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Labor offers new maritime boundary deal for East Timor

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Labor has pledged to submit to international adjudication over the disputed maritime boundary between Australia and East Timor if "good faith" negotiations fail to produce agreement.

The proposed deal on a new sea border, announced by opposition foreign affairs spokeswoman Tanya Plibersek at the National Press Club on Wednesday, could potentially give the fledgling country a far greater share of the rich deposits of oil and gas in the Timor Sea, estimated to be worth \$40 billion or more.

Ms Plibersek lamented that Australia's pivotal role in securing East Timor's independence - "a proud moment" - was being tarnished by its refusal to negotiate a new, permanent maritime boundary with East Timor.

"The maritime boundary dispute has poisoned relations with our newest neighbour. This must change for their sake and ours," Ms Plibersek said.

In a landmark [address](#) in Washington last month, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull highlighted the importance of United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and urged China and other countries to resolve their potentially explosive disputes in the South China Sea under international law.

But Ms Plibersek noted that Australia has not always abided by the "rules-based" system Mr Turnbull has championed, citing East Timor as a glaring example.

After securing a highly favourable temporary boundary with a war ravaged East Timor in 2002, Australia withdrew from the UNCLOS dispute resolution mechanism. It means that East Timor cannot take its dispute with Australia to an international umpire.

Labor is considering reversing Australia's UNCLOS stance entirely. Either way, in the case of East Timor, it is prepared to submit to binding arbitration in the Hague if the "good faith" talks between the two states fails to find agreement.

East Timor sees the new boundary as the last unresolved piece of its hard-won sovereignty after decades of brutal occupation by Indonesia. It believes a new boundary midway between the two countries will secure it a more lucrative share of the Timor Sea resources.

East Timor remains furious that Australian spies bugged its government offices during negotiations for a later treaty governing the share of oil and gas reserves. The espionage was condemned by the [International Court of Justice](#).

But any agreement on the boundary would likely need Indonesia's approval as well.

"Australia regularly calls on other countries to abide by international norms and to settle disputes in line with the rules-based system," Ms Plibersek said.

"If we want to insist that other nations play by the rules, we also need to adhere to them."

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/labor-offers-new-maritime-boundary-deal-for-east-timor-20160210-gmq7iu.html>