

# China backs Australian military intervention into East Timor

By James Conachy  
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In the midst of frenzied diplomatic efforts by the Australian government to deploy its military into East Timor, President Jiang Zemin landed at Melbourne airport on September 6 to begin the first visit by a Chinese head-of-state.

Though the United Nations East Timor ballot on autonomy could be raised in the future as a precedent for a similar intervention in Taiwan or Tibet, China proved to be extremely supportive of the dispatch of thousands of Australian troops to the former Portuguese colony.

After a meeting with Australian Prime Minister John Howard and his cabinet on September 8, Jiang made initial statements of “understanding” toward Australian calls for a UN-sanctioned force and indicated that “dialogue” would take place in the UN Security Council.

When the UN Security Council did vote on September 13 after Indonesia's acceptance of a UN force, China not only endorsed Australia's position, but also, after initial hesitation, agreed to its request for aggressive rules of engagement. China did not lend any support to Indonesian and Malaysian demands that Australia, still perceived in Asia as having links to the European colonial past, not lead the force.

China announced on September 17 that it would send up to 200 of its own civilian police to take part in whatever UN force was eventually formed for long-term operations in East Timor. The first group of Chinese police officers has already departed for Darwin in Australia's far north—only the second time China has ever participated in a UN-organised operation. The other occasion was as part of the military force sent to Cambodia in 1992. Foreign ministry spokesman Sun Yuxi, quoted in the mainland *China Daily*, bluntly stated: “China supports the UN role in East Timor”.

China's stance on East Timor is all the more note-worthy considering the September 2 speech delivered by Jiang Zemin in Bangkok, only days before arriving in Australia. In the keynote address of his state tour to Thailand, Jiang made a vitriolic attack on the NATO war against Yugoslavia and US foreign policy in general, saying:

“The world is far from tranquil. Hegemonism and power politics still exist and have even developed in the international political, economic and security fields. The new gunboat policy and neo-colonialism pursued by some big powers has severely undermined the sovereign independence and development interest of small and medium sized countries and has threatened world peace and international security.”

Jiang's comments summed up the bitter opposition in Beijing to the NATO war on Yugoslavia. Kosovo established a precedent that could be used for great power intervention into China itself, which faces agitation for separation in Tibet and its western province of Xinjiang, as well as the continuing bitter controversy over the status of Taiwan.

To explain the obvious discrepancy between China's attitude on Kosovo, and its full support for the UN military force in East Timor, it is necessary to examine the objectives of Beijing within the region. Far from being an intransigent opponent of “neo-colonialism and gunboat diplomacy,” Beijing's foreign policy is dictated by the self-interests of the thin ruling layer of senior Stalinist bureaucrats and wealthy entrepreneurs who politically dominate China.

Since the beginning of the year Sino-US tensions have risen markedly, fueled by increasingly provocative acts by figures within the Republican Party in America. A substantial element of the Republican right-wing, including its major Congressional leaders like Trent Lott and Jesse Helms, have made open declarations of support for US recognition of Taiwan as an independent nation. Such a move would end the present “One China” policy, which recognises Beijing claim to all China including Taiwan.

The most likely Republican presidential candidate for next year's US election, George Bush junior, answered a CNN question on China at the Iowa straw polls in August in the following manner: “The president [Clinton] has sent a bad message in saying they [China] are strategic partners... I think he sent bad signals to China that says ‘Well, if you move aggressively against Taiwan, we won't act,

necessarily'... They are a strategic competitor... We need to be tough and firm”.

Writing in the *Washington Post* on September 10, former secretary of state Henry Kissinger raised alarm at the depth of anti-China feeling in Washington: “Were Taiwan to achieve formal American recognition of a separate status... this would surely lead to some kind of military clash that, whatever its outcome, would permanently rupture Sino-American relations and isolate America in Asia and probably the world.

“For us to imagine that we can prevent China's natural growth and emergence as a major power is to commit us to an unprecedented domineering role. Over time, this would drain our physical and psychological resources, be opposed by the rest of the world, and in the end by the American people”.

Jiang Zemin used his Thai visit to agitate for precisely such an isolation of the US in the event of conflict with China. He sought to establish a unity between Chinese grievances against the US and the resurgence of anti-American sentiment in countries like Thailand and South Korea due to the harsh measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1998 in return for emergency bail-out loans.

Political turmoil in the region and China's rising economic clout have already resulted in moves to improve relations with Beijing by ASEAN states such as Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam, as well as the larger Asian powers. Last month, China hosted a high level visit by a South Korean military and economic delegation and only last week, China and Japan resumed defence exchanges after several years of tense relations.

Jiang Zemin's comments in Thailand caused such alarm in ruling circles over a possible China-US clash that an editorial in the *Bangkok Post* on September 12, headlined “China's policy of confrontation”, commented:

“Mr Jiang's challenge to Thailand and ASEAN to get behind China in this new world order is troubling to many thoughtful people. Its underpinning, that such a new order is required to oppose what Mr Jiang sees as excessive American arrogance, should be questioned. Certainly every ASEAN member has been exasperated by American policies. But the US remains a dependable source of stability in the region...

“ASEAN has no reason to challenge either China or America... Certainly, there are no controversies requiring Thailand to take sides between these two great countries. For now, it is inadvisable to even speak of an anti-American alliance between China and ASEAN”.

The following day China voted in the UN, with the United States, for the Australian-led intervention into East Timor.

Viewed within the context of regional politics, the embrace of the UN force was not a departure but a continuation of China's efforts to cultivate alliances in Asia—in this case with Australia.

Australia's growing economic and political involvement in Asia has seen a question mark raised over the viability of its long-standing US alliance. The American ties no longer benefit Australian capital, but potentially hinder it. Its major trade and investment partners are Japan and other Asian countries and Australian exporters are often in direct competition with American-based firms. Australia has found itself embroiled in frequent trade conflicts over US subsidies, tariffs and quotas that affect Australian sales.

Australia's fastest growing exports in the 1990s have been tourism and fee-paying overseas students attending Australian educational institutions—both based largely upon the prosperity of the Asian middle classes and perceptions of Australia as a friendly state. Forward projections cite China as the most important new market for Australian goods and services into the next century. Any rupture in relations with Beijing would have long-term economic repercussions.

Jiang sought to test the depth of Australia's commitment to the US alliance. His first days in the country were dominated by a conference with leading business figures. Media attention focused on back-room talks over a bid by a consortium of Australian-based energy companies to secure a 20-year contract to supply \$US15 billion in natural gas to the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen, against rival bids from Indonesian and Malaysian-based operations.

In the end, expectations that a deal would be signed were dashed—on the grounds the Chinese government could not pre-empt the bidding process. Citing an unnamed Chinese official as its source, the *South China Morning Post* on September 10 linked the failure to conclude a gas deal with the refusal by the Australian government to declare it would remain neutral if the US intervened militarily to back Taiwan against China.

East Timor has provided China with another means of wooing Australia—its support for the military operation standing in contrast to the initial lack of US involvement and backing. While Beijing's attitude to Kosovo and East Timor may appear to be contradictory, in reality it is guided purely by the cynical calculations of self-interest.

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