Local impacts of foreign interests in Timor-Leste

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Introduction

In Timor-Leste, one of the world's newest and smallest nations, the interests of foreign powers are on display. Signs noting the source of funds for infrastructure projects, buildings or organisations are scattered throughout the country; many of the capital's largest buildings are embassies or donor offices; and oil and gas rigs powered by international workers and operated by international companies are visible from the beach. Yet these foreign interests also play out much less visibly at the local level, in people's day-to-day lives. These local-level impacts are far less obvious, can be both positive and negative, and remain largely unexplored. This paper offers an initial examination of how we might better capture some of these less overt local impacts of foreign interests.

There has been significant attention paid in the literature and policy circles to rising geopolitical competition globally, and in particular in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, spurred by China's growing engagement in the region and the West's concerns about diminishing influence.[1] Yet despite the preoccupation of much international relations research on geopolitics and inter-state rivalries, little emphasis has been given to the domestic and local impacts of rising geopolitical competition.[2] As a result, while international and Western policymakers are aware of regional and international security risks, there is less familiarity with the potential impact on stability or conflict, and on wider political processes, at the national level or below. Indeed, whether countries like Timor-Leste maintain internal peace or not is largely seen to be determined by a state's internal cohesion and ability to resolve tensions. In recognising the importance of local leadership and politics, the analysis of foreign interests and the ways that they overtly and covertly forward a political agenda that influences society's experience of conflict, stability, politics and development has remained largely neglected.

To this end, The Asia Foundation is undertaking a research project exploring the local impacts of foreign interests, to identify illustrative examples that uncover how geopolitical competition might play out at the local level in people's lives. Country studies are being undertaken in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Timor-Leste. This paper – the Timor-Leste country study – offers an initial methodology for exploring the local impacts of foreign interests through analysis of two key sectors – police reform and infrastructure. Homing in on two areas enabled clearer identification of the interests of key foreign actors, how these are pursued, and with what local impacts. What is provided is an initial attempt to think through how we might go about unpacking the impacts of foreign interests and geopolitical competition. It aims to test a novel method, rather than provide the final word on the outcomes of police reform and infrastructure development.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section two describes the methods developed for testing in the remainder of the paper, in particular setting out our approach to unpacking foreign interests and tracing their downstream impacts at the local level. Section three provides an overview of geopolitical competition in Timor-Leste and key local political dynamics, foregrounding some of the issues that arise within the sector case studies. Sections four and five examine the dominant foreign interests in the policing and infrastructure sectors respectively and apply the methodology to reveal some of their local impacts. While foreign interests are often talked about quite broadly, to identify more granular local impacts the specificity of foreign interests matters and so discussing these concerning each sector is important. Finally, section six sets out our conclusions and implications for future research and programming on better understanding how foreign interests play out at the local level, particularly regarding conflict and peacebuilding.

Methods

Designing the methodology for the project has involved both upfront planning and ongoing adjustments as complications arose throughout data collection. Three key methodological challenges emerged from the outset. First, how do we characterise foreign interests (both overt and covert), particularly when some of the key actors involved are individuals or private entities – leaders, businessmen or enterprises – rather than just nation-states? Second, what do we mean by 'local impacts' and how are these traced? Third, how do we draw a line from those foreign interests to local impacts, with what causal inference? Indeed, a potential reason for the relative lack of research in this field may be the methodological challenge involved in drawing connections between macro-level influences and local events or drivers of change. In some cases, there may be more direct impacts, but in others, impacts may be indirect, further complicating lines of causality. Here, we briefly set out how we have approached these challenges.

Foreign interests

In International Relations, 'foreign interests' 'involve envisaging the state as the possessor of legal personality … and as the kind of 'person' capable of possessing interests, as in the notion of the 'national interest' which it is the mission of … [foreign affairs departments] to promote'.[3] Understanding and characterizing foreign interests thus begins with looking at stated diplomatic positions and goals set out in development program documents and reporting. But we also know that states have more covert interests, alongside stated overt positions. These are much harder to access. We have supplemented the review of the academic and grey literature with interviews with staff from foreign embassies or development programs, or advisers to those programs who report to foreign donors. We have also undertaken interviews with Timorese politicians and experts to provide an account of how foreign interests are communicated and interpreted. But this only takes us so far in being able to account for states' covert interests. In addition, there is far more literature and news media coverage of Australia's role in Timor-Leste (including exposure of some of its covert interests) than there is of most other international actors. This is further limited by a focus on English-language sources, which may miss important contributions in Portuguese, Bahasa (Indonesian) and Mandarin. As a result, the analysis is limited by the extent of information available to the authors on each country.

One challenge, particularly in the infrastructure sector, however, is the prevalence of foreign individuals or businesses whose interests are influential in shaping local impacts but who are not necessarily representative of the state to which their nationality ties them. In some instances, state-owned enterprises contracted to infrastructure-related activities project national interests. In other instances, businesses may not reflect the interests of the state where they are registered, and the local impacts become dispersed. Here, it is important to note, on the one hand, that states are not always neatly unitary actors. This is also apparent in the police reform case study even in relation to different interests between the foreign states' aid departments and police agencies. Concerning infrastructure, businesses like state-owned enterprises and even individuals well-connected with state political and economic elites may offer some insight into broader state interests, particularly less explicit or covert interests. On the other hand, individuals and businesses do not speak for states, and there will be instances where their interests are wholly separate from the state of their nationality or registration. Throughout the paper we aim to make these distinctions clear – where interests are those of the state itself; where they are of those associated with the state; and where they are separate from individual interests. In a fuller study, examining the relationships between these various entities and their states would be revealing but is beyond the scope of what is possible here.

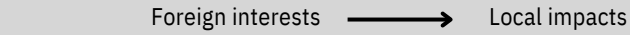
What is 'local'?

'Local' is an overused and slippery term. In International Relations, it is often used to denote 'national' or 'domestic', in contrast to 'the international'.[4] In International Development, it is frequently used to refer to the sub-national, community level.[5] For this paper, we use 'local' to refer to both of these levels. The geographic smallness of Timor-Leste and the centralisation of political authority means that 'the national' and 'community level' are much more similar than is the case in many other countries, although some important differences remain. As much as possible throughout the paper, we specify whether we are talking about the national level or the community level in Timor-Leste. 'Local' impacts therefore may be at a national level, for instance on policy, or at the community level, in terms of how people live their daily lives.

Causal links between interests and impacts

Our first reaction to examining the local impacts of foreign interests is that these interests are not foisted, unmediated onto domestic politics or local communities in a direct, linear way. That is, the simple relationship depicted in Figure 1, below, is not an accurate depiction of reality.

Figure 1: How not to understand causality between foreign interests and local impacts



Rather, in practice, foreign interests intermingle with national politics and interests and are refracted through that lens. This can amplify or emphasise some elements of foreign interests and deprioritise others. As a result, we think about national politics as centrally relevant to shaping the way that foreign interests are experienced at the local level, but at the same time aim to keep the focus here on foreign interests, as much has been written about local level impacts of domestic politics in Timor-Leste. This leads us to the depiction in Figure 2. (Foreign interests are, at least partly, responsive to and shaped by local politics, so there is likely also a dotted line that feeds from local politics back into foreign interests – but this is beyond the scope of exploration here).

Figure 2: Local impacts of foreign interests refracted through the lens of local politics

A further challenge is how to characterise 'local impacts'. Here, we are interested in local impacts on conflict dynamics, and – because of their associated nature – local politics and development outcomes that play a strong role in determining who benefits and who does not. Our aim is not to focus specifically on development impacts (ie, whether people are poorer/better off or have better or worse access to services, etc) but on wider impacts, including on how politics occurs and potential conflict triggers. However, separating 'development impacts' is particularly challenging in Timor-Leste, because it is through development programs that many foreign interests play out. As a result, the impacts of foreign interests in Timor-Leste have a stronger development flavour than may be the case in other places. In addition, the pursuit of development outcomes is commonly used as the vehicle by which political elites build their support bases and service clientelist networks, as is discussed further in the following section. For these reasons, it has been difficult not to focus on development outcomes, but we try to keep a broader focus throughout.

Charting the impact of foreign interests on local conflict dynamics, politics and development outcomes is no mean feat. While there are some observable impacts that we can point to and evidence, others remain far more speculative, though nonetheless important to consider given the potential risks of conflict. As a result, we have broken down 'local impacts' into two categories: observable changes at the national or community level that we can evidence to varying degrees; and potential implications of those impacts, which remain more speculative. This helps to make clear that the implications are not verifiable facts, but rather our analysis of potential outcomes that the more certain local impacts may point to. Figure 3 adds this final step to our approach.

Figure 3: Local impacts and potential implications of foreign interests refracted through the lens of local politics

There is also likely a feedback loop here, with local impacts and their potential implications feeding back into shaping foreign interests. This would be worth considering in future research unpacking the local impacts of foreign interests but is beyond the scope of this paper.

With this approach guiding our thinking, we undertook the following steps of data collection. First, a review was undertaken exploring intersecting literature on international relations, international development, and peace and conflict studies related to Timor-Leste. In particular, keyword searches were used to identify books, articles and grey literature related to 'Timor' plus 'foreign interests'; 'geopolitics'; 'conflict drivers' and sub-searches for 'security sector reform'; 'police reform' and 'infrastructure'. Data collected via this literature review was useful in identifying key foreign actors, characterising their formally stated interests and giving some indication of local impacts.

This was followed by key informant interviews with ten respondents. Half of these were Timorese politicians and bureaucrats (currently serving and retired) and from civil society and the private sector. The other interviews were with non-Timorese working in foreign embassies in Timor-Leste (now or in the past) or with international development programs as advisors or experts. The interviews were semi-structured, not recorded, and have been fully anonymised. Ethics approval for the project was provided via La Trobe University's Human Ethics committee.

Selection of case studies

To help pin down specific local impacts and avoid generic analysis, the paper identifies two sector case studies: police reform and infrastructure development. The two areas of study were selected as they offer different and complementary insights into the local impacts of geopolitical competition and interests.

Police reform was one of the earliest areas of international attention in Timor-Leste and thus provides a longer timeframe to explore impacts, with various international actors involved, offering insight into geopolitical dynamics. The politics of the police (and security sector more widely) has been perhaps the most notable trigger for a return to violence since Timorese independence, with conflict breaking out in 2005-6 relating to police and defence force hostilities and their connection to political grievances and allegiances. Police reform thus offers an important sector through which to consider the local impacts of foreign interests.

In contrast, infrastructure development has more recently become an area of political contestation in Timor-Leste, where different political parties, leaders, and international partners have been providing varying – at times competing – approaches and rationales for investment. This case study also enables consideration of different foreign interests – recognising that these too must be specified at more than a national level, as they differ from sector to sector. Finally, although infrastructure has a less obvious link to local conflict dynamics than policing, its impact on livelihoods, private sector growth, and service delivery is significant, offering important insight into how sectors beyond those directly related to peace and security can nonetheless have important impacts on conflict dynamics.

Overview of foreign power involvement and local politics in Timor-Leste

Foreign powers have been involved in Timor-Leste for over 500 years. Before independence, four key international actors—Portugal, Australia, Japan, and Indonesia—used Timor-Leste as a geopolitical battleground for varying periods.

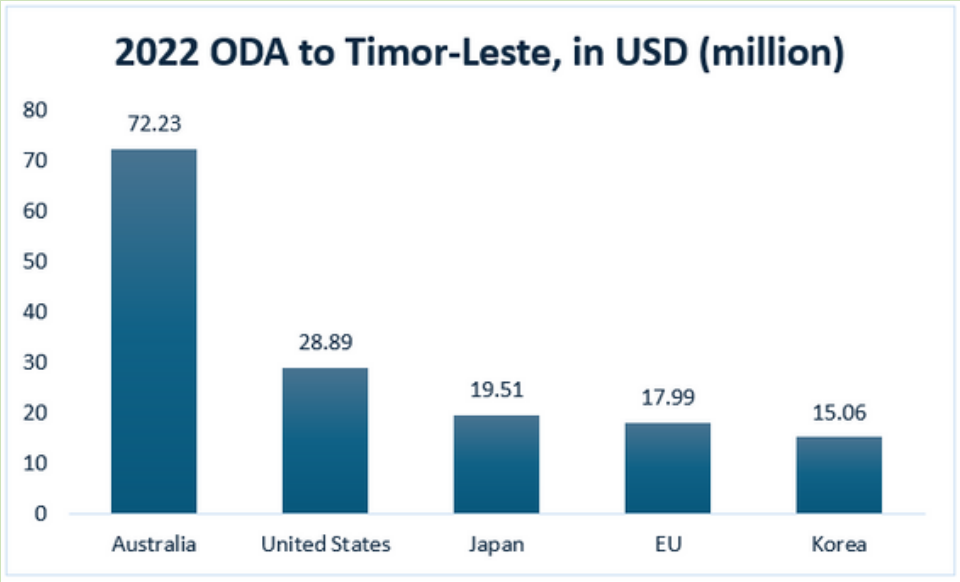
For 200 years from 1651, the Dutch and the Portuguese fought for control of Timor until 1859, when the Dutch concluded a treaty with Portugal to determine the border between Portuguese Timor (present-day Timor-Leste) and Dutch Timor (western Timor)[6]. During Portuguese colonialism, Timor-Leste stagnated economically with little investment in infrastructure and human development[7].

Portuguese Timor's neutrality during World War II was broken when the Australian government positioned allied troops in Timor-Leste territory in 1941. Nine weeks after Australia established a military presence in Timor-Leste, Japan responded by invading Timor-Leste territory. An estimated 60,000 Timorese died during this time.[8]

The 1974 Portuguese Revolution sparked self-determination in Timor-Leste but decolonisation coincided with Cold War Tensions. The rise of the left-leaning Fretilin party in Timor-Leste alarmed the US, while Indonesia saw an opportunity to expand and suppress perceptions of communism in the region. After declaring Timorese independence on 28 November 1975, Indonesia invaded on 7 December.[9] The US support for the Indonesian invasion of Timor-Leste was manifested in the 6 December 1975 agreement to establish a US-supported small-arms factory in Indonesia.[10] The following day, Indonesia invaded Timor-Leste. Australia held a similar Cold War frame, with a preference for Indonesia's stability where "in Canberra's view, East Timor was small and inconsequential. Indonesia was large and influential."[11] The 24-year Indonesian occupation resulted in 250,000 Timorese deaths.[12] A 1999 independence referendum led to further violence, with over 2,000 killed and widespread destruction of more than 75% of the country's infrastructure by Indonesian forces.

The remainder of this paper focuses on local impacts of foreign interests from 2002 to 2024, following the country's restoration of independence in 2002 and Timor-Leste's shift from establishing state stability to an aspiration for improved regional connectivity and economic growth. Yet it is important to recognise that despite this more contemporary focus, foreign interests in Timor-Leste precede this timeframe and continue to influence foreign relations and their impacts.

Overseas development assistance in Timor-Leste, as in many parts of the world, serves as a strategic instrument for advancing international interests.[13] Since the Timorese referendum in 1999, there has been an upsurge in international interest in the small country. Between mid-1999 and mid-2009, bilateral and multilateral agencies spent approximately US$5.2 billion on programs related to Timor-Leste.[14] Almost half (45%) supported the UN missions (see box 1 in the police reform case study). In addition to the UN, Timor-Leste has had a heavy presence from foreign donors, the largest of which during that period were Australia, Portugal, the United States, Japan, and the European Commission.[15] In 2022, the top five ODA partners to Timor-Leste were Australia, the United States, Japan, the EU and Korea:[16]



While the top five donors to Timor-Leste have changed over time, Australia remains the largest single bilateral donor. From 2011 to 2022, Australia provided A$2.4 billion in official development assistance to Timor-Leste.[17]

Timor-Leste's geopolitical significance is shaped by several key factors, including its substantial oil and gas reserves, complex maritime boundary negotiations with Australia, its broader maritime security (especially in response to illegal and unregulated fishing), its increasing geostrategic importance, growing ties with China through the Belt and Road Initiative, and aspirations for regional integration through ASEAN membership.[18] These factors provide crucial context for international interests in the country, influencing foreign involvement due to Timor-Leste's strategic value in the region.

Refraction of foreign interests through local political dynamics

These varied geopolitical dynamics do not exist in a vacuum. They are shaped by and fundamentally shape local dynamics in Timor-Leste. While an in-depth exploration of Timor-Leste's local political dynamics is beyond the scope of this paper, the following features are notable and shape how foreign interests are refracted into local impacts on politics, development and conflict dynamics:

A resistance-era political settlement that creates parallel political processes, one formal-level settlement governed by legal procedures and another informal-level settlement that reinforces the maun bo'ot (literal translation, big brother) culture of powerful resistance-era leaders making decisions based on personal judgement and relationships, with little or no scrutiny[19]. Since independence, Timor-Leste's political settlement has been shaped by military resistance and exiled political leaders, who fought against Indonesia's occupation through both military and diplomatic means. A recurring cast of resistance-era leaders dominates Timorese politics. The current ninth constitutional government, led by the former commander of the armed resistance movement, Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao's CNRT party, also led the sixth constitutional government under a coalition (2007-2015) and was President from 2002 to 2007. During this period the CNRT held strategic portfolios that included the state's Infrastructure Fund, the Ministry of Finance and Decentralization funds, which enabled the control of economic rents.[20] The current President, Jose Ramos Horta, was similarly President from 2007 to 2012, having been Prime Minister from 2006 to 2007. A range of other resistance-era leaders continue to dominate key leadership positions across governments.[21] Beyond patronage networks within the country, these resistance-era leaders and current members of Timor-Leste's political elite established relationships with prominent

business and political figures during the Indonesian occupation. Scambary notes that Indonesian companies are prominent supporters and financial backers of the CNRT party, with highly influential, opaque and reciprocal clientelist networks existing not only between Indonesian businesses and Timorese political elites but also extending through historic linkages to Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto, established during Indonesia's occupation of Timor-Leste.[22]

Political incentives in Timor-Leste focus on redistributing rents from the oil and gas economy to reward veterans and individuals with connections to the resistance movement, including through political party alliances, government positions and government procurement to preferred providers.[23] While economic development is emphasised, political elites control government expenditure and award public subsidies to sustain political support. For example, in the proposed 2025 state budget, social security schemes are equivalent to 18.5% of the $2.6 billion budget.[24] In 2019, the veteran's pension accounted for 4.5% of non-oil GDP or 64% of the Social Protection budget.[25]This is widely seen as key to 'buying the peace' and maintaining stability to enable development.[26] International partners in some cases push for more equitable development that will benefit the poor – though they also value the stability that Timor's more exclusive political settlement has enabled. This tension between a more exclusive and open political settlement, and its impacts on politics (whose voice is heard), development (who benefits) and conflict are key issues through which foreign interests are filtered.

State-centrist development ideologies: Suharto's New Order was a centralist regime that spanned 24 years and influenced Timorese civil servants who served under Indonesian rule of Timor and many of whom now make up Timor-Leste's public administration. Depicted by authoritarian rule, backed by strong military support, the New Order was characterised by widespread corruption, collusion and nepotism[27]. Although other nations in East and Southeast Asia have followed a similar approach to state planning, no other country in the region has impacted Timor-Leste's political model and development approach given the Indonesian occupation from 1975 to 1999. Suharto's New Order laid the foundations for 'state-centrist developmentalism' in Timor-Leste, focused on market expansion and capital-intensive development. While the Government of Timor-Leste has established regulatory bodies for financial oversight, it has simultaneously created special funds and agencies (including the national oil company, Timor GAP) that bypass these mechanisms, allowing for unchecked spending and budget changes.[28] This approach, which deviates from standard financial management practices, bears a close resemblance to the off-budget financing of Suharto's New Order regime and is a lingering effect of the Indonesian occupation. Foreign interests in Timor-Leste routinely confront this Indonesian-influenced state-centrist approach that now sits alongside donor-influenced structures.

Hybrid governance models: Timor-Leste's transition to independent statehood has been characterised, particularly at the community level, by the coexistence of formal governance mechanisms alongside continuing reliance on traditional and customary systems.[29]This hybridity that blends local politics with who holds power and makes decisions in communities also shapes how foreign interests play out at the community level. It can mean that those with power are not those in formal government positions but those with customary roles, with a war veteran history, or who otherwise wield influence behind the scenes.

Timor-Leste's past has and continues to shape present political and geopolitical dynamics. The diverse international interests of foreign actors, detailed in the case studies to follow, do not directly lead to local impacts but are mediated and refracted through the lens of local politics and, in particular, through those personalised dynamics captured above.

Case study 1

Police reform – a melting pot of foreign interests and unclear impacts

Police reform has been a significant component of Timor-Leste's post-independence reforms and has attracted large amounts of funding from international partners.[30] It is therefore an arena with multiple foreign actors with unique interests informing varied approaches to policing support. This case study documents the key foreign actors involved in police reform in Timor-Leste since the restoration of independence, their respective interests, and how these have informed distinct approaches to police reform. It then traces some of the local impacts of these foreign interests and their potential implications, although interviewees noted the difficulty of drawing clear causal lines between the interests and actions of foreign actors and results on the ground.[31]

Key foreign actors and their interests in policing

Interviewees were unanimous in identifying six foreign actors that have played the largest and most influential role in policing in Timor-Leste. These are: the United Nations; Australia; Portugal; Indonesia; New Zealand and China. While the contributions of some other foreign actors, notably Japan, were also mentioned, these were considered to be of smaller significance and are not included here. The interests of these actors are not static but evolve over time. Similarly, their relative influence on Timorese policing has also evolved.

The interests of key foreign actors involved in policing support in Timor-Leste relate primarily to:

- Regional security and stability concerns (Australia, Indonesia and New Zealand)
- Protecting historical and cultural legacies (Indonesia and Portugal)
- Wider alliances and support for national priorities internationally (China and Indonesia in relation to ASEAN and the South China Sea and Portugal via CPLP – The Community of Portuguese Language Countries)
- Commitments to democracy, rule of law and human rights, and values – a sense of supporting Timor-Leste's independence being 'the right thing to do'.

These interests combine to create a competitive environment with juxtaposing ideas about the future of policing in Timor-Leste. Timorese respondents are well aware of the agendas and national interests of their policing partners but also note that they remain dependent on them for funding and human resourcing given insufficient budget allocations from the government.[32] As a result, they note the challenge of how best to navigate these multiple agendas and interests.[33] This situation echoes characterisations of transnational policing exchange internationally, which is now '…a busy transnational policing marketplace. One where the wares on offer now include a growing array of exotic post-colonial policing brands that are seeking to carve-out their own market space'.[34] The milieu set out below reveals multiple actors with varying interests that inform partly-competing visions of policing.

The United Nations

There is ample literature on the role of the UN in police assistance in Timor-Leste. For this paper, it is important to understand the mandate and evolving interests of the UN and their influence on policing assistance. Multiple UN missions were in place from 1999 until 2012 and an evolution of interests is evident over time (see Box 1).

Box 1: UN Missions in Timor-Leste from 1999 – 2012

- The United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), October 1999 - May 2002: undertook peacekeeping and exercised administrative authority during transition to independence.
- The United Nations Mission of Support in East Timor (UNMISET), May 2002 - May 2005: peacekeeping mission mandated to assist newly independent Timor-Leste to develop operational responsibilities and support self-sufficiency.
- The United Nations Office in Timor-Leste (UNOTIL), May 2005 - August 2006: political mission supporting the development of critical state functions, including the police.
- The United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT), August 2006 - December 2012: Multidimensional mission with far-reaching mandate in wake of 2006 crisis, to assist in addressing causes and fallout. Included deployment of 1,608 UN police personnel.
  (see UNMIT, n.d.)

Throughout this time, the UN's mandate in Timor-Leste was to ensure security and the rule of law, and to build the self-sustained capacity of a new nation-state based on democratic principles.[35] Beneath this, however, are other less overtly articulated interests. Some commentators point to the UN's sense of responsibility for a failure to prevent atrocities in Timor-Leste as an impetus to prove the international community's commitment. For instance, Timorese NGO, La'o Hamutuk, in a letter to the UN Secretary-General in 2010, argued that 'In a sense, UN responsibility for Timor-Leste since 1999 grows out of failures from 1975 to 1999.'[36] Following independence, under UNTEAT and UNMISET, UN interests in Timor-Leste policing were in demonstrating the ability of the UN to undertake statebuilding in conflict-affected contexts. As Wilson puts it:

> The idea that if security sector reform cannot be achieved in Timor-Leste in a comparatively benign environment then it probably cannot be achieved anywhere else is often repeated, both by UN officials and engaged observers. Arguably, an admission of failure in the case of Timor-Leste would cast doubt on the whole engagement of the UN in the business of security sector reform.[37]

As a result, there was huge UN investment in Timor-Leste, driven by a determination to demonstrate the success of a UN administration and hand over to a capable state. Most immediately, this investment translated into a focus on stabilisation and 'boots on the ground'. While the UN police undertook policing duties, Timor's national police, the Polícia Nacional de Timor-Leste (PNTL) was being established – vetting, recruitment and basic training took place – but there was an acknowledged lack of engagement with the foundations of a police institution.[38]

While the UN was the dominant international influence on Timorese policing in the immediate post-Independence era, by 2006 this had declined (although UN policing presence remained until 2012) and bilateral policing assistance took on a larger role. In part, this reflected declining relations between the UN and the Government of Timor-Leste, which was eager for the handover of UN responsibilities and for fully independent government. Declining influence might also be attributed to the violence that broke out in 2006, involving conflict within the police and armed forces, which suggested that UN achievements in police reform had perhaps not been as embedded as hoped.[39] UN interests were perhaps moderated around this time, in line with the shifting of the UN's wider role and recognising gaps in policing support . Interests thus shifted to managing a clean handover of authority with the Government of Timor-Leste and bequeathing as functional a police service as possible.

Australia

Australia is Timor-Leste's largest bilateral development partner and close neighbour. The two countries share a military history dating back to World War II,[40] as well as a complicated history of longstanding Australian support for Indonesian sovereign integrity in the face of separatist movements in Timor-Leste and elsewhere. While Australia shifted its support to Timor-Leste independence following the 1999 referendum, this lack of earlier support is not forgotten.[41] Since Timorese independence, there have been growing people-to-people links between the two countries and largely strong diplomatic ties, although these have been tested at times. For instance, revelations in 2013 of Australia using its development support to build government infrastructure to spy on the Timorese government during tense negotiations over maritime boundaries and ownership of oil and gas fields reignited suspicion of Australia's interests. Large protests took place outside the Australian Embassy in Dili and bilateral relations were tense.[42] The situation prompted Timor-Leste to demand fairer renegotiation of the maritime boundary.[43] Yet despite years of dispute over the maritime boundary, 'Australia ultimately accepted a less-than-equal revenue share, forfeiting significant economic gains via conciliation'.[44] It has been suggested that this result reflects Australia's commitment to 'respect for international norms, prioritizing legitimacy and fairness over material gains'.[45] Being seen to adhere to the rules-based international order should be understood in the context of more tense maritime disputes in the region – notably the South China Sea.[46] Australia's interests are also shaped by domestic public sentiment that are largely supportive of Timor-Leste.[47]

In terms of policing support, it should be noted that there is far more available literature and commentary on Australia's interests and role than on the other foreign powers considered here. Australia's interests are primarily related to ensuring security and stability of a near neighbour, as part of a wider Australian Government policy of supporting peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region. Peace in Timor-Leste is both a good in its own right, and instrumental to peace and stability in Australia's region.[48] In this regard, the 2006 crisis in Timor-Leste continues to shape Australia's view of Timor-Leste and concerns about potential for violence make a continued presence in Timor-Leste a priority.[49] As Timor's political system has evolved – and concerns about geopolitical competition in the region have grown – Australian interests have also extended to supporting democracy in Timor-Leste and guarding against the rise of authoritarianism[50] – although it is not clear if or how this shapes policing assistance.[51]

In light of this evolution, Australia's policing assistance has focused on general operational support for administration and resource management, infrastructure and equipment, training (particularly on criminal investigations and forensics).[52] In earlier iterations of policing assistance, Australia focused more strongly on community policing – funding work of The Asia Foundation to support development of a Timorese model of community policing and implementation of a localised policing model. This included a focus on building a police service that is community-oriented, serves the people and maintains the rule of law. Over time, this focus on community policing within Australian policing assistance in Timor-Leste has become less apparent.

At key junctures, such as during the referendum and immediate post-independence period, as well as following the 2006 crisis, Australian policing deployments have provided intervention and stabilisation through 'boots on the ground'. More recently, there has been a shift in Australian policing assistance towards proactive, intelligence-led policing focused on cooperation on transnational crime.[53] These shifts in policing assistance reflect wider shifts in Australian policing emphasis in the Pacific and Southeast Asia. There has also been a stronger emphasis on women's leadership and addressing gender-based violence (GBV) (through both Australian Federal Police (AFP) assistance and through the Australian aid program). This reflects a growing Australian commitment to addressing GBV both at home and abroad.

Yet perhaps most interestingly, some commentators noted a lack of clear strategy or intentionality to Australia's policing assistance in Timor-Leste and indicated that it is not immediately clear how it furthers Australia's interests. Rather, they suggested that Australian policing assistance in Timor-Leste is there because it has existed in various forms since independence and it is now a given that the budget line will continue.[54] They suggest that despite the long-term presence, there is not a strong sense of direction, or of achieving particular strategic goals, but rather a general sense of it being important to continue as a policing partner[55] – perhaps, if nothing else, to ensure that another country does not fill that space.[56] This was summed up in the description of Australian policing assistance to Timor-Leste as ingrained practice.[57] These views also underline the challenge of treating 'Australian policing' as monolithic. In practice, different views on Australian policing support amongst the AFP and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) are important although beyond the scope of what it is possible to cover here. In short, Australian interests in policing assistance likely differ to some degree depending on whether you are sitting in the AFP or DFAT.

Portugal

Portugal's interests in Timor-Leste build on the long history between the two countries and ongoing cultural and linguistic ties. Portuguese colonial rule of Timor-Leste from 1702 to 1975 has bequeathed continuing Portuguese 'echoes' in Timor's political culture and institutions.[58] The Portuguese language has remained dominant (though contested) in formal governance, and shared language continues to facilitate close people-to-people links with visa-free travel for short-term stays. Portugal is also a strong supporter of the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) which promotes cooperation, political and diplomatic coordination, and the promotion of the Portuguese language amongst its nine member states. Portuguese interests thus focus on maintaining Portuguese influence in Timor-Leste – the only CPLP member in Asia.

In policing terms, Portugal has sought to build a Lusophone policing community – the CPLP Police Forum – through assistance, training and exchanges with former-colonies in Africa, Asia and South America.[59] Timor-Leste has previously chaired the Forum and policing assistance to Timor-Leste is part of this wider project. Portugal has provided Guarda Nacional Republicana (GNR) (National Republican Guard) officers to Timor-Leste since 2000. Members of the GNR are military personnel rather than part of the civilian Public Security Police (PSP). This is widely seen to provide a more militarised policing philosophy, but it is important to recognise that the GNR itself has been evolving in its focus within Portugal, developing its proactive and proximity policing approaches to be more aligned with community policing philosophies.[60] Importantly, and in contrast to other policing support, the Government of Timor-Leste has partially paid for the GNR presence since 2012.[61] A GNR officer is also located in the office of the PNTL Commander General as his personal advisor.[62] This gives some indication of the value that the Government of Timor-Leste places on Portuguese policing assistance and the influence it has.[63] The GNR has focused on operational policing and stabilisation – and for many years its officers were a familiar sight on the streets of Dili. This presence was amplified following the 2006 crisis with the deployment of the GNR's Bravo group as part of the UN police mission in the wake of the violence. Beyond this visible presence, Portuguese police and advisors have also been heavily involved in the PNTL's training college and the training of police recruits, as well as in drafting policing laws, policies and regulations.

Indonesia

As the closest neighbour (sharing land borders) and most recent colonial power (from 1975 to 1999), Indonesia has had the clearest direct influence on Timorese policing – interestingly despite few explicit efforts to do so following Timorese Independence.[64] This influence is underpinned by the historic links between the two countries (including in relation to policing), and linguistic and cultural similarities.[65] Indonesia also increasingly positions itself as a South-South development partner, sharing its own development expertise.[66] Between 2010 and 2016, Timor-Leste was the largest recipient of Indonesian technical assistance.[67]

Indonesian interests in Timorese policing are less clearly articulated than those of the other foreign actors in available, English-language sources. (obviously a limitation of this paper). At the level of foreign policy, a pragmatic approach has been adopted by both parties since Timorese independence – recognising the need to work together and the importance of moving forward. As Peake notes: 'The stability of independent Timor-Leste is underwritten by a consensus within the political elite to forgive and forget with Indonesia for crimes committed during the occupation and the two countries have close relations, which play out in a number of areas, including policing'.[68] The shared borders between Timor-Leste and Indonesia also generate shared interests in policing collaboration to protect against irregular people movements, transnational smuggling and crime. Finally, Timor-Leste's concerted bid to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) makes Timor-Leste an important potential ally for Indonesia within the regional grouping. Indonesia has thrown its weight behind Timor-Leste, supporting its bid for membership. Indonesia is thus interested in productive relations with Timor-Leste for national security reasons, to strengthen its regional alliances and influence, and to demonstrate the normalisation of relations and its commitment to the rules-based international system.

There have been heavy influences of Indonesian policing on Timorese policing, many of which are historical and some more recent. When PNTL was established, the integration of 370 former Polisi Republik Indonesia (POLRI – Indonesian Police) officers was fast-tracked, and many were put into senior positions due to their existing skills,[69] instilling an Indonesian policing culture. Similarly, the 'Bimbingan Polisi Daerah' (BIMPOLDA) or village policing model that had been in place under Indonesian rule remains well-known in Timor-Leste and has informed the application of community policing, even though BIMPOLDA was far more focused on controlling local Timorese communities than offering security to the population.[70]More recently, Indonesian policing assistance to Timor-Leste has been formal – through training funded by Timor's Human Capital Development Fund, joint exercises and visits, as well as informal – through personal relationships facilitated by history, language, culture and proximity.[71] Training has focused on close personal protection, tactical driving, traffic management, IT and audit, among other areas.[72] Formal policing cooperation has focused on border management, training and transnational crime, with a number of PNTL officers also pursuing higher education in Indonesia.

New Zealand

New Zealand (NZ) has been an active policing partner in Timor-Leste. Its interests largely centre on fostering broader regional security and being a good regional neighbour – NZ has contributed to other policing missions throughout the Pacific. Increasingly, like Australia, it is also focused on balancing other powers in the region as geopolitical competition makes the Asia-Pacific region a more crowded environment.

In terms of policing support, New Zealand has focused on community policing – sharing its own national model of community policing. This was especially influential following the 2006 crisis, with a high-level PNTL visit to New Zealand in 2007 leading to a direct request for NZ assistance on community policing and a greater role for NZ following the UN police withdrawal in 2012.[73] NZ community policing focuses on policing for the community (rather than of the community) and orients policing towards a preventative, service mentality and away from more militarised policing models.[74] New Zealand's community policing distinguishes itself in drawing on Māori culture and being developed in the context of an unarmed police service. This makes it notably different in feel to other policing assistance on offer in Timor-Leste.[75] Assistance has included a small number of deployed NZ police advisors, the construction of community housing for PNTL officers, and support to a community policing program.[76]

China

China is a newer foreign actor in the policing space in Timor-Leste but its role was flagged by Timorese respondents as being of growing importance, if still less influential than the foreign actors discussed above.[77] Chinese interests in Timor-Leste have taken on greater prominence as China has sought to enhance its strategic influence more broadly in the Pacific. In general terms, Chinese interests in Timor-Leste relate to foreign policy goals they pursue elsewhere: strengthening aid, diplomatic and economic ties to build goodwill and alliances that strengthen support for China's one-China policy and disputes in the South China Sea.[78] As a Chinese official has noted: 'Giving aid helps to establish new friends … For us Timor-Leste is an important friend in the area, and thanks to its government we are confident that they will help us in reducing diatribes with other ASEAN countries'.[79] But Timor-Leste's ambitions to join ASEAN sharpen China's interests in the country.

The South China Sea dispute has become a thorny issue within ASEAN and China needs allies within the regional grouping. Chinese officials have been quoted as underlining the importance of this point: 'For us helping Timor-Leste is key to our relationship with ASEAN,' and '[as] the next member to join ASEAN … we need support from Timor-Leste to improve the relationship with ASEAN'.[80]

Inasmuch as is known, Chinese policing support to Timor-Leste has focused on the provision of equipment (for instance for DNA testing and fingerprint identification), infrastructure support and training.[81] To operate the equipment, China has also provided police trainers to train Timorese counterparts. Police training visits to China also take place. While China is not currently a large policing partner, its assistance is seen as responsive and easier to access quickly than some of Timor-Leste's other policing partners.[82] It is also anticipated to grow. A Joint Statement on Strengthening Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in July 2024 noted that:

> The two nations agreed to enhance exchanges at all levels between the military and police forces, strengthen cooperation in such areas as personnel training, equipment technology, the conduct of joint exercises and training, police affairs and law enforcement.[83]

This policing cooperation is also for (and of) the approximately 20,000 Chinese nationals living in Timor-Leste.[84] More engagement is anticipated as the Timor-China relationship deepens, in keeping with China's ambitions to be a global leader in security governance – including through the launch in 2022 of the Global Security Initiative by Chinese President Xi Jinping, aimed at exporting Chinese policing and security expertise.[85]

Local impacts and potential implications

What then are the impacts of these multitude of foreign interests at the local level? This section identifies four local impacts and considers their potential implications. Importantly the foreign interests do not have discrete impacts – that is, Australian interests, or Portuguese interests, do not operate in isolation and directly 'cause' a local outcome on their own. Rather, these interests intersect and combine with other foreign interests and with local politics that shape how they play out. This makes it difficult to trace the specific local impacts of individual foreign actors.

Local impact 1: Multiple policing models on offer

The most apparent local impact of foreign interests in policing is that there are multiple policing models on offer in Timor-Leste, providing a menu of options that promotes choice but also creates some confusion and undermines capabilities. These multiple models include, for instance, NZ's support for community policing, Portugal's gendarmerie model and Indonesia's BIMPOLDA village policing. On the one hand, multiple approaches provide the PNTL with different models of policing to choose from, enabling them to select what best suits their context and vision. There is some evidence of the PNTL doing this with the development of their own form of community policing – known as the 'VIP model' – Visibility, Involvement and Professionalism. A 2004 decree law was issued calling for the establishment of a National Community Policing Department within PNTL, and community policing was later included in the 2009 PNTL Organic Law and PNTL's National Development Strategic Plan, 2011-2030, as a core philosophy of the PNTL.[86]

In practice, however, this multitude of policing models has also brought with it confusion and slowed the development of a Timorese policing model. As Wassel explains:

> Intensive involvement by the international community in the development of the police service led to poorly coordinated support, with a variety of community policing models offered … It was not until the full withdrawal of United Nations Police and the handover of executive policing authority to the national police in 2012 that community policing policies and practice began to emerge through the lens of local ownership from a decade of international advice, study tours and assessment reports.[87]

The promotion of multiple models of policing by foreign actors, and their tendency to engage with specific police units, has also resulted in different policing philosophies gaining traction within different parts of the PNTL, depending on which foreign actor has been providing support.[88] This means that approaches to policing within the PNTL can be quite uneven. For example, the National Community Policing Department and Women's and Children's Desks work towards a preventative policing model espoused by NZ and Australia, while proactive and intelligence-led policing is promoted by Australia within criminal investigations, and the Rapid Intervention Unit deploys more militarised and responsive policing as per Portuguese

GNR training. Community policing is again a case in point – while the 2009 Organic Law is clear on community policing being the stated philosophy of the PNTL, in practice is it widely seen as the purview of the National Community Police Department and not relevant to other parts of the police.[89]

The potential implications of a multitude of policing models are that different parts of the PNTL end up with quite different policing cultures, creating challenges for service cohesion and fracturing public opinion. People's views of the PNTL differ depending on whether they have interacted with the traffic police, the Women's and Children's Desk, community police officers or riot police, for instance. While inevitable to some extent, this seems to have been exacerbated in Timor-Leste by the different approaches to policing that foreign actors have brought, informed by their own interests and policing cultures.[90] It becomes difficult to accurately assess perceptions of the PNTL because there is no single coherent PNTL but rather multiple policing styles within the service. This is apparent in perception surveys on police performance, for instance. While 99% of respondents report that they 'trust the police', 15% report that police have used excessive force against them or their family, according to The Asia Foundation's 2022 perception survey.[91] One possible explanation is that when people are asked about trust in 'the police', they think of their most accessible and known contact point – the community police officer based in or close to their community – but do not necessarily consider other parts of the PNTL. As The Asia Foundation survey report notes: 'These high rates of trust should thus be viewed with some degree of caution in terms of what they tell us about overall impressions of the PNTL in Timor-Leste, notwithstanding the possibility that positive perceptions of effective OPS [local-level police] may well be contributing to increased trust in the police'.[92]

For police service cohesion, the multitude of policing approaches is potentially concerning because of the history of divisions within the PNTL, some of which played out violently during the 2006 crisis. This includes divisions between PNTL who were former POLRI (Police of the Republic of Indonesia) and those who were not; as well as divides between Westerns and Easterners.[93] Foreign actors' interests in promoting different policing styles may thus contribute to unhelpful divisions within the PNTL and undermine service cohesion.

A second potential implication is that the interests of foreign actors in promoting their various models of policing foreclosed the possibility of alternative policing models from emerging in Timor-Leste. The prevalence of customary models of dispute resolution and community safety that exist in Timor-Leste are widely recognised,[94] and having not made space for exploration of what an embrace of these indigenous practices might look like, there is a risk that Timor now has a thin veneer of formal policing, with all the accoutrements, that has largely failed to engage with the realities of how people deal with grievances and disputes in their daily lives. The opportunity for a more transformative exercise of figuring out what Timorese policing might look like was glossed over amongst the efforts of foreign actors to promote their policing models.

Local impact 2: Filled resourcing gap and provided temporary security guarantee – but patchy

A second local impact of foreign interests on policing in Timor-Leste is that foreign actors have filled a critical funding gap and provided some degree of security guarantee. Despite this, however, the assistance is projectized and patchy, raising questions about its contribution to longer-term, sustainable capacity.

Timorese respondents noted that policing assistance from foreign actors plays a critical role in providing funding and human capability for policing that is not covered by the national budget.[95] This has enabled the PNTL to better fulfill its policing duties and remain a visible presence in many communities (although police are still considered to be difficult to access in remote areas).[96] In addition, the continued presence of international police – from UN police to the GNR to Australian and NZ advisors – has provided some degree of security guarantee, deterring would-be offenders and providing some confidence in community-level peace.[97] In this way, the foreign interests of international partners have provided a cushion for the PNTL to develop financial and human capacity. The presence of multiple funding partners has also enabled Timor-Leste to control where it sources policing support, to some extent. Indeed, with growing geopolitical competition, Timor-Leste knows that it can play the interests of international partners off against each other, within reason.[98]

At the same time, and related to the first impact listed above, much of the funding that has been provided by international actors is project-specific assistance that is not well coordinated (not least because of competition amongst some of those providing policing assistance).[99] This has meant that assistance is patchy – it focuses on parts of the police that suit the interests of the foreign actor. Indeed, some respondents spoke of how each foreign actor seeks to carve out their own space within policing assistance.[100] As a result, there may be islands of effectiveness within PNTL without sustained capacity across the institution.

The potential implications of the injection of resources and provision of a security guarantee are twofold. On the one hand, foreign interests might have coalesced in ways that bought Timor-Leste some time to establish policing foundations, benefit from international policing assistance and find its feet. On the other hand, the form of policing assistance means that it has created siloes within the PNTL and isolated areas of improvement without broader institutional change. The potential implications also depend on what the future of policing assistance to Timor-Leste looks like. In most post-conflict settings, one would expect international policing assistance to decline over time. Timor-Leste has experienced remarkable consistency of support.[101] Interviews suggest that Australian policing assistance, for instance, is somewhat path-dependent and likely to continue for the foreseeable future, not necessarily given its clear strategic purpose but because it is now an accepted part of the AFP's regional policing footprint.[102] The implication may be that the PNTL is spared from having to go it alone but this leaves it highly dependent on the whims of foreign interests and how they play out in the policing sphere.

Local impact 3: Improvements in police performance and community trust in police

A third local impact of foreign interests on policing in Timor-Leste is that relatively high levels of sustained policing assistance from multiple foreign actors has contributed to important improvements in police performance and has led to increased trust in the PNTL over time.This has had real impacts on people's lives and played an important role in post-conflict peace and stability. But there are also questions from some commentators about the real impact of foreign investments in policing assistance.

The UN missions contributed to building the foundations of the PNTL and protected against early potential politicisation of the police (for instance by resisting the integration of more ex-FALINTIL fighters into the service).[103] However, the lack of engagement with internal police management and accountability has been criticised as leaving big gaps that were seen to have contributed to the 2006 crisis.[104] Post-2006 police assistance sought to address this shortcoming.

Evaluations – particularly from Australian and New Zealand policing support – unpack the contributions of those countries to PNTL, including reported improvements in frontline service delivery, increased knowledge of sexual assault and child abuse cases in the Vulnerable Persons Unit, and the strengthening of referral pathways for domestic violence with some indication of increased reporting of domestic violence as a result.[105] It also includes the establishment of community police councils in target communities throughout the country and greater coverage of village police officers in communities, expanding the police presence.[106] Wider analysis in existing literature similarly points to improved security overall, with an absence of civil conflict, improved institutional resilience, declines in most forms of violence and improved public perception.[107]

Portuguese policing assistance has also been seen to provide a regulatory model that has gained traction in Timor-Leste, informing Organic Laws, policies and regulations.[108] This has provided important strategic direction and improved operational planning.

Yet despite these indications of some success, there has also been strong criticism of policing assistance and its failure to deliver meaningful results. There is an increasing sense of 'poor yield' from the large international investments in policing in Timor-Leste.[109] Wilson has described the phenomenon as 'smoke and mirrors', pointing to a focus more on form than function and 'mirroring' international police practices that foreign actors promote to develop a police force 'in their own image'.[110] Taking this perspective, the success of peace and stability in Timor-Leste owes less to international policing assistance and more to local political efforts to ensure the peace.[111]

Perhaps more importantly, however, perceptions surveys undertaken by Belun (a local civil society organisation) and The Asia Foundation both find that the PNTL is widely seen as a legitimate and trusted institution.[112] In Belun's survey, a wide cross-section of respondents from across municipalities noted that police were mostly meeting their expectations and performing well. Belun's survey found that communities are mostly satisfied with the PNTL's performance in maintaining public order and dealing with crime and violence:[113] 'Examples of good police performance given by respondents included that the PNTL maintained security; identified, intervened and resolved problems; prevented conflict and crime; protected and assisted victims of crime; enforced traffic laws and responded to traffic accidents; and, to a lesser extent, protected the border from smuggling and illegal crossing.'[114] This is supported by The Asia Foundation's community perceptions surveys, which show continuing improvements in perceptions of police over time. In 2022, 99% of respondents reported that they trust the police (similar to response rates in 2015 and 2018); and 71% said that they felt that police performance had improved over the past year.[115]

The potential implications of these local impacts are that law and order has been sufficiently restored for people to begin investing in their lives – whether that be by building houses, setting up businesses, or sending children to school. This local impact, if indeed attributable to international policing support, demonstrates that foreign interests can have positive local impacts. Improved trust in police and improved police performance may lead to higher rates of reporting to police – which would need to be backed up by a capable police response. Should this not happen, there is a danger of confidence in police being undermined, and people taking matters in their own hands, resolving matters outside of the law. In practice, however, this seems unlikely. Surveys by The Asia Foundation find, alongside growing trust in police, growing reliance on non-police avenues for resolving disputes. People report being more likely to take disputes and grievances to local leaders at different levels – in particular aldeia chiefs (48%) but also lian-ni'an (20% and suco chiefs (13%), with only 5% taking disputes and grievances to the PNTL.[116] This statistic has held true over multiple iterations of the survey.[117] While 21% of community respondents saw the PNTL as having 'primary responsibility for the maintenance of security,' 34% saw aldeia chiefs as having this role.[118] The potential implication is less that the police might be overrun with requests for support and more that they might be irrelevant to people's day-to-day lives. This may lend credence to the views of some of our respondents and other commentators that policing assistance, while not doing any great harm, has not necessarily amounted to much.[119] At best, then, the implication is that foreign interests have contributed to improvements in police performance and public perceptions of police. At worst, foreign interests have been a benign sideshow that have not got in the way of locally-led improvements. The truth may well lie somewhere in the middle.

Local impact 4: Militarisation of the PNTL

International interests have also contributed to the militarisation of the PNTL. While perception surveys are largely positive about the performance of the PNTL, they also note continued concerns about police excessive use of force.[120] The Belun study notes that in every focus group discussion, at least one person raised concerns about security sector personnel acting outside of the law, abusing their power or being excessively violent.[121] There was also a sense of lack of accountability within the PNTL institution over disciplining such behaviour.[122] One respondent in the Belun study spoke directly of the militarisation of the police:

> Our police are semi-military. They wear military-style uniforms, and also have Steyr weapons [...] of a large-calibre. They appear like the armed forces. It's like we have two militaries.[123]

The Asia Foundation perception survey of 2022 found that 15% of respondents reported the use of excessive force by police against them or a family member, a proportion that rose as high as 25-29% in some districts.[124] Cases of excessive use of force by the PNTL are also frequently covered in local media.[125] A notable case in 2018 involved an off-duty PNTL officer shooting dead three youth and injuring five others at a party.[126] This finding backs up interviews with policing commentators who described the PNTL as having a 'trigger happy mentality'.[127]

The Belun survey also interviewed PNTL representatives, one of whom explained the need for a heavy-handed response:

> We all know the Timorese character [...] If we go easy on them, they taunt us. Sometimes if we speak nicely to them 'Little brother, why did you do that?' they respond, 'Are you telling me what to do?' They are taunting us. In their opinion I'm not a real police. So what are we to do? We have to use force to cool them down.[128]

Untangling the link between excessive use of force, militarisation of the police, and the role of international actors and their interests is complicated. But it is important to note the influence of foreign actors and how their own policing cultures have informed police development in Timor-Leste.

Some of the policing models on offer in Timor-Leste are examples of more militarised, responsive policing. Such models can build on specific clauses of the PNTL Organic Law stipulating that policing 'assumes a nature identical to the military' (sic.) in its organization, discipline, instruction and status.[129] Portugal's GNR sits within a military structure (as opposed to its civilian police, that have been far less involved in policing assistance in Timor), are armed and are steeped in a history of gendarmerie. Indonesian policing is beset by challenges of corruption, politicisation and violence.[130] Moreover, Timor-Leste's firsthand experience of both Portuguese and Indonesian policing was under colonial rule – where there was a heavy focus on maintenance of law and order, collecting intelligence on dissent and reporting back to the metropole.[131] These policing cultures – while not monolithic – do little to dissuade militarisation. There are reasons why these models of policing have been attractive in Timor-Leste. In the context of a violent independence struggle from a much larger and more powerful neighbour, and in the wake of the threat of return to violence with the 2006 Crisis, robust policing approaches are understandably attractive to assist in maintaining a hard-won peace.

Peake has argued that despite much more literature on Australian, NZ and UN policing, the most influential international actors in the policing sphere in Timor-Leste are Indonesia and Portugal.[132] Both countries, sharing language and some degree of culture and history with the Timorese that Australian, NZ and Chinese policing advisors do not benefit from, have developed deeper relationships with Timorese counterparts.[133]

Portugal's hold on the Police Training College is widely seen to have a significant influence on PNTL's policing culture, particularly via the training of recruits.[134] Portugal's influence is also evident in the titles and trappings of policing in Timor-Leste and in the Portuguese written and styled laws and policing, which are much less decipherable to other foreign actors.[135] While the influence of Portuguese policing assistance has waxed and waned, largely owing to the strength of personal relationships at any given time, certain advisors have had very close relationships, over which commentators describe the Portuguese as being very protective.[136]

Indonesia's influence on Timor-Leste is striking in many spheres – from language, to culture, to food, and also to governance and policing.[137] Similarities exist in bureaucratic style,[138] political discourse,[139] and power and governance.[140] These similarities also apply to policing – visibly through uniforms and buildings, and in elements of policing culture. The cultural influence is enabled not only by the recent history of Indonesian policing of Timor-Leste but also by continued training – more PNTL are trained in Indonesia than anywhere else.[141] The modelling of PNTL behaviour on Indonesian POLRI paramilitary operations is also pointed out, mobilising large police operations that require significant money for staff overtime, fuel and food to address a vague and largely rumoured threat, and ultimately result in 'the rounding up of a large group of people suspected of vague misdeeds, most of whom are subsequently released … [T]he nod to Indonesia is palpable'.[142] Indonesian responsive approaches to policing have thus added to informing Timor-Leste's model.[143]

Alongside these influences, no international policing partner has worked squarely on improving police oversight and accountability (although there have been elements across programs, and some small investments from the United States in recent years) – not least because there is limited local traction to work in this space. This is a criticism that goes back to early UN police interventions.[144] As a result, more responsive or militarised policing influences occur without the institutional protections, oversight and disciplinary measures to protect against the risks of militarisation.

The potential implications of this local impact of militarisation of the PNTL are that foreign actors need to consider how their own policing cultures – that they promote through foreign police assistance – will play out in local contexts. On the whole, foreign actors are not interested in creating ill-disciplined police services prone to excessive use of force. However the risks of promoting militarised approaches to policing in a context of weak police accountability and oversight must be recognised. The militarisation of policing risks excessive use of force and threatens to weaken trust between communities and police. Ironically, foreign interests in policing that centre on regional stability are thus potentially undermined by 'tough,' law and order policing approaches that can themselves result in greater violence.

Case study 2

Infrastructure development – balancing intentions and impacts

Infrastructure development plays a critical role in Timor-Leste's transition from a post-conflict state to a thriving economy. Infrastructure development is critical in enabling the movement of people and information, as well as the delivery of vital goods and services. Indonesia's departure from Timor-Leste in 1999 was marked by a 'scorched earth' policy that saw the destruction of most basic infrastructure, including power, water, transport, telecommunications, and office and school buildings that were built by Portuguese and Indonesian administrations.

Since 2006, Timor-Leste's Infrastructure Fund, sustained by the inflow of funds from petroleum sales, has enabled Timor-Leste to fund its public expenditure. This has led to a dramatic increase in infrastructure development spending, with the infrastructure budget growing by over $200 million annually since 2007[145]. By 2013, Timor-Leste planned to invest approximately 15% of its GDP in infrastructure development, far exceeding the 6% GDP investment considered adequate for most developing countries' infrastructure needs[146].

Although Timor-Leste's infrastructure expenditure targets are ambitious and annual expenditure rarely meets its target,[147] various large-scale infrastructure projects have been prioritised and contracted since independence.[148] Infrastructure development prioritized by the Timor-Leste government from 2011 to 2030 include:

- Roads and bridges
- Access to safe drinking water and sanitation systems
- Access to reliable electricity supplies
- Increasing seaport capacity on the north and south coasts
- Expanding the Dili International airport
- Establishing a modern telecommunications network that includes fibre optic cable and broadband internet access

The initiation, design and award of projects has fallen to a diverse set of international actors who have varying interests in Timor-Leste. This case study documents the key foreign actors involved in large-scale infrastructure development in Timor-Leste, their respective interests, and the impacts on Timorese society. The case study then identifies potential implications that may result from these interactions.

Key foreign actors and their interests

Literature and key informant interviews identify five foreign actors who have played a significant role in infrastructure development in Timor-Leste: Australia, Indonesia, China, Japan and multilateral agencies (including ADB, IFC and the World Bank). While other foreign actors have been involved in smaller-scale infrastructure projects, they have been omitted from this analysis. The interests of identified actors, much like those within the security sector, are not static and have evolved – shaped by and themselves shaping the infrastructure priorities of Timor-Leste.

Australia

Australia's broad relationship with Timor-Leste, including as its largest donor, has already been explained earlier in this paper. Concerning infrastructure development, Australia's interest in Timor-Leste is three-fold: (i) countering growing foreign actor presence in the region, (ii) enabling the precursors for economic growth given Timor-Leste's looming fiscal cliff, and by extension of this, (iii) supporting political and state stability.

Timor-Leste's economic, political and state stability is tied to developing its oil and gas reserves, which accounted for 75% of the government budget in 2024[149] and 80% of gross domestic product (GDP),[150] making Timor-Leste one of the most petroleum-dependent economies in the world. Timor-Leste's oil and gas resources are rapidly dwindling, and the Petroleum Fund may run out within 10-15 years[151] or even as soon as 2028 if current trends continue.[152]

The development of the Greater Sunrise oil field is critical for Timor-Leste's economic future. However, Australia disagrees with Timor-Leste's preferred approach to its development. While Timor-Leste wants to process the gas onshore, Australia favours existing infrastructure in northern Australia which it considers a more commercially viable option.

This preference stems from Australia's desire to see the sustainable and mutually beneficial development of oil resources, which it believes is both economically beneficial to Australia, and a more financially viable alternative to the estimated $12 billion required for onshore processing in Timor-Leste.[153] While it is unclear who will engage in the project, Timorese leaders have indicated interest from Chinese state-owned enterprise Sinopec,[154] South Korea and Kuwait if Australia and its partners do not follow through.[155]

High rates of unemployment and a government budget that is heavily dependent on oil income indicate that state instability could become a real threat to Timor-Leste. Past security incidents in Timor-Leste (1999 and 2006) have demonstrated how state instability can threaten regional stability and could require Australia to provide lengthy and resource-intensive humanitarian assistance.[156]

Given the current uncertainty and looming exhaustion of oil reserves, the diversification of Timor-Leste's economy is seen by Australia as critical. Australia's interests in infrastructure development relate to Timor-Leste's ability to diversify and stimulate its economy to ensure national stability and wider growth in the Asia-Pacific region. The economy's largest non-oil exports comprise remittances (US$171 million in 2021),[157] coffee ($26.1 million in 2022)[158] and tourism ($23.2 million in 2019).[159] The development of Timor-Leste's international airport serves as a cornerstone for the growth of several non-oil sectors.

Australia's US$73 million contribution to the expansion and modernization of Timor-Leste's international airport in Dili is part of a multi-donor US$270 million initiative that also includes a loan of US$135 million from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to extend the existing airport runway and a new air traffic control tower, and approximately US$44 million in grant funds from Japan for a new passenger terminal building.[160]

Experts note that Australia's involvement in Timor-Leste megaprojects has been relatively recent, with the 2019 establishment of the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP), its first significant move into the space towards correcting a perceived gap in Australia's offering in the region.[161] Beyond the airport project, Australia has used AIFFP to address cybersecurity-related concerns. Analysts have highlighted the possibility that a Chinese submarine cable would serve as a conduit for Chinese state media[162] and could result in Timor-Leste being a pawn in a larger powerplay for regional influence.[163]

To counter this threat to national interest, Australia persuaded the Timor-Leste government to take an Australia-centric approach to the country's fibre optic advancements,[164] connecting Dili to Port Hedland and Darwin through the Australian-owned Vocus North West Cable System.[165] The Timor-Leste South Submarine Cable is the first submarine telecommunication cable connecting Timor-Leste and is estimated to have cost the Timor-Leste government US$40-60 million, with the Australian government having provided a loan of AU$25.7 million and AU$7 million in advisory services through AIFFP.[166]

Japan

Japan's approach to overseas development assistance emphasises economic cooperation and partnership rather than traditional humanitarian aid, viewing ODA recipient nations as responsible partners who should set their own priorities and mobilise their own efforts.[167] This philosophy is manifested by Japan using ODA funds to leverage private sector investment and trade relationships while maintaining a request-based system where nations identify their own project needs.[168] Underpinned by this approach, Japan's ODA to Timor-Leste is also shaped by grievances and related atonement stemming from the invasion and occupation of Timor-Leste in World War II. In recent years, Japan has supported a "free and open Indo-Pacific," considering growing concerns in the East and South China Sea and growing Chinese influence in the region, nuclear issues in North Korea, and the ongoing war and instability in Ukraine[169]. Japan has also shown support for Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN, with a focus on supporting the country's economy under the Japan – Timor-Leste Comprehensive Partnership towards Sustainable Growth and Development.[170]

Japan's cooperation with Timor-Leste predates independence, and JICA established its office in March 2002. From 2000 to 2020, Japan provided Timor-Leste with $464 million in ODA.[171] This has included a strong focus on infrastructure – in particular road improvements and power supply rehabilitation – before shifting its focus to regional connectivity through support for airport and port infrastructure.[172]

China

Although China's Pacific aid program declined from 2017-2021, total aid spending in 2022 rose to $256 million, positioning China as the Pacific's second-largest bilateral aid donor after Australia[173]. In the last three years, China has shown renewed ambition to engage in large-scale infrastructure projects in the region, shifting its approach from a loan-financed infrastructure actor to a grant-dominated aid program, with grants now accounting for almost two-thirds of China's aid to the region.

China's relationship with Timor-Leste is characterized by mutual strategic interests and growing economic ties. China views Timor-Leste as a potential market and investment destination, offering opportunities to expand its regional influence[174]. Timor-Leste, in turn, seeks Chinese investment and market access to diversify its economy and balance relationships with other key partners.[175] This dynamic has led to significant Chinese involvement in Timor-Leste's infrastructure development, with Chinese companies, many of them state-owned enterprises, receiving over US$1.3 billion in contracts for projects that include the South Coast highway and Tibar Port.[176] These megaprojects are outlined below:

Chinese companies were paid by Timor-Leste to build infrastructure.

Project	Company	Payment ($million USD)
Electric power plants and transmission lines	Chinese Nuclear Industry Construction Co. #22 and China Shandong International	358
South Coast highway (first 30 km)	China Overseas Engineering Group Company and China Railway First Group Company	300
Container port	China Harbour Engineering Company (subcontracted by Bolloré)	200
Other roads	CBMI, Sinohydro, Shanghai Construction, Hebei Road and Bridge, CNI22, China Wu Yi, Chongqing Int'l Construction and others	448
Other projects	various	> 10
Total		**1,343**

Source: Gomes, E and Scheiner, C (2021), 'Chinese involvement in Timor-Leste: myths and facts,' La'o Hamutuk

In the period from 2010 to 2016, Timor-Leste spent US$1.2 billion on infrastructure, 80% of which was contracted to Chinese companies.[177] China's involvement in infrastructure projects is often criticised by Western and other commentators.[178] However, in Timor-Leste, Chinese companies offer a proven track record in developing infrastructure in a cost-competitive manner and can outbid Western companies on price.[179] While China has provided foreign assistance, including the construction of government buildings, ODA from China represents a relatively small portion (just 3%) of Timor-Leste's total foreign aid.[180] Chinese ODA to Timor-Leste totalled US$88 million through to 2021, most of which has been used to pay Chinese companies and workers.[181] The 2023 meeting between Timorese Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Hangzhou, China, marked strengthened bilateral cooperation and strategic partnership between the two nations,[182] This included Timor-Leste's support for China's Belt and Road initiative and China's assistance for infrastructure development and food self-sufficiency.

Indonesia

Development cooperation from Indonesia to Timor-Leste is conducted under a South-South and Triangular Cooperation (SSTC) framework and a South-South Cooperation (SSC) policy. Technical assistance from Indonesia to Timor-Leste focuses on developing the agricultural sector, media and communications, health and governance.[183] From 2014 to 2016, infrastructure-related programming accounted for 6% of Indonesia's support to Timor-Leste under the SSTC.[184] Given their proximity, the bilateral relationship between Indonesia and Timor-Leste focuses on strengthening economic partnership, trade, and land and sea connectivity – with Indonesia a firm supporter of Timor-Leste's membership within ASEAN. The strength of the bilateral economic partnership is captured by the US$818 million that state-owned and private Indonesian enterprises have invested in Timor-Leste since independence,[185] through the 856 Indonesian businesses operating in the country[186]. Concerning infrastructure development, Indonesia's interest is centred on business-to-business partnerships and state-owned enterprises being able to infrastructure contracts in Timor-Leste.[187] The most notable example is the US$119 million contract to Indonesian state-owned enterprise PT Wijaya Karya to develop Oecussi International Airport.

Multilateral Agencies

The World Bank/IFC and the ADB are the most active multilateral organisations supporting infrastructure development in Timor-Leste. ADB support for Timor-Leste has focused on removing infrastructure bottlenecks and institutional constraints to open the way for more sustainable development. ADB's identified goal is to encourage private sector development and economic diversification, and it has committed 80 public sector loans, grants, and technical assistance totalling US$756 million to Timor-Leste. The ADB's most prominent infrastructure project has been the US$135 million loan for expanding Dili's Presidente Nicolau Lobato International Airport.

IFC's interest in Timor-Leste is to accelerate and improve the environment for private sector development and investment. The IFC was the transaction advisor for the Tibar Bay Port project – the country's first Public-Private Partnership (or PPP), which will amount to US$490 million.[188] The IFC worked with Timor-Leste's Ministry of Finance PPP Unit to deliver a transparent and competitive tender process that was won by the Bolloré Group in 2016. Under the award agreement, Bolloré Group contributed US$360m of this cost, with the remainder (US$130m) financed by the Government of Timor-Leste.[189]

Local impacts and potential implications

Foreign actors' primary interests in infrastructure development in Timor-Leste centre around:

- Improved regional partnerships, trade, and economic development given dwindling oil resources (Australia, China, Indonesia and Multilateral agencies)
- Regional security and stability concerns (Australia, Japan and Indonesia)
- Wider alliances and strategic geopolitical influence (China, Japan and Australia)
- Promoting governance and a competitive investment environment (Multilateral agencies)

These interests are fluid and simultaneously coalesce and juxtapose approaches to infrastructure development in Timor-Leste. Timor-Leste's political elite understand foreign actors' interests and use these to consolidate power, maintain political stability, and establish a legacy that appears to address urgent long-term development outcomes. At times, political elites intentionally pit foreign actors against each other to achieve desired economic outcomes.[190] Similarly, foreign actors seek to influence political elites to compete for geopolitical influence.

This section identifies three local impacts and considers their potential implications. Given the fluidity of foreign interests interfacing with dynamic political interests, direct links between foreign actor interest and impacts at the community level do not exist. More apparent is how foreign and local political interests in infrastructure development interact to affect outcomes.

Local impact 1: Infrastructure projects are shaped by political aspirations more than they are guided by development benefits

The interplay between foreign actors and political elites creates a complex situation where development rhetoric does not always align with on-the-ground realities. While foreign actor involvement in Timor-Leste's infrastructure development landscape is often driven, at least in rhetoric, by genuine intentions to support development outcomes, the reality is far more nuanced.

Experts interviewed in this study noted a lack of long-term strategy and vision in Australia's approach to airport infrastructure development which is shaped by historic missteps in the two countries' bilateral relationship and a desire to mend relations in the context of wider geopolitical competition.[191] An interviewer noted that one key factor influencing the Australian aid program has been the desire to support the Timorese government in order to help allay lingering suspicions over Australian motives.[192] Geostrategic influence towards balancing the growing presence of China in the Pacific, while improving the economic and political stability of Timor-Leste, adds layers to the complex nature of Australia's engagement with Timor-Leste. Such layers create entry points for Timor-Leste's political elite to pit foreign actors against one another. This was noted in 2022, when Jose Ramos-Horta used China's interests in oil and gas deposits in the Timor Sea as leverage in Timor-Leste's negotiations with the Australian firm Woodside, drawing the attention of the Australian government.[193]

While Australia seeks to maintain geographic influence while addressing historic mistakes, Indonesia leverages its socio-cultural ties and the past to create spheres of influence within Timor-Leste's economy and political framework. Experts describe how Indonesian businesses emphasise these close ties when meeting government representatives as a way to influence project tenders.[194]

Less apparent, but clearly present, is the impact of Indonesia on state structures and informal institutions. Scambary argues that the impact of 24 years of Indonesian occupation, and close political and economic ties between Timor-Leste and Indonesia, has resulted in Timor-Leste's infrastructure fund bearing close resemblance to the off-budget financing of Suharto's New Order regime.[195] Further, the existence of coordinating ministries in addition to ministries of planning and investment in Timor-Leste mirrors the Indonesian government planning system, especially Bappenas, Indonesia's powerful National Development Planning Agency.[196] One expert interviewee noted that although Timor-Leste has good procurement systems and regulatory environments, senior ministers from Public Works through to the office of the Vice-Prime Minister know how to bend the law and create opportunities for preferential access by Indonesian businesses.[197] The desire for Indonesian elites to align government development approaches with political power[198] is mirrored in Timor-Leste's political hierarchy, whereby state-funded projects service clientelist and patrimonial networks.[199]

This pattern was highlighted by a former Director within the Government of Timor-Leste, who indicated that Indonesian and Chinese companies strategically build personal relationships with Ministers before business registration and during tendering processes, and then use these relationships to encourage Ministers to expedite approval processes.[200] This strategy was noted to have been employed by Chinese companies during the tendering of road projects and by Indonesian companies in the telecommunication sector, with companies using sympathetic Ministers to influence not only infrastructure tenders but also the government's financial crime unit.[201] Senior technical staff indicate awareness of how foreign business interests interplay with political elites, impairing transparency and accountability within the infrastructure sector. They accept this as being part of the hierarchical framework of Timorese politics.[202]

A potential implication of foreign actors playing into the patronage of elite politics is the reinforcement of power imbalances and the inequitable distribution of development outcomes. The selection of many of the megaprojects proposed by the political elite is influenced by interests in servicing clientelist networks or gaining political prestige.[203]

These processes continue alongside visible disparity in wealth, which, compounded by increasing youth unemployment rates, perceptions of corruption and the country's looming fiscal cliff, could spark unrest and violence akin to the riots witnessed in Dili in 2002[204]

Local impact 2: The impacts of foreign interests and investments in infrastructure projects can be mitigated through safeguarding standards

Timor-Leste has made significant progress in infrastructure development, particularly in road restoration and electricity sector upgrades, with public investment enabling network-supplied electricity coverage to increase from 21 per cent of households in 2003 to 83 per cent in 2016.[205]

The implementation of state infrastructure projects is often dependent on land acquisition from individuals and communities, either through a mutually agreed purchase or through expropriation.[206] The acquisition of land rights by states frequently results in a loss of livelihoods. housing, and social connections for those affected, making it a complex aspect of infrastructure projects.[207] This challenge was exemplified in Timor-Leste's ambitious US$400 million government plan which involved contracting a Chinese state-owned enterprise, Chinese Nuclear Industry 22nd Construction Company, to construct heavy-oil power generation stations and transmission lines. The project faced criticism for weak planning and multiple delays.[208] Off-target, over budget and under pressure to fulfill the promise of cheap, reliable electricity, the government undertook a land acquisition process characterised by informal and arbitrary procedures, lacking proper environmental and social impact assessments or community consultations.[209] Small and informal compensation was provided to affected families, with police violently dispersing and arresting individuals involved in community demonstrations against land clearance,[210]

In countries with weak legal and institutional frameworks for the acquisition of land rights by the state, the involvement of international institutions and their safeguard mechanisms can mitigate the impacts on affected people and communities.[211] International financial institutions (including the ADB, IFC, World Bank, and the Japanese government agency JICA) have implemented safeguard policies for infrastructure projects in Timor-Leste, seeking to minimise social and environmental impacts such as those encountered in the electrification project above. These policies include conducting impact assessments, implementing participatory resettlement plans, ensuring adequate consultations and compensation, and establishing grievance mechanisms. Indeed, a notable positive impact of foreign actors in infrastructure development in Timor-Leste is the inclusion of such safeguarding mechanisms.

Safeguard policies in Timor-Leste now provide more bargaining power to affected communities, especially with regard to land acquisition. For instance, the Road Network Development Plan, supported by ADB, WB, and JICA, aimed to rehabilitate 976 kilometres of roads and created a Resettlement Framework to respond to land acquisition challenges.[212] Approved by the Government of Timor-Leste, the Resettlement Framework guided land acquisition, ensured compensation for affected people, and standardised resettlement plans across projects. Through the Resettlement Framework, landowners in the municipality of Manatuto successfully negotiated land values up to US$12 per square meter, in contrast to the US$3 per square meter rate set by the Council of Ministers for land acquired for the Betano power station.[213]

Foreign enforcement of safeguarding principles offsets potential harm to communities caused by involuntary resettlement and the environmental impacts of infrastructure projects. The government of Timor-Leste has circumvented some safeguarding processes, for instance by conducting "socializations" in place of genuine consultations with affected communities.[214] In the case of Betano, the project was over-budget, off-track and poorly planned.[215] Rigorous safeguard policies can be perceived as a deterrent to time-pressed state actors who make promises to voters and are compelled to complete legacy projects by any means necessary. In practice, it may be beneficial to ensure sufficient flexibility of standards to enable projects to move forward while ensuring a minimum level of compliance, even if it risks reinforcing the unwanted impacts and implications identified above under local impact 1.[216]

Local impact 3: Foreign-led infrastructure projects constrain Timorese workforce advancement

Foreign actors, particularly foreign contractors and overseas labour, are increasingly perceived as a threat to local employment and business opportunities in Timor-Leste.[217] This sentiment is exemplified by the former Vice-President of the country's Chamber of Commerce and Industry, who highlighted Timorese business complaints about foreign contractors, imported workers, and foreign small businesses encroaching on opportunities for Timorese, arguing that the country could "fall to foreigners in 20 years."[218] This argument extends to infrastructure projects, as illustrated by the Betano national electricity project, where only 35% of the workforce was Timorese.[219]

Experts interviewed for this study remarked that Timorese businesses lack the equipment and skills to compete with foreign entities for large-scale infrastructure projects. For instance, in infrastructure development projects like the Dili Airport refurbishment, experts remark that there are no Timorese companies capable of upgrading elements of the airport to a standard that meets global safety requirements.[220]

Foreign involvement in infrastructure development also brings some benefits by upskilling the local labour force. For instance, the Tibar Bay Port project led to significant individual capacity building, with 97- 98% Timorese staffing, including technical roles.[221] As a government minister noted, these Timorese staff have had opportunities for professional development that they would never have had working in a purely government-managed Port Authority.[222] Yet, this individual capacity building does not necessarily translate to institutional capacity building. A public-private partnership project like the Tibar Bay Port development will not result in the Timor-Leste Port Authority managing the developed facility independently. Such isolated benefits also do little to address widely held concerns about infrastructure development projects serving the economic interests of foreign firms rather than providing much-needed local employment.

Timorese youth (aged 15-24) are almost twice as likely to be unemployed (9.6%) compared to the total population (5.1%).[223] With Timor-Leste's economy remaining heavily dependent on public expenditure and the country's Petroleum Fund – the primary source of funding for the state budget, projected to be fully depleted by 2034 – the conditions are ripe for economic and societal instability.[224] A possible outcome of dissatisfaction towards foreign actors perceived as a threat to Timorese employment opportunities is xenophobic crime and increased youth disenfranchisement, which, together with looming economic challenges, can catalyse state instability.

Conclusions and implications

This country study has tested a methodology for examining the local impacts of foreign interests, applying it to two fields in Timor-Leste: police reform and infrastructure development. In each area, the paper has documented the interests of the most pertinent foreign actors and how these interests shape their investments before setting out some visible local impacts and speculative implications. A key challenge has been to identify and substantiate the local impacts and the contributions of foreign interests, along with the intersections between foreign interests and local politics. This remains an area for further research to understand how, in a context of more explicit geopolitical competition and posturing, the impacts of foreign actors' actions can be understood. This brings an important human dimension to geopolitical competition and international relations and can help to make explicit the benefits and the costs of the pursuit of foreign interests.

This final section sets out some cross-cutting implications from the analysis above, reflecting on what the findings tell us about local impacts of foreign interests in Timor-Leste specifically, as well as more broadly. Five key points are made.

1.States are not unitary actors and national interests are slippery

What began as a seemingly straightforward task of identifying national interests opened up the complexity involved in pursuing national interests through both police reform and infrastructure development (and presumably other sectors, also). This is complicated by the fact that states are not unitary actors pursuing their clearly defined national interests in a homogenous way. Rather, there are multiple agencies of a given state working in Timor-Leste – such as DFAT and the AFP, or MFAT and the New Zealand Police, in the field of police reform. There are also a range of private and state-owned actors in the infrastructure space that have varying degrees of ties to their nationality or country of registration, and may share some interests with that state, but also pursue independent interests. China's engagement with Timor-Leste's infrastructure sector is a case in point: Chinese companies secured 80% of Timor-Leste's US$1.2 billion infrastructure spending from 2010-2016, while China's development assistance totalled US$88 million to 2021, most of which was used to pay Chinese companies and workers. China's engagement with Timor-Leste on infrastructure projects illustrates how state diplomatic relations, state-owned enterprises, private businesses, and development assistance can operate with varying interests and degrees of coordination. In the field of development assistance, the rise of managing contractors as the primary implementation modality also brings to bear additional interests. This means that the pursuit of national interests is increasingly complicated, and ascertaining what these interests are and how they are pursued is not straightforward – let alone determining the local impacts of those interests.

This complexity is noted but not fully explored in this paper, and it is an important area for future research. The extent to which the various elements of 'the state' are acting in concert or at cross-purposes will affect the ability of that state to pursue its interests. It creates ample space for other actors to work in the interstices between these divergent interests – for both benevolent and nefarious purposes. It is, of course, unrealistic to assume that democratic states can get all parts of the state singing entirely from the same song sheet, but exploring how this challenge is navigated and with what consequences would be revealing.

2.Tracing local impacts of foreign interests is hard, with more that could be learnt from international development

There is very little literature on understanding the local impacts of foreign interests. While there are sweeping historical studies of what foreign interests have achieved regionally or globally, limited data exists on the contribution of foreign interests to specific local impacts. Here, the foreign policy community could learn from the international development community, which has developed monitoring and evaluation approaches precisely to evidence contribution to local impacts. Drawing on such evaluation approaches would help to provide more robust evidence to understand the local impacts of foreign interests beyond mere assertions. It might also enable foreign actors to consider their 'tools of statecraft' in a more integrated fashion, as different levers to pull to achieve foreign policy outcomes, although this will never be without its tensions, as set out above.

3.Where the impacts of foreign interests can be observed, they are both intended and unintended, positive and negative

The case studies in this paper reveal that local impacts of foreign interests in Timor-Leste are mixed. Their influence is not direct but rather combines with the interests of other foreign actors and with the local political economy to produce both positive and negative local impacts. While some impacts might be intended – such as improvements in police performance and increased citizen trust, and community benefits from infrastructure investments and safeguarding standards – others are not. Examples of less intended impacts include how infrastructure investments from foreign actors in pursuit of their interests end up conflated with clientelistic politics, and how the parallel promotion of particular policing models undermines the emergence of a Timorese policing philosophy. These might be seen as unfortunate side effects of pursuing national interests, but they also underline that foreign actors could be thinking through the potential impacts of promoting their interests in a much more granular way.

While foreign actors and their foreign policy arms might consider political analysis to be their bread and butter, greater attention could be paid to how national interests will intersect with the interests of other states, and how these will be refracted through the lens of local politics to produce both intended and unintended impacts. This is important so as to be aware of how unintended consequences could undermine foreign states' interests by augmenting existing grievances that can act as triggers for instability. In the case studies examined here, this effect is apparent in the way that policing assistance from countries with more militarised policing cultures risks being operationalised in ways that result in police ill-discipline and excessive use of force. Similarly, foreign interests in infrastructure development are augmented by clientelist politics, resulting in local impacts that perpetuate the status quo. These local impacts are not necessarily in the interests of the foreign powers and their intended outcomes, suggesting that stronger analysis of how foreign interests refract through local politics is needed.

4.Interests of multiple foreign actors may help mitigate foreign dominance and allow for pushback

Timor-Leste is an interesting case of a small state attracting the interest of many foreign actors – initially due to its underdog status as the world's newest state and later due to its geostrategic position. In many ways, it might seem more challenging to be the subject of international interest from multiple larger actors – from superpowers like China to middle powers like Indonesia and Australia and smaller but influential powers such as New Zealand and Portugal. Yet in Timor's case, this abundance of foreign interest has also created opportunities.

Most obviously is the influx of investment, primarily through aid, that foreign interest has brought – enabling Timor-Leste to develop a range of sectors, including policing and infrastructure. As has been noted in this paper, Timor-Leste has also benefited from relatively long-term investments from these actors, as compared to many other post-conflict settings. Yet, beyond the money, the multitude of foreign actors has also mitigated any one actor (and their interests) from gaining dominance. This makes Timor-Leste an interesting case in contrast to some other post-conflict settings where one country is clearly dominant (think the US in Afghanistan; the United Kingdom in Sierra Leone; etc). It is a situation that may carry both pros and cons. On the one hand, it creates space for Timor-Leste to push back on foreign interests and to play them off against each other. This may be useful in forwarding Timor-Leste's own national interests and give the small country more of an upper hand than is sometimes the case for post-conflict, aid-reliant countries. At the same time, a messier set of interests can create tensions that pull in opposing directions. Timorese respondents reflected on their awareness of the competing interests of other powers and how they navigate these in strategic ways but also face limits to doing so, given dependence on aid resources.[225]

5.Local politics remains key in how foreign interests play out

Finally, throughout this study the role of local politics emerged again and again as the key factor shaping local impacts. This was incredibly difficult to tease apart from the role of foreign interests. While one central figure has significantly shaped Timorese politics,[226] local politics here refers not only to the wider political settlement in Timor-Leste at the level of political elites but also to how power and decision-making happen within institutions and how institutional behaviour plays out in communities. All these levels of local politics are playing a central role – from elite politics shaping investments in infrastructure and who wins procurement contracts; to institutional politics influencing how foreign interests in policing gain influence in different parts of the PNTL; to local level community politics shaping land acquisitions for infrastructure projects or sentiments towards the PNTL. Thus, any examination of the local impacts of foreign interests cannot avoid the mediating roles of local politics.

For international actors pursuing their national interests, this finding means that understanding local politics across multiple levels is key. A number of respondents flagged that this understanding is severely lacking amongst a range of foreign actors working in Timor-Leste – from police advisors to donor agencies supporting infrastructure projects.[227] This neglect of the influence of local politics risks foreign interests being pursued in ways that deliver unintended impacts. It mistakes foreign interests as the main game, when the main game is local politics, which has had decades of experience running rings around foreign actors trying to pursue their own interests. A more solid understanding of how foreign interests get interpreted, prioritised and variously refracted through the lens of local politics requires much more consideration. But this is a difficult task – the methods pursued in this paper have only been able to offer broad brush strokes due to political sensitivities and limitations of time and information. While the approach recognises the important role of local politics, more work might be needed to develop a method that interrogates its interplay with foreign interests.

Conclusion

This study has developed an initial method for identifying local impacts of foreign interests in Timor-Leste, focusing on police reform and infrastructure development. In doing so, it has encountered methodological challenges that speak to the complexities of national interests, their causal influence on local outcomes, and their intersection with local politics. It has underlined that foreign interests can result in both intended and unintended consequences that have positive and negative impacts for communities in Timor-Leste. Across both police reform and infrastructure development, there have been both positive and more concerning impacts of foreign interests – suggesting they are neither inherently 'good' or 'bad' but that deeper consideration of how they are likely to play out in the context of local politics is needed. Finally, it has pointed to the need for future research pathways, as well as potential learning opportunities between the foreign policy and international development communities, to better understand how international actors influence local outcomes and affect stability, local politics and development.

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[5] See for instance G. Miles and K. Stokke (2010) 'Participatory development and empowerment: The dangers of localism,' Third World Quarterly 21(2): 247-268.
[6] Government of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (2021) 'Timor-Leste: History,' Accessed at: Our first reaction to examining the local impacts of foreign interests is that these interests are not foisted, unmediated onto domestic politics or local communities in a direct, linear way. That is, the simple relationship depicted in Figure 1, below, is not an accurate depiction of reality.
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Interview with policing director, 28 July 2024
Interview with policing expert, 26 September 2024
Interview with policing expert, 27 September 2024
Interview with representatives of international development organisation, 18 November 2024
Interview with senior representative from business association, 14 September 2024


UK International
Development
Partnership | Progress | Prosperity


XCEPT
CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS


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