International Relations of the Asia-Pacific Volume 15 (2015) 27–52
doi:10.1093/irap/lcu017 Advance Access published on 6 November 2014

Doubts down under: American extended deterrence, Australia, and the 1999 East Timor crisis

Michael Cohen[1] and Andrew O'Neil[2]*

[1] *Political Science, University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark; and* [2] *Government and International Relations, Griffith University, Brisbane, QLD, Australia*
**E-mail: a.oneil@griffith.edu.au*

Accepted 20 September 2014

Abstract

American extended deterrence commitments span the globe. Despite extensive research on the causes of deterrence successes and failures, evidence of which US allies find what extended deterrence commitments credible is elusive. This article utilizes interviews with former Australian policy-makers to analyze the credibility of the United States to defend Australian forces during the 1999 INTERFET intervention in East Timor. While there was no direct threat to Australian sovereignty, the episode stoked concerns in Canberra regarding the willingness of Washington to come to Australia's assistance. The Howard government coveted a US tripwire force presence, and the Clinton administration's unwillingness to provide this raised serious concerns among Australian political elites about the alliance. While this says little about the separate question of whether Washington would use nuclear or conventional weapons in defense of Australian sovereignty, the Timor case indicates the existence

of an extended deterrence credibility deficit regarding the more probable low-intensity conflicts that Australia finds itself in.

1 Introduction

Do Australian policy-makers think that US commitments to Australian security are credible? While the 2007–2013 Rudd and Gillard Governments publically expressed support for a nuclear weapons-free world, according to recently released diplomatic cables, former Gillard government officials worked to undermine the efforts of those working toward a global ban on nuclear weapons because they believed that this would threaten Washington's ability to consider all weapon systems for the defense of Australia (Dorling, 2013). Concern over Washington's commitment to Australia's security in a rapidly changing Asia caused Canberra to undermine the earlier initiative of the Rudd Government that resulted in the high-profile report of the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament.[1]

In this article we address Australian perceptions of the credibility of US extended deterrence in the 1999 East Timor crisis. Australia's involvement in the crisis has been covered at length, but there has been no substantive analysis of US–Australia alliance dynamics throughout the episode. In particular, although several analysts have acknowledged that Canberra was not happy with the slow response from Washington to requests for assistance to the Australia-led intervention, discussion of whether this triggered broader concern among Australian policy-makers about the credibility of American-extended deterrence has been absent from the literature. We argue below that the credibility of US-extended deterrence in twenty-first century Asia is very important but empirically under-analyzed. The next section briefly summarizes the literature on extended deterrence and shows that little is still known about how recipients of extended deterrence commitments view the credibility of these commitments. The subsequent section justifies the selection of the INTERFET intervention, outlines a summary of the episode, and provides the first detailed study of the challenges it raised in the US–Australia alliance.

Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard were not the first Australian leaders to believe that US extended nuclear deterrence is in Australia's long-term

1 The ICNND was instituted in 2007 by the Rudd government and issued its final report in 2008. See http://www.icnnd.org/Pages/default.aspx.

strategic interests. Since the 1950s, successive Australian governments have been keen to optimize the prospects for coverage under the American nuclear umbrella. Since 1993, Australian strategic guidance documents have made clear the expectation that US extended nuclear deterrence will apply if Australia is ever subjected to a nuclear threat by a hostile power (Leah, 2012). Yet, notwithstanding the unprecedented intimacy of the contemporary US–Australia security alliance, the ANZUS treaty (under Article 4) merely requires that parties in the event of one party being attacked 'meet the common danger in accordance with [their] constitutional processes'.[2] Successive US administrations have been unwilling to publically commit to extended nuclear deterrence coverage of Australia, in contrast to repeated commitments to Japan and South Korea. As one former Australian Foreign Minister has remarked, 'actually, the US isn't obliged to do anything in particular under the alliance'.[3]

However beneficial Australia has found the US alliance to be over time, this raises the important question of how different US security alliance obligations have been interpreted by Australian policy-makers. The nuclear dimension of Washington's alliance commitment obscures an equally important issue: the credibility of US commitments to use different levels of conventional force in support of Australia. The conflicts in which Australia finds itself in the twenty-first century are most likely to involve the use of conventional rather than nuclear weapons. Short of the incredible scenario of a state threatening a nuclear strike on an Australian city, policy-makers in Canberra will likely find themselves worrying about the willingness of the United States to use conventional weapons before they worry about Washington's commitments to use nuclear weapons. Almost all conflicts where US extended nuclear deterrence is tested will likely have already challenged, and perhaps undermined, US general conventional deterrence. The decision in 2011 to deploy 2,000 American marines to the northern port city of Darwin was designed in part to enhance the credibility of the 'tripwire' commitment to use conventional force short of nuclear weapons (Coorey, 2011).

However, at a time of increasing Chinese assertiveness in maritime territorial disputes – including Beijing's unilateral declaration in 2013 of an Air

2 The text of the ANZUS treaty can be found at: http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/dfat/treaties/1952/2.html.

3 Interview with Alexander Downer, Adelaide, 11 March 2014.

Defense Identification Zone – periodic provocations from North Korea as Pyongyang pushes closer to acquiring nuclear-armed ballistic missiles, and an explicit US commitment to refocus its stretched resources on shoring up its alliances in Asia, the credibility of US extended deterrence commitments has come under increased scrutiny in Tokyo, Seoul, and Canberra. The credibility of Washington's Asia commitments will strongly influence not only China and North Korea's behavior toward US regional allies, but also the long-term force composition and deployment choices of US allies themselves, including over the long-term whether they pursue an indigenous nuclear weapon capability. The credibility of US commitments will influence how Japan, South Korea, and Australia respond to growing Chinese influence in the evolving Asia-Pacific order and what additional forces the US deploys to the region to shore up its alliances. In short, if US extended deterrence commitments to its regional allies are the bricks of the Asian regional order, the credibility of these commitments may be the cement. However, despite scholarly analysis of the causes and dynamics of successful extended deterrence, alliances, and the changing Asian regional order, the critical question of how America's allies view the credibility or otherwise of US security commitments has received limited empirical attention.

2 Credibility and extended deterrence: in search of evidence

Despite the centrality of nuclear weapons and deterrence in international politics since 1945, the attention devoted to the impact of nuclear weapons on state conflict and the dynamics of deterrence successes and failures, there has been very little theoretical development or empirical testing of the credibility of different US deterrence commitments. Systematic scholarly assessments of extended deterrence began in the late 1980s. Research has addressed the causes of deterrence success and failure through multivariate quantitative tests or formal game theoretic models. This research has tended to assume that extended deterrence commitments to use conventional and nuclear weapons lack credibility, but they have not addressed which commitments are more or less credible.

In an influential analysis, Paul Huth argued that the military capability to deny a quick and decisive victory, reciprocity in diplomatic and military actions, and a record of not backing down in crises with the potential attacker increase the chance of extended deterrence success (Huth, 1988;

see also Huth and Russett, 1988). Subsequent research has refuted (Lebow and Stein, 1990), refined (Fearon, 1994; Danilovic, 2001a; Signorino and Tarer, 2006) and built upon these insights (Werner, 2000; Quackenbush, 2011; Benson *et al.*, 2014).

While the literature has addressed the guarantor and target of extended deterrence, it has had curiously little to say about the recipient of extended deterrence guarantees. It is unclear whether recipients find different extended deterrence commitments more or less credible, whether they can influence (or believe they can influence) the commitment they are given, and whether variation in extended deterrence commitments influences variation in indigenous force development and posture. The literature is inconclusive. Morrow concluded that 'explaining why tighter alliances are more credible is difficult' (Morrow, 1994, p. 293). He argued that only a small proportion of alliances 'deliver' for client states because alliances 'are not honored in a crisis' (Morrow, 1994, p. 293). Leeds and his colleagues, however, found that taking the specific obligations of alliances into account – many alliance treaties do not require states to join in active war – most states honor their alliances commitments most of the time (Leeds *et al.*, 2000). In an important study that addressed what we know about the theory and practice of deterrence in the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, Patrick Morgan (2003) did not address recipients' views regarding the credibility of extended deterrence. In research that explicitly addressed the sources of threat credibility in extended deterrence, Vesna Danilovic (2001b) showed how variation in the importance of the issues at stake to the *provider* of extended deterrence caused variation in extended immediate deterrence success, but said little about whether this influences the beliefs or behavior of the recipient of the extended deterrence commitment. The difficulty of gathering systematic and reliable data on the credibility of different aspects of extended deterrence may explain this. But disagreements regarding whether several pairs of states constitute deterrence or extended deterrence relationships remain unresolved. Moreover, interviews and secondary materials can shed useful, if not conclusive, light on what was and what was not found credible in contemporary cases.

A more policy-oriented literature has addressed optimal approaches for the United States and its NATO allies in Europe during the Cold War and its Japanese and South Korean allies since then, but this has usually asserted rather than demonstrated the credibility of extended deterrence (for one of the first examples, see Slocombe, 1991). Seven decades into the

nuclear age, no one has examined cross-national or longitudinal variation in the credibility of extended deterrence policies to use conventional or nuclear weapons. William Tow (1989) showed how the 1984 crisis involving New Zealand's unwillingness to accept US nuclear-armed vessels influenced ANZUS alliance dynamics, but said little about how this influenced Australian perceptions of US credibility. Other scholars have addressed the extended deterrence-related challenges facing Australia in twenty-first century Asia. Yet these studies have not focused on the perceived credibility of extended deterrence in Canberra regarding conventional as distinct from nuclear weapons (see Leah, 2012; Fruhling, 2013; Lyon, 2013). Richard Tanter (2011, p. 117) argues that 'the Australian model of extended nuclear deterrence is marked by … a lack of certainty about its standing and character in US eyes', but he does not address what *conventional* assurances Canberra has and has not found credible.

Stephen Walt (1997, p. 160) argues that geographic distance and power asymmetries are likely to undermine credibility because a threat to one state may not threaten the other. Because smaller, materially weaker partners have more at stake in terms of security assurances resulting from alliances – what he terms 'the asymmetry of motivation' – they will bargain much harder than their major partners over the nature of these assurances (Walt, 1987, p. 44). This suggests that Australia will invariably be searching for US assurances and commitments during periods of strategic uncertainty, particularly when it confronts security challenges where its stake in the outcome is higher than Washington's. If recipients of US extended deterrence find themselves in crises where they seek conventional rather than nuclear assurances (the most likely scenario), we need empirical studies that address which allies find what type of commitments and assurances credible. This article is a first step in this direction.

We can distinguish between three distinct behaviors that recipients may or may not find credible. The first is the commitment to use nuclear weapons against an adversary in defense of an ally. This might involve the deployment of nuclear weapons in the recipient's territory or a formal alliance (Fuhrmann and Sechser, 2014). The second is to use conventional weapons or other offensive military power against the common adversary. The third is to support the ally with conventional offensive military power that is not deployed in combat against the adversary, but instead used as a signal to deter the adversary. The use of nuclear weapons should on average be less credible than the use of conventional weapons, which

should in turn be less credible than an over-the-horizon presence, but non-deployment, of conventional weapons. Insofar as most allies will likely receive the third before the second and the second before the first, the analysis focuses on Washington's credibility to support Canberra with non-deployed conventional forces.

3 The 1999 East Timor crisis

With Japan and South Korea, Australia is one of the most powerful US allies in the Asia Pacific. One might argue that comparatively, given nominal GDP levels, Australia matters less to Washington than Japan and South Korea but more than the Philippines and Thailand. If there is a relationship between the relative importance of an Asian ally to Washington and the perceived reliability of Washington's commitments to that ally's defense, the perceived credibility of US commitments in Australia might offer an average of the barometer of the beliefs of America's Asian allies more generally.

We selected the 1999 East Timor crisis for several reasons. Most significantly, it is the only episode since the 1960s where Australian leaders worried that they might find themselves in an armed conflict without the United States, in this case with Indonesia. As Australia's leading strategist has observed, the 1999 East Timor crisis remains 'the most consequential strategic crisis management challenge Australia has faced in recent times' (White, 2008, p. 68). While there was no discernible anxiety that conflict would escalate to Australian territory, the then Prime Minister, John Howard, and his advisers exhibited a strong desire to elicit a reassurance from Washington that extended deterrence would apply to Australia's leadership of the East Timor intervention force in September 1999. Australian requests focused on extracting a commitment from the Clinton administration for a US ground force contribution, which was seen as a tangible 'tripwire' presence. That this was not forthcoming, in spite of Australian lobbying, triggered concerns within the Australian government at the highest levels. Yet, these concerns were not shared throughout the Australian government bureaucracy, including within the single most important coordinating agency for the Timor operation, the Department of Defence. One of the interesting features of Australia's East Timor experience in relation to the US role was the gap between the concerns expressed by political leaders and the relatively sanguine response of those charged with

undertaking preparations for INTERFET. Eventually the intensity of the concerns of Australian political leaders would be eclipsed by the events of 11 September 2001, which would lead to a substantially more intimate alliance relationship between Australia and the United States. But concern over Washington's commitment when the chips were down has cast a shadow over the US commitment to Australia's defense, at least in crises in Southeast Asia.

Australian anxiety over East Timor in 1999 occurred in the context of a history of concern regarding Washington's reluctance to intervene on Australia's behalf in disputes with Indonesia. Despite the 1995 East Asia Strategic Initiative (widely referred to as 'the Nye Review'), in which the US reaffirmed an enduring strategic commitment to the region, senior Australian policy-makers were aware that sections of the US foreign policy establishment advocated a reduction in US global commitments in pursuit of a post-Cold War 'peace dividend'. In preparing strategic guidance documents in the early 1990s, senior Australian officials were keen to insert specific reference to US extended deterrence, which was motivated in part by a desire to pull Washington closer during a period of uncertainty (see Department of Defence, 1993, 1994). US officials did not contest the insertion of this wording, but nor did they publically endorse it. Australian attempts to present the wording as evidence of an increasingly intimate alliance relationship belied persistent private misgivings over the credibility of assumptions regarding a US security umbrella as part of the ANZUS alliance. This underlying concern was stated most clearly almost twenty years earlier in a secret strategic report, 'Australian Strategic Analysis and Defence Policy Objectives', endorsed by the conservative Fraser Government in 1976:

> Australian policy has for many years deliberately avoided attempts to reach understandings with US governments defining the circumstances in which the US would come to Australia's support, and the nature of that support. It has been considered that the US would not be responsive to such attempts. Moreover, such attempts could result in a more limited US commitment than would serve Australia's interests. *The extent to which the US accepts a commitment will always depend upon US judgments regarding its own interest at the time. Much would depend on circumstances of the day* (Quoted in Fruhling 2009: 604, italics added).

In contrast to America's NATO allies and Japan and South Korea, Australia has never received a formal public commitment from any US administration concerning the applicability of American extended deterrence in any context. This is not particularly surprising given that Australia has never been subjected to direct military threats in the same way that America's NATO and East Asian allies have in the past. Nevertheless, the absence of a formal public commitment has fed doubts about the extent to which the US would support Australia in the event it is ever threatened by a hostile power. Much of Australia's anxiety historically in relation to US extended deterrence has focused on Indonesia. Since the 1950s, Indonesia has been seen by Australian strategic planners as the primary potential threat to Australia's security. This has stemmed from periodic tensions in the bilateral relationship and the belief that any physical threat to Australian territory would emanate from northern approaches and therefore have to come through the Indonesian archipelago. We do not mean to imply that Australia is, or views itself as, a leading player in Southeast Asian conflicts. Indeed, there are grounds to argue that Australia has had a far more substantial role in the South Pacific. Rather, Australian concern about the reliability of US commitments has mostly centered on Indonesia. Australian anxiety over the coverage of the ANZUS Treaty was exacerbated in the 1960s when the Menzies Government unsuccessfully sought to extract commitments from the Kennedy and Johnson administrations that the United States would assist Australia if confrontation with Indonesia over the formation of Malaysia escalated to armed conflict. Washington was evasive on any commitment: the Johnson administration noted that Australia could only count on limited air and naval support and no ground forces (Pemberton, 1987, p. 174). Comments in 1989 by then Vice President, Dan Quayle, that Australia could not automatically count on support from Washington in the event of conflict with Indonesia provided further grounds for Australian anxiety (Jones, 1989).

The 1999 East Timor crisis was precipitated by the 1997–1998 Asian economic Crisis that effectively undermined and ended Indonesian President Suharto's three-decade rule. In the mid-1970s Suharto had invaded and brutally suppressed East Timor, located on the south-eastern tip of the Indonesian archipelago. Repression of indigenous Timorese groups pushing for autonomy from Indonesia had occurred before then and continued into the 1990s. While Indonesian public opinion in the 1990s showed sporadic support for limited Timorese regional autonomy or independence, many feared that it would empower and embolden resistance movements seeking

further autonomy throughout the nation – in regions as distant as Aceh in the west and Papua in the east – and possibly corrode Indonesian unity (Booth, 1999). The economic crisis strained the ability of the Suharto regime and the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) to suppress Timorese resistance (Crouch, 2003).

After pressures on the Indonesian national currency forced the floating of the *rupiah* in August 1997, its value quickly depreciated. This proved to be a debilitating shock to the Indonesian economy. It undermined many companies and banks and forced the government to seek an IMF bailout package totaling forty-three billion US dollars (Blustein and Richburg, 1998). By 1998, Indonesia had signed three agreements with the IMF, its GDP had contracted substantially, and inflation had skyrocketed (Hill, 1998). After Suharto was re-elected and formed a new cabinet in March that year, large-scale riots erupted throughout Indonesia when he unexpectedly and sharply reduced government fuel subsidies. Suharto resigned on May 14 after the violence further escalated. Meanwhile, TNI operations in East Timor were draining the Indonesian government financially and had cost the Indonesian military 20,000 fatalities since the initial invasion of the territory in 1975 (Vickers, 2013, p. 220). On 8 June 1998, three weeks after taking office, Suharto's successor, B. J. Habibie, announced that Indonesia would soon offer Timor a special plan with limited autonomy under Indonesian sovereignty. Habibie's initiative was followed by a letter from Australian Prime Minister John Howard recommending that East Timor be granted a referendum on self-determination (ABC News Online, 2008). In any event, the sheer cost of holding on to East Timor may have eventually forced Jakarta to reassess its policy. After the foreign ministers of Indonesia and Portugal held detailed discussions on Indonesian limited autonomy proposals throughout the remainder of the year, Habibie indicated in January 1999 that he might be willing to grant Timor independence. Agreement was eventually reached in May at ministerial-level talks in New York between Indonesia, Portugal and the United Nations on the implementation of a ballot on Timorese independence (United Nations, 1999).

4 Australia's reaction

Habibie's declaration that Timorese independence was in the offing surprised the Howard government and forced it to address some difficult

trade-offs. On the one hand, Australia's primary interest in a stable and prosperous Indonesia had long caused Canberra to encourage at most limited autonomy so as not to challenge Indonesian sovereignty and undermine the often-strained relationship with Jakarta and the Indonesian armed forces. This rendered the deployment of an Australian Defence Force (ADF) contingent to East Timor highly undesirable: Canberra's interests in Indonesian stability in the immediate post-Suharto era far outweighed any desire for Timorese autonomy and human rights (see Henry, 2014).

On the other hand, Habibie's January 1999 declaration suggested that independence – and possibly widespread civil war between pro-integrationist and pro-independence groups – was highly probable. Canberra also had incentives to promote stability in East Timor if it became an independent state. Australian public opinion exhibited a strong sense of sympathy toward the Timorese people, and there had been a long-standing debate over whether Australia was morally justified in formally recognizing Jakarta's incorporation of East Timor into Indonesia in 1976. An opportunity to redress this issue was a factor in the Howard Government's thinking. Internationally, there was certainly an expectation that Australia would contribute to preventing the expected violence, and there seemed few alternative states capable of leading a multinational coalition if Australia demurred.

All of this raised serious problems. It was clear that as much as an army brigade group (~3,500 personnel) might be necessary in a Timor peacekeeping role that could last many years. The ADF would probably struggle to contain the violence if it escalated to a more widespread civil war. In June 1999, the Howard Government ordered an army brigade to be at one month's readiness to deploy as it became clear that Australia's initiative to contain violence might not succeed (White, 2008, p. 75). Australian policy-makers were concerned that the Indonesian army could encourage an escalation of the conflict to deter an Australian intervention. But there was no doubt in Canberra that the TNI's role in supporting pro-integrationist militia groups – which triggered a spike in violence as the ballot date approached – rendered the Indonesian provision of security to support the UN-supervised ballot deeply problematic.

As the scale of TNI support for pro-integrationist militia violence became clearer, Canberra warmed to leading a UN peacekeeping force (PKF) to maintain security before and during the ballot. Perhaps because of a positive response to the prospect of an Australian PKF by a senior

UN official visiting Canberra in March 1999, Australian policy-makers began to expect that the UN would put in place a peace stabilization force as part of the tripartite agreement involving Indonesia (White, 2008, p. 78). But the final agreement to emerge in late April made no provision for a PKF, allowed only a modest police presence to protect UN personnel, and left security of the ballot to the Indonesian Army. Howard raised the PKF issue with Habibie at a summit in Bali in late April and was rebuffed (Greenlees and Garran, 2002, pp. 144–147).

As the prospect of escalating Indonesian army sponsored violence leading up to the August vote grew imminent, the UN pushed Canberra further into Timor by asking Howard in early May if Australia would be willing to evacuate UN personnel should security in Timor collapse. Howard accepted on condition that the UN would be responsible for Indonesian consent to any operation before it was launched. By now, those responsible for any Australian involvement in Timor were developing plans in consultation with the UN for a full scale PKF operation to provide security during and immediately after the ballot and over the longer run if Indonesian forces permanently left Timor (Connery, 2010, pp. 32–40).

Although the ballot was delayed due to inadequate security, it occurred on August 30, had a 99% turnout of registered voters, and confirmed over 78% support for independence. While violence had occurred throughout 1999, it escalated immediately on September 4 following the announcement of these results. Approximately fifteen hundred mostly pro-independence Timorese were killed, over 170,000 left East Timor for camps in West Timor, and a large and systematic campaign of terror destroyed much of East Timor (Seybolt, 2007, pp. 87–88). This clearly threatened UN personnel, so the planned ADF brigade began to evacuate them. While the mission was completed within eight days, violence persisted after martial law was declared on September 7. Australian public opinion voiced an irresistible demand that Canberra intervene to stop the loss of life in East Timor when Jakarta seemed unwilling or incapable of doing so (see Fernandes, 2004, ch. 4). After Foreign Minister Alexander Downer publically suggested that the Australian government might be willing to lead a multinational coalition to restore order in East Timor, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan asked Prime Minister John Howard whether he would do so (Howard, 2010, p. 345). Australia had not specifically prepared for this task, both because Timorese independence seemed a distant prospect

and earlier assessments had suggested that it would be beyond Australia's capabilities (White, 2008, p. 82).

5 In search of commitment

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1264 was approved on September 15, 1999 and authorized permissive rules of engagement to INTERFET forces to stabilize the situation in East Timor. It also included an assurance that the UN would look to quickly re-establish its mission in East Timor and deploy a peacekeeping force to take over from Australia (Eldon, 2004, pp. 559–560). Washington had supported the UN Resolution, but it was unclear what, if any, commitment the Clinton administration would provide to the INTERFET operation. Securing US support quickly became a key objective of the Howard Government, which was conscious of the serious risks attached to leading an operation on the territory of its most important regional neighbor with which Canberra had a long history of tensions. American backing for the operation was seen by senior Australian policy-makers as a necessary condition for INTERFET going ahead, and the National Security Committee of Cabinet had specified this – along with Indonesian agreement, a strong Security Council mandate authorizing permissive rules of engagement, and the active support of ASEAN countries – as one of four preconditions for the operation proceeding (White, 2008, pp. 83–84).

American support was seen as crucial for a host of reasons. A key consideration for the Howard Government was domestic politics. John Howard had come to office in 1996 with the US alliance as the centerpiece of his foreign policy agenda. Serious doubts would be raised among the Australian public about this agenda – and potentially even the value of the alliance itself – if Washington proved unwilling to strongly support Australia in its most significant military operation since the Vietnam War. One of John Howard's senior advisers at the time has confirmed that domestic considerations were a motivating factor in Howard's push for US involvement.[4]

However, the primary reason for coveting US support related to the potential for escalation resulting from confrontation between Australian-led

4 Interview with Michael L′Estrange, Canberra, 14 November 2013. L′Estrange was Secretary of the Cabinet and Head of the Cabinet Policy Unit.

forces and pro-integrationist militias. By the end of 1998, the Australian intelligence community had concluded that the Indonesian military 'had armed pro-integrationist militia groups and was planning to use them against East Timorese who supported moves towards independence' (Ball, 2001, p. 43). The strong links between TNI and the militias operating in East Timor were cause for concern among senior Australian decision-makers because of the potential for TNI becoming directly involved in any confrontation or conflict on the ground between ADF personnel and militia forces. Senior levels of government exhibited anxiety in the days preceding the INTERFET intervention. The expectation in a number of quarters, particularly the Defence Department, which was leading operational planning, was that Australian forces would likely be involved in armed engagements with pro-integrationist militia groups. Given the presence of several thousand TNI troops in East Timor, a broader conflict between Australian and Indonesian forces could not be ruled out. The two countries had engaged in military hostilities during the Malaysian independence crisis three and a half decades earlier, and there was simmering resentment on the Indonesian side over Australia's role in urging the independence ballot. The then Chief of the ADF, Admiral Chris Barrie, would later observe that: 'We were very lucky. Had a firefight started, I think the outcome could have been different. If you had had a few dead on each side, then it could have got out of control' (quoted in Kelly, 2009, p. 511).

There was serious concern prior to intervention that direct engagement between Australian and Indonesian forces had the potential to lead to conflict between the two countries. Of particular concern to Australian policy-makers was the potential for the TNI to drag Jakarta into a military conflict. Then Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, has subsequently noted that: 'We didn't know about how TNI would take the humiliation of being ejected from Timor and we were also unsure about just how much control the government in Jakarta was able to exert over TNI'.[5] Having confirmation from Washington that it would be willing to assist Australia in a scenario where military conflict with Indonesia developed was a key factor influencing the search for US reassurance. John Howard (2010, p. 346) recalled in his memoirs feeling that 'US involvement would send an implicit but clear deterrent signal to any in Jakarta who might have considered resisting the intervention force'. In essence, Australia sought a commitment

5 Interview with Alexander Downer, Adelaide, 11 March 2014.

from Washington that it would move to deter escalation in the event Indonesian authorities attempted to use military force to stymie the INTERFET intervention. As Downer has observed, 'We were convinced US involvement would have eliminated any prospect of TNI and/or the Indonesian government escalating'.[6] The optimum way to achieve this was having US forces directly involved in the intervention force itself, and Australian policy-makers were keen to extract such a commitment from the Clinton administration during INTERFET preparations; even a small detachment of ground forces could serve as a 'tripwire' for automatic US involvement if military tensions with Indonesia escalated.

It should be emphasized that Australia's political leadership was more focused than planning agencies on the importance of securing US military involvement. Indeed, there appears to have been a disconnection between the operational side of planning in the Department of Defence and the political side in the Prime Minister's office. Hugh White, who at the time was Acting Secretary of the Defence Department, confirms that the Department made no formal request for a commitment of US combat forces on East Timor itself. According to White, shortly after the independence ballot, he received a verbal assurance over the phone from the then Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, Walter Slocombe, that 'the US would be there [for Australia] if things got out of hand with Indonesia'.[7] There is no evidence that the assurance received by White from Slocombe was conveyed directly to Prime Minister Howard or his office. Refusal by the White House to respond positively to Howard's request was matched by the Pentagon's apparent unwillingness to provide support.

One reason for this reluctance was undoubtedly due to Australia's previous message to the State Department throughout much of 1998 and 1999 that a PKF was *not* required. This stood in contrast to the view of US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Stanley Roth, who had recommended the need for an international coalition to be assembled (Fernandes, 2004, pp. 58–59). At a narrow operational level, an American military contribution was not seen by Australian defense planners as a pre-requisite for success. As the Commander of the INTERFET mission, General Peter Cosgrove (2006, p. 206), would later write, 'at no

6 Interview with Alexander Downer, Adelaide, 11 March 2014.

7 Interview with Hugh White, Canberra, 25 February 2014.

stage did I think that a major "Big Brother" presence was necessary or appropriate'. Indeed, some felt it could be counterproductive given the residual hostility among some senior Indonesians over Washington's role in the introduction of tough structural adjustment measures by the IMF in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis.[8] For its part, Australia's Defence Department was ambivalent due to the view that 'America's force protection doctrine would do more damage to the operation than good'.[9]

Consultations between Australian and US officials over a possible American contribution to an intervention operation began in mid-1999. From the outset, Australian officials received mixed messages about the likelihood of US support. The US Pacific Command (PACOM) had commenced contingency planning for a large-scale military contribution in East Timor, but the message from Washington was that the Clinton administration remained extremely reluctant to approve any US intervention force (Connery, 2010, pp. 88–89). The Pentagon in particular was opposed to a military contribution, and although the White House had not unequivocally ruled this out, it remained detached from high-level political discussions between Canberra and Washington. The State Department was more inclined to consider an Australian request, but as James Cotton (2004, p. 95) points out, it was around this time that 'some commentators detected an emerging crisis in the ANZUS alliance'.

Washington's reluctance appeared to stem from two factors: post-Cold War 'intervention fatigue' in the context of ongoing commitments in the Balkans; and a desire to improve relations with post-Suharto Indonesia. Significantly, in the lead-up to the intervention, President Clinton approved a US campaign of heavy diplomatic arm twisting aimed at Jakarta, including thinly veiled threats that Indonesia's broader economic interests and its military links with Washington would be compromised if it opposed the INTERFET mission (see Greenlees and Garran, 2002, pp. 24–254). This diplomatic activity on Washington's part may have been critical in convincing Jakarta to permit the INTERFET operation to proceed. Clinton may have believed that this leverage over Jakarta offset the need for a military commitment. But it was unclear to Canberra how much of Washington's pressure would contain the TNI. Clinton and his advisers may have been wary of offering any assistance that could embolden Canberra in its

8 Interview with General Peter Leahy, Canberra, 13 November 2013.

9 Interview with Hugh White, Canberra, 25 February 2014.

dealings with Jakarta. Most likely, Washington considered the stakes in Timor to be less substantive than its other global interests. Whatever the specific reasons, American ambivalence was highly unwelcome to Australian policy-makers. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer has recalled being 'slightly astonished by US reticence to become involved'.[10]

Once it became clear in early September 1999 that Australia was committed to leading the INTERFET operation, the Howard Government communicated to Washington its strong preference for American 'boots on the ground' as part of the intervention force. In a phone conversation with President Clinton on September 6, Prime Minister Howard asked directly for US ground forces to be committed to INTERFET. According to Howard (2011, pp. 4–5), 'in a fascinating conversation, he explained to me how heavily stretched the American military was and how it would be very difficult for them to provide any ground troops. My initial reaction was one of great disappointment and I sort of thought well, you know, it was a poor repayment of past loyalties and support'. One former senior official in the Prime Minister's office at the time recalls that Howard was genuinely shocked and dismayed by his phone discussion with Clinton, and that he was very concerned Australian domestic perceptions of the value of the US alliance could be adversely affected as a result. The official understood that Howard had conveyed these responses directly to Clinton.[11]

Concern about escalation with Indonesian forces was most acute in the first 24 hours of the INTERFET operation, after which time Australian military planners were increasingly confident of the security environment (see Cosgrove, 2006, chapter 9). After requesting a limited American military contingent as a show of support, Australia's Defence Minister, John Moore, was informed by his US counterpart, William Cohen, that Washington would not be supporting INTERFET militarily. Moore recalled that his response to Cohen's statement was blunt: 'Well, so much for the ANZUS treaty' (quoted in Henry, 2013, p. 106). For Australia's then Deputy Prime Minister, Tim Fischer, the Clinton administration's unwillingness to support Australia as the leader of INTERFET, and accompanying public remarks from senior US officials that downplayed the seriousness of the situation in East Timor, constituted 'a very sharp

10 Interview with Alexander Downer, Adelaide, 11 March 2014.

11 Interview with Michael L'Estrange, Canberra, 14 November 2013.

reminder to Australia that when the chips are down, you cannot always automatically bank on the USA' (quoted in Henry, 2013, p. 106).

The Clinton administration would eventually commit, after 4 October, an over-the-horizon presence of a ship-based detachment of helicopters and troops from the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, which were deployed near East Timor (Lane, 2004, p. 45). Whether senior US officials threatened Indonesia with military retaliation in the event Australian forces were attacked, as one author has claimed (Kelly, 2009, p. 511), is difficult to verify. Ultimately, despite the subsequent claim by Hugh White (2009) that 'the US provided exactly what we asked for … it was a model of how the alliance should work', the Clinton administration's contribution fell short of what senior Australian policy-makers, including Prime Minister John Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, had initially expected and subsequently pushed for.

6 An extended deterrence credibility deficit

The fact that Washington came late and somewhat reluctantly to support the Australian led INTERFET mission can be attributed to several factors. These include a reluctance to become involved in *any* peacekeeping intervention missions following the United States' unfavorable experiences in the 1990s in Somalia and the Balkans, a desire to improve relations with Jakarta in the post-Suharto period, and a fear that the United States could be drawn into a conflict with Indonesia in support of its Australian ally. To the extent that the Howard Government had taken the initiative of sending the letter to Habibie, which in the eyes of many had precipitated the referendum and subsequent bloodshed in East Timor, Washington may have been concerned that a blanket reassurance could create a degree of moral hazard, emboldening Canberra to be more risk-acceptant in its dealings with Jakarta. As noted, INTERFET was the most significant Australian military commitment since Vietnam that involved the country's single most important regional neighbor, while for Washington events in East Timor constituted one of many hotspots on a busy global agenda. This clear asymmetry of motivation (Walt, 1987, p. 44) meant that there was a gap between Australia and the United States in respect to reassurances and extended deterrence. From Washington's

perspective, it made sense that Australia take responsibility for the outcome of the intervention mission.[12]

Is there any evidence to suggest that the East Timor episode had an impact on Australian perceptions of the credibility of US extended deterrence commitments? The emphasis in successive statements from Australian governments regarding extended deterrence since the 1990s has been on the nuclear dimension. Strategic guidance – at least the unclassified strategic guidance that has been made public – has therefore presupposed that American extended deterrence would only be forthcoming in the direst of circumstances where Australia's existential security was threatened. The same strategic guidance assumes that, under the doctrine of 'self-reliance', Australia would need to handle unilaterally any contingency short of an existential threat. Such extreme circumstances are seen as highly improbable and, in contrast to their Japanese and South Korean counterparts, Australian policy-makers tend to see the subject of US extended nuclear deterrence in fairly abstract and arcane terms (see O'Neil, 2013, chapters 4–6).

Of more immediate interest to senior Australian policy-makers is the question of how the US alliance can yield a payoff for Australia when support is required from Washington for major challenges short of existential security threats. As illustrated by the exasperated reactions from Howard, Fischer, Moore, and others to the Clinton administration's ambivalent response to Australian INTERFET requests, there is an underlying expectation flowing through successive government statements that Australia's past loyalty and support for US global military operations will be rewarded. This stands in slight contrast to the less presumptive perspective regarding US assistance among senior Australian military leaders. Australian political elites have historically been socialized to holding the view that reassurance from the United States is part of the alliance 'package', notwithstanding the rather patchy empirical record of US administrations in this regard. Largely because of these factors, Washington's reluctance to support Australia militarily in East Timor came as an unpleasant surprise to these elites. Lingering concerns persist that in the most likely, less threatening, challenges that Australia is likely to face with Indonesia and, possibly elsewhere, US support may be elusive. The 2000 Defence White Paper – the first since 1987 – captured some of this sentiment when it noted

12 Phone interview with Peter Jennings, 20 November 2013. Jennings was head of the East Timor Policy Unit within the Department of Defence.

that Australia 'should not take the health of our alliance for granted. We will need to work hard with the United States to ensure its continuing viability and relevance in a period of change' (Department of Defence, 2000, p. 36). Ultimately, Timorese independence led many to view the INTERFET operation as a success and model for the future. But this narrative neglects the anxiety and credibility deficit perceived among Australian political elites at the time over US reticence to provide support in the execution of the INTERFET mission.

Did the East Timor crisis raise doubts in Canberra about the credibility of US extended deterrence? Here, the picture is mixed. For operational planners in the Department of Defence, the absence of US boots on the ground in East Timor appears to have been a nonissue. Provision by a senior Pentagon official (Slocombe) of an unofficial extended deterrence commitment to his Australian opposite number (White) appears to render the question over Australian anxiety irrelevant. Yet, the blunt doubts expressed by Moore and Fischer indicate that US reluctance over INTERFET at the political level was regarded as having wider ramifications for the credibility of alliance commitments. While John Howard has been more circumspect in directly criticizing Washington since 1999, his Government's experience with the United States in relation to East Timor and INTERFET was eclipsed two years later by the events of 11 September 2001, which marked the beginning of a new era in the Australia–US alliance (Tow, 2004). The following decade would be characterized by a degree of intimacy in operational cooperation and coordination of foreign policy unprecedented in the history of the bilateral relationship (see Bisley, 2013). All of this seems to have had some impact in glossing over the tensions with Washington that existed in 1999 and the sense of anxiety among Australian policy-makers at that time about the credibility and depth of the US alliance commitment. But it cannot have escaped Canberra's attention that this new cooperation and coordination was prompted by threats directed at, and conflicts initiated by, Washington. It is far from clear that Australia can expect the assistance it desires in its next regional crisis.

7 Conclusion

While the INTERFET operation was Australia's biggest military commitment since the Vietnam War, it did not pose a direct threat to Australian

territorial sovereignty or national security. Yet, Australian decision-makers were cognizant of the possibility that military engagement with TNI-backed militias had the potential to escalate to armed conflict between Australian and Indonesian forces. American attempts to reassure Australia informally (i.e. Slocombe to White) immediately prior to the intervention may have mitigated some anxiety. Yet, a strong sense of uncertainty persisted in the initial stages of the INTERFET operation over whether Australia possessed the required military capabilities to deal with a contingency if tensions escalated with Indonesia, and whether Washington would be willing to fulfill its vague ANZUS commitments. Australia's behavior confirms the theoretical perspective – to paraphrase Stephen Walt – that smaller allies will struggle to elicit extended deterrence reassurance from their major power ally when there is a variation in perception of the importance of the issue at stake. In short, from the perspective of the smaller alliance power, an asymmetry of motivation can lead to an extended deterrence credibility deficit.

Although it is easy to exaggerate Australian anxiety about the credibility of US extended deterrence, senior Australian policy-makers were conscious of the historical parallels between INTERFET and the period of Confrontation with Indonesia in the 1960s.[13] The Menzies Government's frustration in dealing with two US administrations that were extremely reluctant to reassure Australia that America had alliance obligations that would apply to any conflict with Indonesia was important in bringing home to Australian strategic planners that Washington felt no automatic obligation under the ANZUS Treaty to render assistance. The sentiments expressed in the 1976 strategic guidance document quoted earlier in this article were a direct reflection of Australia's experience with the United States during Confrontation. It is therefore not surprising that the Clinton administration's warning to Jakarta that there would be consequences resulting from an attack on Australian forces did not ameliorate concerns in Canberra over whether and when the United States would intervene.

The consternation among senior Australian policy-makers in relation to the Clinton administration's reluctance over East Timor may have led to diminished confidence in the United States' willingness to furnish meaningful support to Australia when it counts. Much of this confidence

13 Phone interview with Peter Jennings, 20 November 2013; Interview with Hugh White, Canberra, 25 February 2014; and Interview with Alexander Downer, Adelaide, 11 March 2014.

appears to have recovered after 11 September 2001, but it will not have escaped Australian policy-makers that Washington only came on board with a nominal military commitment to INTERFET and political support after intensive lobbying from Canberra. In the sole historical instance (up to 1999 and since) when Australia has requested United States military support for an Australia-led operation, the US government exhibited great reluctance. This may have damaged perceptions among Australian policy-makers of the reliability of US extended deterrence at the turn of the century, but it is less certain whether it will have a lasting impact. Despite the orthodox interpretation of INTERFET as a success story for Australia, Australian policy-makers are well aware that the US has a history of leaving Canberra stranded in its Southeast Asian crises. What this implies for US credibility to use conventional or nuclear weapons in defense of Australia in the future as well as how this influences Australian procurement and posture choices remains unclear.

In the present context, President Obama is attempting to reassure America's Asian allies of a commitment to their security in the wake of tightening fiscal pressures at home, the rapid rise of China, and persistent destabilization by North Korea. It is striking that we still know little about which recipients of extended deterrence find what commitments credible. In this article we have not addressed beliefs about Washington's willingness to use nuclear or even conventional weapons in defense of Australia. Rather, in the more probable and less threatening crises that Canberra has found itself in, Washington has come to the party reluctantly and late. We cannot say what US commitments the current Australian government finds credible, but in any future crisis in Southeast Asia it is likely that Australian policy-makers will recall the experiences of their predecessors in the 1960s and late 1990s.

This article suggests several important avenues for future research. Scholars might examine the impact (if any) of the Timor experience on subsequent Australian defence procurement and deployment decisions. Future research could also address South Korean and Japanese beliefs about US credibility in the aftermath of recent North Korean nuclear tests and artillery attacks. Research might also address beliefs about the conditions under which policy-makers in the Asia-Pacific believe the United States would respond more forcefully to Chinese behavior in the South China Sea and elsewhere. Incorporating recipients of extended deterrence into scholarly research promises to yield deeper knowledge about how

perceptions of deterrence credibility work in practice. Very few in Australia and elsewhere are aware that underneath the apparent success of INTERFET lay concerns about Washington's commitment to supporting Australia in regional crises. Findings regarding the perceived credibility of US assurances in other recent crises would reveal more about the stock that Washington has in Seoul, Tokyo, and elsewhere. Such research has the real potential to substantially enrich our knowledge of the circumstances in which smaller allies find different commitments credible (or not) and how this influences their alliance behavior more generally.

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