

Downer says East Timor spying claims motivated by gas grab

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IMAGE:

FORMER AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN MINISTER, ALEXANDER DOWNER. (AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

*Former Foreign Minister Alexander Downer says recent spying allegations by East Timor against Australia are an 'opportunistic' attempt to undermine a treaty between the two countries over lucrative gas fields in the Timor Sea, as **Matt O'Neil** writes.*

Former Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer has hit out at recent allegations made by the East Timorese government that Australia spied on the country in 2004, at the height of negotiations over lucrative gas reserves in the Timor Sea.

Mr Downer said he was 'cynical' about the comments, labelling them 'opportunistic'.

'[The allegations] are tied up with East Timor's desire... [to] abrogate the [2006] treaty we signed, in order to get the gas flowing to East Timor rather than have the gas flowing to Australia,' Mr Downer told *Breakfast*.

Australia and East Timor signed the Treaty on Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea (CMATS) in 2006.

The treaty put on hold disputes between the two countries over claims to the resource rich Timor Gap, but has since been hotly disputed by the East Timorese government.

Since the espionage claims emerged, East Timor has taken Australia to the international court of arbitration in The Hague to get the treaty overturned.

Mr Downer completed the treaty in 2006, and was Foreign Minister when the alleged spying took place.

He said the East Timor government was trying to gain political leverage from Canberra's fallout with Jakarta.

'The East Timorese made this claim months, if not years ago, and they've just come out and repeated the claim yesterday in order to gain themselves more publicity because of the Indonesia crisis.'

Mr Downer said that the cases of alleged spying in East Timor and Indonesia were unrelated.

'There's nothing new about this at all, and it's a completely unrelated issue... it's got nothing to do with the Edward Snowden allegations.'

'Their ambition is to have all the gas from the Timor Sea pumped into East Timor.'

East Timor is just one in a series of diplomatic fallouts that Australia is experiencing within its regional vicinity.

On Wednesday night China expressed anger over Foreign Minister Julie Bishop's remarks regarding Beijing's newly declared air defence zones in the East China Sea, labelling them 'irresponsible.'

This adds to the diplomatic headache faced by the Abbott Government since the Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhuyono suspended bilateral co-operation on people smuggling, police and military exercises in the wake of allegations that his phone was tapped by Australia's overseas intelligence agency.

Tony Abbott is now considering President Yudhuyono's request to appoint special envoys to work through the problems created by the spying allegations.

Drawing on his experience as the UN envoy to Cyprus, Mr Downer said that envoys would have strong symbolic value, and would demonstrate how seriously Mr Abbott took the issue.

'To have leading figures participate elevates the status of the negotiations and the significance of the negotiations... it's not just what you're negotiating but who negotiates that can often have significance.'

Mr Downer praised Tony Abbott's decision to use a retired Australian army general to deliver his reply to the Indonesian president, saying it was a 'dignified thing to do'.

'It's a way of demonstrating how seriously he takes the issue, [and] it's a way of reaching out to the president of Indonesia.'

Alexander Downer was Foreign Minister in the Howard Government for 11 years.