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‘In their strategic interest’: Ramos-Horta calls on Australia to spend big in East Timor



By [Chris Barrett](#)

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Singapore: New East Timor President Jose Ramos-Horta wants Australia to back a major infrastructure drive in south-east Asia’s newest nation, saying it’s in the new government’s strategic interest to retain a “pro-Australia, pro-Western values” near neighbour.

In an interview with *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*, the 72-year-old former independence activist made no apologies for fostering stronger ties with China, which has tagged East Timor as “an important Belt and Road partner country”.



Jose Ramos-Horta was sworn in at an inauguration ceremony in Dili on Friday. AP

His call for Australia to “invest serious money in support of infrastructure in Timor-Leste” shapes as a fresh foreign policy challenge for the incoming Albanese government, which assumes control a month after Beijing signed a security pact with the Solomon Islands.

“We need upgrading of our universities, we need to upgrade some rural roads, water and sanitation. We need an international-class hospital,” said Ramos-Horta, who was previously president between 2007 and 2012 and was prime minister before that.

“It’s not only a one-way street in terms of only benefiting Timor. Timor-Leste should be part of the wider Australian strategic interest, to see a pro-Australia, pro-Western values Timor-Leste on Australia’s doorstep. So it’s not philanthropy. It’s [in their] economic and strategic interests.”

Australia is East Timor’s leading development assistance partner, according to Australia’s Department of Foreign

Affairs and Trade, with \$105.7 million budgeted for 2022-23. It also supports East Timor's police and armed forces and has been the main overseas player in the country's COVID-19 recovery, gifting more than 1 million vaccine doses.

However, Ramos-Horta would like to see a deepening commitment including Timorese people being granted more work visas in Australia, help in upgrading the country's vocational schools to Australian standards and for Australia and East Timor to join forces on maritime security to help prevent "predatory foreign fishing companies robbing resources in the Timor Sea".

It comes as China has spruiked its links with East Timor. Its ambassador, Xiao Jianguo, in March talked up the engagement of state-owned Chinese companies in projects such as an expressway, a container terminal and the national electricity grid, and its donation of 200,000 COVID-19 vaccine shots.

As he was sworn in on Friday, the 20th anniversary of East Timor's independence from Indonesia, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ramos-Horta spoke of a desire to broaden links with Beijing in areas such as trade, renewable energy, digitisation, artificial intelligence and urban and rural infrastructure.

But he told the *Herald* and *The Age* he was surprised his election had been seen by some analysts as a precursor to a marked shift into China's orbit.

"I do have a good rapport with China. It would be a total mistake not to have a good relationship with China," he said.



Australian-made AstraZeneca vaccines arriving in Timor-Leste. AUSTRALIAN EMBASSY IN DILI

"Having said that, it doesn't mean I'm pro-China. Actually, all my life I was suspected of and labelled pro-West, pro-Australia, pro-United States. So, I'm amused that after more than 40 years as being known as pro-US, pro-Australia, suddenly I'm viewed now as pro-China.

"Timor-Leste is one of the few countries in the world that has not borrowed money from China. And actually, I have to say, we in Timor-Leste are worried about how China is so much present in Australian life. Even our neighbours in the Northern Territory ... they leased their Darwin port for 100 years to China. Can you imagine if we were to lease the Dili port to the Chinese just for five years? The Australians and Americans would go berserk."

Even so, as Australia frets about further Chinese outreach in the Pacific, he is clearly aware of the potential to leverage East Timor's strategically crucial location. Dili is little more than an hour's flight north-west of Darwin.

He signalled a resuming of the push for a pipeline to East Timor from the \$50 billion Greater Sunrise oil and gas field, a proposed mega-project which has been plagued by doubts about its economic viability.



Ramos-Horta wants to see the case against Witness K lawyer Bernard Collaery dropped. ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

“Definitely Timor-Leste could not do it alone. We have to have international partners and it would be far better that Australia’s federal government would support the pipeline coming to Timor-Leste. It is in Australia’s interests,” he said.

“If you look at Timor-Leste as part of Australia’s national strategic interest, then it is important that Australia go along with Timor-Leste in support of the pipeline coming to Timor-Leste. It would definitely make Australia and Timor-Leste even closer.”

After relations were left strained by maritime border negotiations and Australia’s bugging of East Timor government offices, Ramos-Horta described bilateral ties now as being on a “very solid footing”, although he has consistently called for authorities to abandon the prosecutions of the whistleblowers who exposed the spying scandal.

A former intelligence officer known as Witness K has already been convicted for conspiring to reveal classified information and his lawyer, former ACT attorney-general Bernard Collaery, is awaiting trial.

“We’ve put the past where it belongs,” said Ramos-Horta of East Timor’s relationship with Australia. “At the same time, I wish Australia would be more generous and more compassionate with Bernard Collaery. I would say please drop the case.”

Witness K is regarded as a national hero in East Timor for bringing the bugging to light. Ramos-Horta said he might have the ex-member of the Australian Secret Intelligence Service awarded the country’s medal of honour now that he was president again.

Ramos-Horta’s immediate priority is to bring an end to a long-running political impasse at parliamentary level and address costs of products like cooking oil and rice, which have soared due to the impact on supply chains of events such as the lockdown in Shanghai and the war in Ukraine.

“We have to discover how we can all work together to prevent a humanitarian crisis in Timor-Leste,” he said.



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