

## **Indonesia's Aggression in East Timor: The Question of Political Justification**

### **Abstract:**

Indonesia's aggression towards East Timor started in 1974 and lasted for more than two decades. There was none to little interventions by the international governments during the first two years of the aggression which caused its long period. Indonesia's decision to intervene in East Timor's independence met with reluctant diplomatic response by the international world as East Timor's winning political party used communism as its ideology. Neoclassical realism is used to analyze the domestic situation and how it was later translated into international response in Indonesia's aggression to East Timor. East Timor's aggression is a systemic result of an individual's obsession and matched with international ignorance – especially the West in this regard. At the end of the day, East Timor was a victim of both Indonesia's foreign policy and ideological war during the Cold War.

**Keywords:** East Timor, Indonesia's aggression, Cold War, Foreign Policy

### **Introduction**

In the period of 1974–1976 Indonesia launched an aggression towards its neighboring country, East Timor, which was continuously justified throughout the next 27 years by the Indonesian government as protecting Indonesia and East Timor's national security (Lawless, 1976). The aggression was launched during the power vacuum when the Portugal government left after previously colonizing the country for 450 years. The Portugal government left in the middle of 1974 after making it clear to the United Nations that they would not relinquish their control over any of their colonized territories (Lawless, 1976).

In East Timor, after the acknowledgement of the Portugal government over their colonized territories, political movements by political groups were automatically present within the country. There were at least three important political groups, among



which each had an aspiring idea on East Timor's next political fate. These political organizations played an important role in Indonesia's aggression later in 1975 (Clark, 1980). The three political groups and their political goals were:

- a. *União Democrática Timorese* (UDT). Their political goal focuses on a progressive autonomy with Portugal's presence in the country.
- b. *Associação Social Democrática Timorese* (ASDT) which later changed its name to *Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente* (Fretilin). Their political goal focuses on establishing an independent country of East Timor without any intervention from any external parties. This, according to Fretilin, should happen after a short transitional period.
- c. *Associação Popular Democrática Timorese* (Apodeti). Their political goal is to fully integrate with Indonesia as a new province. Apodeti is the least popular group within the East Timor population as their political goal does not focus on sovereignty and independence (Clark, 1970).

Among the three groups, Fretilin campaigned on social reforms in East Timor's society due to the high number of illiterate people and high level of poverty in the country. However, the popularity of Fretilin was seen as a threat by the Indonesian government due to its leftist ideology. Indonesia was not ready to welcome a communist party victory in its neighborhood after their own history with communist party (Ooi, 2004). This is a shared sentiment not only by Indonesia but also by two other states such as Australia and the United States – both were not ready for a popular and winning communist party within their area of interests, especially after Vietnam and on-going Cold War (Lawless, 1976; Ooi, 2004). While Fretilin was campaigning on a speedy and fast independence, Apodeti was the group that was closely linked to Indonesian intelligence due to its strong bias to integrate with Indonesia as an autonomous region. According to Fretilin, Apodeti is nothing but a puppet of the Indonesian government (Ooi, 2004). On the other side, UDT held the key to a stable and stronger political stance of independent East Timor which Fretilin was aiming for.

In order to avoid Indonesia's aggression towards East Timor, Fretilin and UDT were supposed to create a coalition and declare their independence after Portugal recognized the coalition as the sole authority in East Timor (Hoadley, 1976). However, due to external and internal conflicts between the Fretilin and UDT members, the coalition disbanded after three months. Indonesia is accused of playing a big part in the disbandment by using fake news to ignite UDT's fear of Fretilin's leftist political position – stating that Fretilin had received military training from China and Vietnam (Narayan, 2000). After the disbandment, UDT then came to Jakarta which was seen as supporting the integration of East Timor with Indonesia's territory. Civil war quickly broke out in the country with the suspicion of Indonesia's government as the



main supporter for UDT and Apodeti's financial and weapon resources – for months, Indonesian government tried to boost the popularity of Apodeti during the civil war which was to no success (Hoadley, 1976).

After the independence announcement by Fretilin on 28 November 1975, Indonesia launched a full scale aggression to East Timor with a silent support from the United States and Australia. There were small and anxious international diplomatic responses towards the aggression as the international order was not supportive of both the Fretilin and Indonesia's action; however, the international organizations also did not provide any solutions towards the on-going situation in East Timor, causing more and more casualties by each day (Hoadley, 1976). It was predicted that the casualties of the aggression in December 1975 reached a number of 100,000 people killed (Chomsky & Herman, 1979).

It is important to note that Indonesia's occupation of East Timor lasted for 24 years with various violent events happening throughout the years, including a genocide that happened soon after East Timor voted to be independent in a referendum held in 1999. However, this essay tries to focus only on the first years of the aggression which happened in the 1970s. This is because the first years of the aggression strongly portray Indonesia's reasoning and justification for their aggression. Thus, this paper aims to further analyze Indonesia's perspective on the aggression by seeing what happened on the domestic level which eventually led to the aggression. This paper also aims to understand whether the East Timor aggression was a justified foreign policy from the national perspective.

### **Neoclassical Realism Perspective on Aggression and Indonesia's Aggression towards East Timor**

Hans J. Morgenthau, known for his contribution to classical realism, in his publications described that humans naturally become attracted to power and domination, which is the source of conflicts in the international arena (Algozaibi, 1965). He also elaborated further that there are some other principles that should be taken into considerations upon using realism as a theory and analysis tool such as time context, political morality, national interests or power, and human factors (Algozaibi, 1965).

Meanwhile, neorealist scholar, Kenneth Waltz, in 1979 described the interests of states in the self-help international system and why states choose to be involved in wars. Waltz stated that in the international anarchy system, states would always act as if they were in a conflict (Waltz, 1979). Waltz further explained that in the international system, weaker states are left to defend themselves from stronger states; meanwhile, the stronger states must always make sure that the weaker states would not disrupt their security



(Waltz, 1979). Thus, according to Waltz, states' main interest in the international system is survival, as states believe there are no organizations that could protect them against external threats (Waltz, 1979). However, as neorealism focuses more on states' behavior at international level constraints, it is harder for neorealism to analyze the relation of a foreign policy or state's international outcome and the domestic aspects (Meibauer, 2021). Waltz's neorealism theory is also often referred to as defensive realism.

John Mearsheimer, in his 2001 book, coined the term of 'Offensive Realism' which more or less stated some similar principles with Waltz's defensive realism. Mearsheimer's idea relies on the principle that states would always compete with each other in the anarchy system to reach a hegemon state (Toft, 2005). However, Mearsheimer's main idea on state's power relies on the military capacity of a state. According to Mearsheimer, other power capabilities such as economic warfare are not as important as military power to ensure a state's hegemony in the anarchy system. Furthermore, Mearsheimer's idea revolves around the fact that a state should be strong enough to be the hegemon either at the regional level or global level (Toft, 2005).

Another realist perspective arose in 1998, in which Gideon Rose defined neoclassical realism as a school of thought which focuses on analyzing a state's foreign policy as its interpretation of its place in the international system and implementing it in its power capabilities, which is a reflection of indirect and complex systemic pressures from the international system (Rose, 1998). According to Rose, states' foreign policies should be analyzed as a complex interaction of a state's domestic variables with the international system (Rose, 1998).

Compared to neorealism, neoclassical realism manages to provide more flexibility in analyzing changes in the constraints of the international anarchy system. This is especially the case directed to analysis on historical events which Gustav Meibauer in 2021 argued that among the realism school of thoughts, neoclassical realism would be the most fit to understand and analyze a certain state's Foreign Policy, especially when the foreign policy is considered as part of the international system's history (Meibauer, 2021). Meibauer further elaborated that neoclassical realism is suitable to analyze historical foreign policies as the theory takes into account intervening variables such as collective identity, strategic culture or nationalism which other theories in the realism school of thought might not be able to provide.

In analyzing the case of Indonesia's aggression towards East Timor during the period of 1974–1999, neoclassical theory coined by Gideon Rose would be used as a tool to further understand Indonesia's behavior prior and during the aggression. Furthermore, the use of neoclassical realism in Indonesia's case relies strongly on the context that Indonesia's policies – both foreign and domestic – were strongly controlled by the state's leader and political elites (Said, 1998). This argument of power centralization



and political elites' power perspective finds support in Salim Said's 1998 publication which explained that the constant shift of power in the military and domestic political arena was at hand during the then Indonesia's president Soeharto's reign and other political elites that the president appointed.

Furthermore, there are various statements from Indonesia's officials which indicate their threat perception on East Timor's independence. One of the statements came from a source close to General Ali Murtopo – one of important generals and followers in Soeharto's first year as president – shortly after UDT's President Lopes da Cruz's public announcement on how and what Indonesia will approve as East Timor's independence declaration. According to the source, "integration into Indonesia is the best solution. Independence has no chance. It is too weak and small and will create a problem for us in the future. If it becomes radical we will take care of it," which meant that Indonesia believed their security and international order might be endangered if East Timor's independence was not according to Indonesia's set of standards (Chomsky & Herman, 1979). This statement portrays the domestic perspective as a variable that would later be translated into Indonesia's foreign policy.

It should also be taken into consideration that Indonesia's aggression towards East Timor happened during Soeharto's regime who swore that as long as international communism still exists, it threatens Indonesia's national security and Soeharto's governmental legitimacy (van der Kroef, 1970). Thus, the possibility of having communism-led country as Indonesia's direct neighbor – according to Soeharto and Indonesia's government at that time – is the needed variable to justify its aggression policy as Indonesia's foreign policy towards the newly independent East Timor.

## **Indonesia's Aggression: Reasonings**

In the previous part of the discussion, the neoclassical realism perspective is used to lay the foundation for the analysis. Thus, this part of the discussion seeks to utilize the theory further by looking at the variables which the Indonesian government claimed to have pushed its foreign policy and aggression towards East Timor throughout 1974–1999. Additionally, aside from the officially issued reasons by the Indonesian government, this part would also explore further how the political leaders' perspective on power impacted the aggression in East Timor. As previously explained, this discussion tries to focus on the first years of the aggression (1974–1976), as the first two years of the aggression strongly presented a stronger state vis-a-vis weaker state struggle in the international anarchy system.

First, it is important to ask ourselves whether what Indonesia did to East Timor in 1974–1976 could be really called an aggression or merely a state's foreign policy to



protect its security. Therefore, we borrow Michael Walzer's definition of aggression. Walzer in his book *Just and Unjust War: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* stated that a state can be said to conduct an aggression when three requirements are fulfilled (Walzer, 1977):

- a. It can only be done by a state to another state
- b. A territorial integrity is violated
- c. A political sovereignty is violated

When Indonesia launched its aggression in 1975, East Timor was still part of Portugal. Fretilin also announced the country's independence in December 1975, shortly before Indonesia took over the region. Although Portugal did not acknowledge Fretilin's one sided independent announcement, Portugal also condemned Indonesia's aggression and cut off diplomatic ties with Indonesia as a form of protest (Narayan, 2000). This illustration gave us an understanding that:

- a. Indonesia invaded a country which, as previously mentioned, already has three independent and sovereign political parties. This is with or without the presence of Portugal as the colonial country, violating the political sovereignty clause.
- b. Despite East Timor's short-lived independence, East Timor was an independent state. Additionally, according to United Nations and international laws, East Timor had already claimed the self-determinant clause in which it was already on the path to become a sovereign state (Cravo & Freire, 2014). Thus, Indonesia was launching a violent act towards a state. The idea that aggression can only be done from one state to another is fulfilled through this.
- c. Throughout history, East Timor and Indonesia were never an integrated territory. East Timor and West Timor, which is part of Indonesia, were colonized by two different countries – Portugal and the Netherlands. Therefore, the independence announcement was only covering the area that Portugal colonized in East Timor instead of going beyond Indonesia's territory, giving Indonesia no rights to proclaim East Timor to be 'historically part of Indonesia' (Cravo & Freire, 2014). Thus, the territorial integration is violated in this sense.

Therefore, it can be concluded that according to Walzer's definition, an aggression which was carried out by Indonesia indeed happened in 1974–1976. This is especially concerning as East Timor had continuously announced their self-determinant status which Indonesia kept violating for various reasons. One of the justifications by Indonesia during the aggression in 1975 when the civil war broke out and the international world accused Jakarta of the planned attack is the following: "The troops will be withdrawn as soon as peace and order there are restored," said Adam Malik, Indonesia's Foreign Affairs Minister (1966–1978) (Andelma, 1975)



The importance of East Timor aggression for the Indonesian government, especially for Soeharto, could be seen from who and how the military operation was carried out. As Soeharto's regime was relying a lot on the strong presence of armed forces and military to smooth his governance both towards the general public and political scene (Said, 1998), those who led East Timor aggression then became important. Throughout 1974–1976, two of Soeharto's most trusted military officers at that time, General Ali Murtopo and General Benjamin Murdani orchestrated special operations that would distance Soeharto and Indonesia from the bloody events (Robinson, 2001). Murtopo, who was the head of Indonesia's Intelligence Agency, and Murdani, who was the head of Indonesia's military intelligence, trained Timorese militias in a military camp which was disguised as an agricultural training camp with men aged eighteen to thirty years old as participants (Robinson, 2001). Murtopo and Murdani successfully used local people against their own in their military campaigns and thus created a diplomatic shield towards Soeharto and Indonesia from the international system. In the diplomatic and foreign affairs arena, Indonesia denied its participation in the chaos that entailed in East Timor's claim of independence (Hill, 2001). However, in notes by Australia Embassy's agents, Murtopo and Murdani's campaigns were already noticed as disguised military operations with a mission to seize East Timor.

This fact then triggers a question: what makes East Timor's integration to Indonesia very important for Soeharto's regime that only those who are close to the president were trusted with the task to launch campaigns against the small state's independence? Then the second question was towards the international system which kept silent during the first years of the aggression: what made the international system hesitate to act?

The reason for Soeharto's insistence on East Timor's integration with Indonesia might lie in the fact that East Timor's leading party was a communist party and the New Order government could not afford to have a close neighbor whose main political party was a communist. This stems from Indonesia's and Soeharto's experience from the previous government, also known as Old Order, in which they had to face a *Gerakan 30 September Partai Komunis Indonesia* (30 September Movement by the Indonesia Communist Party) or best known in the country as *G30S PKI* (van der Kroef, 1972). *G30S PKI* happened in 1965 as a coup d'état movement by the leaders of Indonesia Communist Party (PKI) to throw Soekarno, Indonesia's first president, from his presidency. *G30S PKI* also attempted to topple over the power of Indonesia's armed forces at the time, causing one of the most horrendous casualties in Indonesia's history (van der Kroef, 1972). Prior to the event, Soekarno, Indonesia's Army, and PKI had been dancing in a power struggle to control the country, not to mention that Soekarno was not planning to hand over his leadership role despite his declining health (van der



Kroef, 1972). Therefore, Soeharto's cautiousness on the ruling of communist party as its neighbor would be justified as his preventive action against another communist uprising in Indonesia. It was in his best interest that he would be able to show the public that no communist activity should thrive inside the country – or anywhere near the country's territory – as it would threaten his political position and legitimacy. This idea was supported by the United States who just lost in the Vietnam War and saw that communist ideology should not be further spread in Asia (Fernandes, 2015). If the US was unable to fully control it at their expense, especially after suffering so many losses, it was in its best interest that another interested actor could do the role (Fibiger, 2020).

The international support and acknowledgement of Soeharto's sentiment towards communism and any parties associated to the ideology was not only voiced out in silence when the aggression began. The US, for example, supported Indonesia with military aid for the operation; they fully understood what Soeharto intended to do with their expansionist experiment in East Timor (Fernandes, 2015). Other countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom knew of Soeharto and Indonesia's intention to launch a full scale aggression towards the new nation; instead, they chose to stay silent (Dowson, 2022). According to the declassified documents by the British Embassy in Indonesia, Australia and the United Kingdom decided to stay on good terms with the Soeharto regime during the first year of the aggression. The documents cited that there seemed to be no urgency to be involved in what they would perceive as a domestic issue, fearing that their reaction towards the aggression might be seen as intervention by the Indonesian government (Dowson, 2022).

On another issue, Soeharto's ambition to bring East Timor under Indonesia's territory seems to stem from its previous government's sentiment towards colonialism and Indonesia's willingness to 'adopt' a new territory, that is, let go from colonialism. This is because prior to Soeharto's regime, Indonesia had continuously assured the international world that it had no intention to take East Timor as part of its territory (Weatherbee, 1966). However, the foreign affair statements of Indonesian government continuously cited voluntary requests of the people of the region which Indonesia would then seriously consider (Weatherbee, 1966). Thus, the second possible argument on why Soeharto wanted East Timor to integrate was because he saw East Timor as part of Indonesia, especially considering East Timor's geographical position which is right in the middle of Indonesia. Perhaps, despite Soeharto's efforts to distance himself from the Old Order, as part of the military, he had carried the ambition and belief that Indonesia should expand its territory further when it is possible to do so (Kiernan, 2017). The International world seemed not to be fully bothered by this expansionist idea because they treated the Indonesia's East





Timor aggression as a domestic issue due to East Timor's uncertain position at the international level. After seeing and being involved in several wars, foreign countries did not see an urgency to be involved in what they thought to be a logical policy by the Indonesian government.

This is because the Indonesian government proposed that East Timor was unable to stand on its own with its poor economic situation and its great reliance on foreign aids (Kiernan, 2017). However, this is only what Indonesia proposed to the looking eyes of the international world. Arguably, Indonesia under Soeharto saw that East Timor might have the much needed oil reserve to assist Indonesia's owned enterprise (Lundahl & Sjöholm, 2019). It was also suspected that Indonesia exploited East Timor along with Australia by finishing a border dispute on the Australia – East Timor maritime border, suspected to contain massive natural resources (John, Papyrakis & Tasciotti, 2020). It should be noted, however, that during the occupation Indonesia started to look away from oil and instead started practicing monopoly and corruption in the agriculture sector (Lundahl & Sjöholm, 2019). B.J. Habibie, Indonesia's next president after Soeharto, also saw the oil and economic factors as untrue, stating in frustration that East Timor does not possess the needed and expected resources that Soeharto and his political elites wanted (Anwar, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

The first years of the aggression by Indonesia towards East Timor could be seen as foreign policy that stems from its domestic political situation and ambition. As Indonesia was in a deep dictatorship and centralized governmental condition, it could be seen that East Timor's situation was fully supervised by the then president, Soeharto. Most of the justifications voiced out by Indonesia at the international level – such as communism and poor economic background – had existed because of his individual's political concerns and ambitions. This policy is then reflected in the domestic policy and extended to Indonesia's foreign policy, especially concerning communism as Soeharto was fully against the ideology and movement.

Internationally, these justifications and reasonings met with the ideology-driven war that had caused foreign countries such as the United States to support the practice. Furthermore, the international world was not able to take actions in response to Indonesia's actions as they saw how East Timor is geographically located inside Indonesia's territory, causing a perspective that the aggression was a domestic issue instead of an international one. This is in line with how Indonesia had always treated East Timor's independence topic as a 'close relative's problem' attitude which is then translated as a national issue and concern.

Thus, this paper found that the motivation of Indonesia's aggression to East Timor is strongly influenced by individuals' perspective, ambitions, and domestic situations. It was then met with international hesitance to act which was considered as an approval to conduct the aggression. Thus, Indonesia's aggression towards East Timor is the result of a complex interaction of the domestic and international politics which caused the justification of the actions by the national level.

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