

The future of east timor

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Americans are facing yet another foreign policy dilemma in a far-off corner of the globe. At issue is the fate of the people of the tiny island of East Timor, located in the far reaches of the Indonesian archipelago. At issue is the desire of the East Timorese to secede, which goes against the desires of the central government to maintain the territorial integrity of their country. Like minority peoples in the former Republic of Yugoslavia, Iraq, Chad, Burundi and many other places, the succession-minded East Timorese are facing brutal repression from the central government.

Perhaps we should send troops to defend the defenseless civilian population of East Timor. Although this scenario is increasingly common in the latter 20th century, the United States has yet to draft a consistent foreign policy stance capable of systematically addressing minority succession movements. One of the prime difficulties in developing a policy is our inability to identify the "right" and "wrong" parties. Philosophically, we should recognize the right of self-determination for all nations, but realistically the creation of thousands of micro-national states presents enormous potential for conflict.

The best strategy we could embrace would be a preventative one. We should monitor the human and civil rights records of foreign country and keep a close eye on the treatment of minority populations. We may be able to pressure majority populations to respect the rights of minority, thereby undermining the creation of secessionist sentiment. In cases where violence erupts, we can not automatically send in American peacekeeping forces. We can not afford such a policy in terms of lives or tax dollars.

The United Nations should be the final arbiter on these matters. If the UN can not act in a manner that is to our liking, then we should consider our geographic and historical relationship with the warring parties. In the case of East Timor, they are clearly out of our geographic realm of influence. We should count on our allies in the region, particularly Japan and Australia, to keep the peace and monitor the behavior of the Indonesians.

On the other hand, geography is of no value in making this decision because the worlds' economy is interdependent. Instability in Indonesia could upset the world market for oil and consequently we could face economic hardship. Geography also did not stop us from encouraging the Indonesians to repress the East Timorese during the Nixon administration. Perhaps we should send forces to East Timor to help undo some of the problems we have helped create.