

The Linear Mindset in the UN Engagement with Timor-Leste

Written by Ramon Blanco

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RAMON BLANCO, NOV 22 2012

At the beginning of the year 2002, the eastern half of the small island of Timor, in the Southeast Asia, entered in the realm of the international system as a newly independent state. It was on 20 May 2002, under the auspices and conduction of the United Nations (UN), when Timor-Leste became a legally independent democratic republic. To be more precise, on May 2002 Timor-Leste restored its legal independence. This process of constructing the restoration of the Timorese independence was neither short nor calm. On the contrary, Timor-Leste had a very long, tortuous and bloody violent road towards its legal independence.

The importance of the process of creating a Timorese legally independent state is twofold. On the one hand, the process of seeking to create the liberal peace and to construct a liberal democratic state in Timor-Leste was a process that sought to end a long period of occupations, violence and killings in that part of the island (Richmond and Franks, 2009: 83). After all, one should not forget that Timor-Leste was subject to Portuguese colonization, occupation by the Japanese during the Second World War, and from 1975 onwards the country was violently dominated by Indonesia. On the other hand, due to the scope and depth of the UN engagement with the country, the process of legal independence, according to Oliver Richmond and Jason Franks (Idem), “represented an important marker in the liberal statebuilding [sic] process”. Indeed, Timor-Leste represents an emblematic case in regards to the transformation of violent conflicts in general, especially for the UN.

Due to the type of, and variety of the UN conflict-transformation instruments deployed in the country, Timor-Leste is a paradigmatic case within the UN rationale in regards of transforming violent conflicts and consolidating peace. Indeed, a pivotal point in regards to the UN engagement with Timor-Leste is the fact that this intervention in Timor-Leste represents the deployment of nearly all conflict-resolution instruments designed for each one of the phases of the conflict-cycle which is underpinned by a linear and phased understanding of violent conflicts. Most importantly, due to the depth of its engagement, and the kind of activities carried out in Timor-Leste (which can be understood as one of the deepest, if not *the* deepest, state-building enterprise led by the UN), the perception of Timor-Leste as a ‘success’ or a ‘failure’ case plays a very important role not only in regards to the continuity or reformulation of the UN instruments and reflection in regards to peace throughout the globe, but also in regards to the very credibility of the UN as conflict-transformation actor within the international scenario. In fact, Timor-Leste is the best example of the need of rethinking the UN approach to peace. Rather than experiencing a pacific path of full development, which would be expected according to the mainstream approach to peace after the deployment of all UN conflict-transformation instruments, the mere occurrence of the violent events of 2006 and 2008 in Timor-Leste and the unstable development of the country, calls for the rethinking of the UN approach to violent conflicts throughout the globe.

The UN Conflict-Transformation Instruments Deployed to Timor-Leste

When observing the interventions of the United Nations in Timor-Leste, the very first thing that might strike the analyst is the wide and deep scope of each mission. After all, it is more than clearly observable in activities that range from the *de facto* sovereignty over the territory and the very creation of state institutions, to actions taken in the realm of the population’s health. Whilst also passing through the fostering of certain values – liberal democratic ones – and

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manners of managing state institutions, which often come through the notion of good governance; a notion that there is little of emptiness and impartiality. Secondly, another thing that might come to the analyst's eyes, while observing the UN interventions in Timor-Leste, is the number and the duration of them. Timor-Leste was subject of five missions – UNAMET (1999), UNTAET (1999-2002), UNMISSET (2002-2005), UNOTIL (2005-2006) and UNMIT (2006-present) – and the UN peace operations are on Timorese soil for more than a decade. Indeed, very few places were subject to such kind of intervention.

In addition to all this, there is another element of these interventions that is not so clear when analyzing them, and it is pivotal to bring to light – the linear conflict-resolution mindset behind the interventions. Notwithstanding all the insights that one might have observing the interventions individually, it is perhaps also instructive to observe them collectively as a whole. It is only by doing this that the use of the UN peace instruments[1] – peacemaking, peace enforcement, peacekeeping and peacebuilding – on the ground in Timor-Leste becomes clear. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, by taking this step back and seeking to understand the peace operations as a whole it is possible to perceive that the linear conflict-resolution rationale, which characterized the UN peace rationale, was behind the UN involvement in Timor-Leste.

Since nearly all peace instruments designed to overcome each phase of the conflict cycle was performed by the UN in Timor-Leste, the country should be experiencing a path of a strong development according to mainstream approaches to conflict transformation. However, the harsh conditions in which the Timorese live, despite more than a decade of UN engagement and the deployment of virtually all of its UN conflict-transformation instruments, calls for the rethinking of the UN peace rationale.

This does not mean that one can find a carbon copy of the UN peace rationale on the ground in Timor-Leste. Furthermore, it is certainly very difficult to clearly delineate each distinct conflict-resolution instrument adopted by the UN when analyzing these kinds of environments. Indeed, it is even harder to look to the reality on the ground, at any 'post-conflict' scenario where there are more grey zones than clear-cut environments, and to seek to outline which phase of the conflict is developing or even to match it with a conflict-resolution instrument. Nevertheless, taking this step back and seeking to observe the UN intervention in Timor-Leste globally whilst also having the UN peace instruments in mind, an analyst can gain a more general picture of the UN instruments deployed.

Notwithstanding the fact that it is impossible to find a perfect match between conflict phases and peace instruments, this step back makes clearer that it was precisely what was sought in Timor-Leste by the UN – to match a different phase of the conflict with a conflict-resolution instrument. Indeed, it also becomes clearer that not only did the UN deploy most of its peace instruments to Timor-Leste, but also that the grey zones and the overlapping areas of these instruments, and the linear progression of them, went from peacemaking to peacebuilding.

Collectively, it is perceptible that each of the phases of the conflict was correspondent to a UN conflict-resolution instrument[2]. Michael Smith and Moreen Dee (2006: 454-455), for instance, also point to this matter. Hence, the delineation developed below builds upon their work and goes further. Here, a more comprehensive understanding of this picture is achieved by bringing to the scene periods of the UN engagement with Timor-Leste that the authors miss, namely the UN Secretary-General's good offices and negotiations that reached the 5th May 1999 agreements, the UNOTIL, and the UNMIT.

The first peace instrument used in the UN engagement with Timor-Leste might be characterized as peacemaking. Peacemaking, as a conflict-resolution instrument, for the UN (2008: 17) "normally includes measures to address conflicts in progress and usually involves diplomatic action to bring hostile parties to a negotiated agreement". In Timor-Leste, therefore, the peacemaking phase might be argued to involve all the SG's good office efforts and all the negotiations, developed under the UN auspicious, which led to the agreement in New York on May 5th 1999. This agreement determines the establishment of a mission designed to carry out and supervise a Timorese popular referendum on an Indonesian autonomy proposal. Indeed, the negotiation period and the process of ballot conduction, and therefore UNAMET, should also be placed under this peacemaking phase since it was not only a direct consequence of the negotiations, but also because this process was as a pivotal element of bringing all the key parties – Timorese, Indonesians, and Portuguese – together.

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In addition to peacemaking, Timor-Leste was also subject to the deployment of the instrument of peace enforcement. This is defined by the UN (2008: 18) as “the application, with the authorization of the Security Council, of a range of coercive measures, including the use of military force (...) [aiming] to restore international peace and security where the Security Council has determined the existence of a threat to the peace”. In the case of Timor-Leste, this instrument might perfectly be understood to have been deployed twice. The first occurrence was with the deployment of the INTERFET mission, which was a military mission that sought to restore order in Timor-Leste right after the announcement of the Timorese rejection of the autonomy proposal offered by the Indonesian government. This peace instrument was also deployed for a second time with the deployment of the International Stabilization Force (ISF) in order to respond to the April-May 2006 crisis which was a bloody wave of violence that took place in the streets of Dili, Timor-Leste’s capital.

The third UN peace instrument deployed to Timor-Leste was peacekeeping. As already aforementioned, peacekeeping for the UN (2008: 18) is understood as “a technique designed to preserve the peace, however fragile, where fighting has been halted, and to assist in implementing agreements achieved by the peacemakers”. In the case of Timor-Leste, one might understand that this instrument was more present, although in different degrees, during the period of the missions of UNTAET, UMISSET and UNMIT. In these periods, not only was there, in the UN’s eyes, a ‘peace’ to keep, but also the UN was a pivotal element in the maintenance of the security of the country. In fact, for some periods, and not short ones, the UN was the *de facto* body responsible for this maintenance. Indeed, this maintenance was materialized in the form of the actual policing of the country and the responsibility of the security of the borders at different periods.

Finally, the other peace instrument that Timor-Leste was subject to was peacebuilding. This instrument is understood by the UN (2008: 18), as a conflict-resolution instrument that “involves a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundation for sustainable peace and development”. Aiming to address “the deep-rooted, structural causes of violent conflict”, it concentrates its activities on “the functioning of society and the State, and seek to enhance the capacity of the State to effectively and legitimately carry out its core functions”. Hence, the main objective of this instrument is to create the conditions for a sustainable and long-lasting peace. Observing the UN engagement with Timor-Leste, this instrument might be understood as being present, in different degrees, during the missions of UNTAET and UNMIT. Due to the scaling down of the UN presence on the field, this instrument became reduced at the UNOTIL. Nevertheless, as a response to the 2006 crisis, this peace instrument became deeper and wider with UNMIT.

Once more, one cannot find a perfect copy of the UN peace rationale on the ground. In addition, it is very difficult to clearly delineate each distinct conflict-resolution instrument adopted by the UN and the distinct periods of its engagement with Timor-Leste. Nevertheless, the deployment of different peace instruments during the UN intervention in Timor would have, roughly speaking, the kind of illustration of the Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: The UN Conflict-Resolution Rationale Present in Timor-Leste

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Source: Author's free adaptation from (Smith and Dee, 2006: 455).

In this figure it is clear that the conflict-resolution instruments deployed to Timor-Leste were seeking not only to deal with the amount of violence that was perceived on the ground but also to reach a phased and linear understanding of the conflict and its transformation. This linear and phased understanding of the conflict-cycle^[3] means less a clear-cut delimited phase sequence of each instrument than the progression from peacemaking towards peacebuilding, with several overlapping and grey zones among the peace instruments. In fact, this is precisely the kind of understanding that underpins the UN rationale regarding its approach to peace, which is delineated at its Capstone Doctrine (UN, 2008: 19).

From the period of the UN Secretary-General's good offices, to the period of the UNMIT, the UN engagement with Timor-Leste might be characterized as passing through nearly all conflict-resolution instruments, going from peacemaking to peacebuilding. The point here is certainly not to distinctly and decisively divide the Timorese situation into clear-cut periods, but precisely to evince that this kind of rationale, although hardly feasible in reality, was behind the UN intervention in Timor-Leste. In fact, until the April-May 2006 crisis, it could even be argued that Timor-Leste passed through the whole conflict-cycle. Therefore, being subject to nearly all of the conflict-resolution instruments designed for the conflict cycle, Timor-Leste should be characterized as a country experiencing a strong and pacific path of development under this rationale.

On the contrary, this could not be further from the truth. Indeed, the 2006 crisis came to prove precisely the opposite. On April-May 2006 Timor-Leste, and particularly its capital Dili, experienced a bloody wave of violence. The crisis evinced the fragile basis of the whole intervention. This linear and phased conflict-resolution approach, if successful, could make a positive argument for this kind of understanding in regards to the transformation of violent conflicts and Timor-Leste would be the best-case example. However, the mere occurrence of the 2006 and 2008 tragedies (when an armed group sought to kill both the Timorese Prime-Minister Xanana Gusmão and the President José Ramos-Horta) makes the case for the opposite argument. In addition, the very slow development of the country, even after a decade-long UN intervention should not be forgotten. Notably, Timor-Leste experiences a very low position on the Human Development Index year after year and most of the Timorese are still living in very harsh conditions. These facts make the case that this linear rationale, which underpins the UN engagement in Timor-Leste, should be at least questioned, if not completely rethought.

Unfortunately, rather than seeking to rethink its conflict-resolution rationale in accordance to the reality, precisely the opposite occurs as the UN seeks to reframe the reality by frequently portraying Timor-Leste as a successful case. However, there is a concealed reason for this. Rather than Timor-Leste actually *being* a successful case, due to the depth of the UN intervention, the number of missions, the range of the instruments deployed and of the activities performed, Timor-Leste *has*, more than any other 'post-conflict' country, to be *portrayed* as a successful case. Since so much is at stake for the UN in the case of Timor-Leste, namely the whole conflict-resolution rationale and peacebuilding approach of the organization, rather than rethinking its approach, Timor-Leste is increasingly presented as a success by the UN. If this wasn't the case and UN intervention in Timor-Leste was seen as unsuccessful, the very credibility of this kind of rationale and of the UN as a pivotal conflict-transformation actor would be imperiled. This, more than any achievement on the ground or the kind of peace created, is the pivotal reason for the continuing portrayal of Timor-Leste as a successful case of conflict transformation in the international arena. This might work for the UN's credibility as a conflict-transformation actor within the international scenario however it hardly helps the population of 'post-conflict' countries to improve the quality of their lives and to alleviate the hard conditions in which they live. On this note it is worth bearing in mind that Timor-Leste is the most iconic example of the need to rethink the conflict-transformation rationale which underpins the UN approach to peace, rather than the model of a successful intervention that the UN insists on portraying.

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[1] These instruments, which form the UN peace rationale, can be found at (UN, 2008: 19).

[2] Part of the research of this section was developed under the European-Union-funded COST Short Term Scientific Mission at the Brussels-based think-tank GRIP (*Groupe de Recherche et d'Information sur la Paix et la Sécurité*) under the reference ECOST-STSM-IS0805-050911-007628.

[3] For more in regards of the phases of a conflict, see for instance (Ramsbotham et al., 2005: 11-12).

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