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## Wong concedes Australia's treatment of Timor-Leste 'not in the spirit of friendship'

By Matthew Knott in the Sydney Morning Herald, July 7, 2023

Foreign Minister Penny Wong struck an apologetic tone towards Timor-Leste in comments about Australia's use of hardball tactics to stymie the fledgling nation's efforts to secure access to oil and gas riches in the Timor Sea after it won independence from Indonesia.

The Australian Secret Intelligence Service – the nation's foreign spy service – allegedly installed [listening devices in Timor-Leste's cabinet room in Dili in 2004](#) to gain an advantage in hotly contested negotiations about where to draw the maritime boundary between the two nations.



Penny Wong said Australia had at times behaved in a disappointing way over a maritime boundary dispute with Timor-Leste. *Credit: Alex Ellinghausen*

The Turnbull government then sought to block an international conciliation commission from settling the maritime boundary dispute.

During a visit to Timor-Leste's capital of Dili on Friday, Wong said it was important to recognise that there "have been past instances in which Australian governments have acted in ways that Timorese people, and many Australians, found disappointing".

Wong said Timor-Leste was right to use the Permanent Court of Arbitration's conciliation commission in The Hague to challenge Australia over the maritime boundary dispute.

"Australia looked at this issue too narrowly and without properly considering the importance of this issue in the context of your path to sovereignty," she said.

While not constituting the formal apology to Timor-Leste some have requested, Wong's comments are believed to be the strongest acknowledgment from an Australian official that the country behaved poorly in negotiations over the maritime boundary.

"The Australian government should not have formally challenged the competence of the conciliation commission, when a broader, more understanding approach was needed that reflected the unique relationship we had with such a close neighbour," she said.

"It was not in the spirit of our friendship, from our struggle together in World War II to our support for your young nation after independence."

East Timorese politicians, including recently elected Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao, have been [campaigning to convince Australian oil and gas company Woodside](#) to agree to pipe gas from the \$70 billion Greater Sunrise field for processing in Timor-Leste rather than the company's preferred option of Darwin.

Leaders in Dili see [the long-stalled Sunrise Project](#) as a future economic lifeblood of the underdeveloped young nation, which has been heavily reliant on natural resources since independence but is expected to exhaust its earnings from oil and gas in a decade.

Timor-Leste controls about 57 per cent of the field, which is 450 kilometres north of Darwin, while Woodside controls 33 per cent and Japanese company Osaka Gas 10 per cent.

Describing the gas field as unfinished business, Wong said: "Australia has only one ambition for Greater Sunrise: to see the field developed as soon as feasibly possible to support Timor-Leste's development.

"Prime Minister Gusmao was right to say that Greater Sunrise needs to be a feasible and economically sound solution, that creates a petroleum industry that can yield direct economic dividends for your people."

She continued: "Australia has been listening carefully to understand your ambitions for Greater Sunrise. I can assure you that Timor-Leste's commitment to onshore processing and to the south coast Tasi Mane project is clearly understood."

During her first visit to Timor-Leste last year Wong said the government was working hard to try to "unstick" the stalled project.

The government last year appointed former Victorian premier Steve Bracks its special representative for the Greater Sunrise project.

Gusmao [recently said](#) Australia had behaved "very, very badly" over the maritime boundary issue in the past and that supporting his plan to process the gas on Timor-Leste's southern coastal area of Suai was a way to make amends.

"It is a reparation," he said.



## Australian politics

# 'Not in the spirit of our friendship': Penny Wong concedes past Australian wrongs in Timor-Leste

Foreign minister says previous governments have treated the country in 'disappointing' ways during visit to Dili

**Daniel Hurst** *Foreign affairs and defence correspondent*

Fri 7 Jul 2023 05.20 EDT [The Guardian](#)

The Australian foreign affairs minister, Penny Wong, has attempted to improve Australia's ties with [Timor-Leste](#) by conceding that “disappointing” actions by past governments were “not in the spirit of our friendship”.

Wong did not mention the scandal surrounding [Australia's bugging of the nation's cabinet room in 2004](#), but acknowledged Timor-Leste's sovereign right to make its own choices “without having them encroached by others”.

In a speech in the Timor-Leste capital, Dili, on Friday, Wong said she wanted to “acknowledge some of the past” regarding disputes over access to underwater oil and gas reserves that lay between the two countries.

“There have been past instances in which Australian governments have acted in ways that the Timorese people - and many Australians - found disappointing,” Wong said.

She said Timor-Leste was right to launch a bid for **compulsory conciliation to resolve the maritime boundary dispute with Australia** in 2016, as it was entitled to do under the UN convention on the law of the sea.

“The Australian government should not have formally challenged the competence of the conciliation commission, when a broader, more understanding approach was needed that reflected the unique relationship we had with such a close neighbour,” Wong said.

“It was not in the spirit of our friendship, from our struggle together in World War Two to our support for your young nation after independence.”

Wong conceded that Australia had “looked at this issue too narrowly and without considering the importance of this issue in the context of your path to sovereignty”.

The minister said after the challenge failed, the Australian government - with Labor’s support - embraced the conciliation process and reinvigorated a “good faith approach in a way that better reflected the spirit of our friendship”.

The speech did not specifically mention the diplomatic dispute stemming from a 2004 operation by the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (Asis) to bug key offices of the Timor-Leste government - a move that **one of the key negotiators for the developing country later described** as “outrageous”.

Australia originally **secured a 50-50 split** of the Greater Sunrise fields, positioned 450km north-west of Darwin and 150km south of Timor-Leste.

Whistleblower allegations about the matter prompted the Timor-Leste government to build a case against Australia at The Hague, alleging the bugging had rendered the treaty void.

Wong said the new maritime boundary treaty, signed in 2018, finally reflected an outcome that was “fair and equitable, and consistent with international law”.

This was, she said, “a powerful signal of respect for the rules-based order at a time when those rules are being challenged”.

Wong assured Timor-Leste that Australia was seeking to be “a partner who wants you to have your own, powerful voice, who won’t ask you to toe the line”.

“We have been listening carefully to understand your ambitions for Greater Sunrise, and I can assure you that your commitment to onshore processing and to the south coast Tasi Mane project is clearly understood,” she said.

At a later press conference, Wong was asked how she could justify supporting a big oil and gas project when the world was seeking to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

“The global economy is in transition and Australia is in transition,” Wong said.

“I do represent a government that has got very ambitious targets when it comes to climate change and we were elected with a strong mandate to act on climate and we will.

“However, we do also understand the economic imperative for Timor-Leste through this period of time and why Greater Sunrise matters to your people.”

The Australian government also announced it would provide a further \$2m in funding to support Timor-Leste’s efforts to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) and the World Trade Organization.

# Address to the Timor-Leste Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Dili, Timor-Leste, 7 July 2023



Ha'u-nia respeitu ba.

His Excellency, President José Ramos-Horta;

His Excellency, Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao;

My host, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, His Excellency, Bendito dos Santos Freitas;

Ministers, Vice Ministers and Secretaries of State of the Government of Timor-Leste;

Members of the National Parliament of Timor-Leste;

Members of the diplomatic corps and international organisations;

Distinguished guests;

Ladies and gentlemen.

Boatarde!

It is a pleasure to be in Timor-Leste again, my second time in the year or so since I became Foreign Minister.

And it is a great honour to have met Prime Minister Gusmao and Minister Freitas so soon after the formation of your new government.

I want to begin by congratulating Prime Minister Gusmao on the election result, and congratulating all those elected or who ran as candidates.

I also wish to extend my congratulations to all the ministers who were sworn into their positions just a few days ago.

It is an enormous privilege and responsibility to have been chosen to lead by your people, who turned out in record numbers to exercise their democratic right.

The Australian Government looks forward to working closely with you in the years ahead to support your priorities.

I welcome the sentiments and aspirations expressed by Prime Minister Gusmao in his inauguration speech this week, when he spoke of greater trust and mutual respect in our bilateral ties.

Like Prime Minister Gusmao, we want to move beyond past differences.

We want to work alongside Timor-Leste to achieve your new Government's vision of a prosperous, healthy, educated, skilled, innovative and dynamic society.

Australia and Timor-Leste are the closest of partners.

Of course we are neighbours. That means we have issues to manage, and being neighbours means we have an interest in managing them together.

Timor's success matters to Australia, and I believe Australia's success matters to Timor.

Our success matters to each other because we share a region and we share a future.

We share an interest in both of our countries being prosperous and peaceful.

Just as important as these interests is our friendship.

Because fortune may have chosen for us to be neighbours, but we choose for us to be friends.

There has always been a deep reservoir of respect, friendship and solidarity between the Timorese and Australian people.

This friendship means all Australians want your nation to continue to flourish and reach its full potential.

Often the strongest friendships are those that have been forged in the greatest trials.

Together, we fought the battle for survival in the Second World War, when Timorese worked alongside nearly every Australian soldier; helping navigate, gathering intelligence, helping carry the wounded, securing food supplies.

As one Corporal, Jeremiah Haire recorded in his diary, "sharing common food and plate".

Around 50,000 Timorese died in that war, an immeasurable loss and sacrifice we will never forget.

When you took the courageous step of voting for independence in 1999 and asked the international community for help to secure your nation, Australia answered.

More than half of the 11,000 personnel in the International Force in East Timor, or INTERFET, were Australian; the single largest deployment of ADF personnel since the Second World War.

The Commander of INTERFET, General Peter Cosgrove, said that with this support, Australia, had "fulfilled the promise made by their spiritual grandfathers at the end of World War II."

In 2006, when Timor-Leste asked for military and policing help to re-establish and maintain public order, Australia was honoured to lead these efforts, as a friend and as a neighbour.

And in 2008, following the coordinated, violent attacks on President Ramos-Horta and Prime Minister Gusmao, we stood resolutely behind Timor-Leste, responding to Timor's request for more peacekeeping troops and police to stabilise a dangerous situation.

We were there in 1999, in 2006 and in 2008 because it was the right thing to do and because of our belief in a free and prosperous Timor-Leste taking its rightful place in the world and the region.

Indeed, following your independence, Australia quickly became Timor-Leste's largest development and security partner.

The depth of that partnership continues to this day, with Australia providing an estimated A\$118 million in development assistance this year, putting Timor in our top five development partners.

We will continue to support your ambitions and respond to your priorities.

Our cooperation extends across a wide range of sectors, including security, health, agriculture and human development, and economic resilience.

We are expanding our cooperation on major infrastructure projects, including the redevelopment of Dili International Airport and the Timor-Leste South Submarine Cable.

We are also expanding access to Australia for Timorese workers under the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Scheme, an initiative which began under the previous Labor Government in Australia.

Some 4,680 Timorese workers are currently in Australia, employed across rural and regional areas, remitting 37.5 million dollars each year to their families in Timor-Leste.

Aside from remittances, we are expanding opportunities for seasonal workers to gain valuable skills, and improving workers' rights and conditions.

When I was here last year, one of the messages I received was that you wanted further support to develop education and skills for your people.

As part of that, the Australian Government will support an additional 35 Timorese to complete formal qualifications in aged care, helping to build critical skills for your people and bolstering your economic resilience.

And I am pleased to announce further support today for skills and education today.

This includes a doubling of our Australia Awards scholarships - also created under a Labor Government - from 10 to 20 places; the creation of 18 places in the Australia Awards fellowship program to help build capability in disaster response and preparedness and biosecurity; and new scholarships for Timorese to attend the Australia Pacific Training Coalition in Suva.

We will continue to work with you to find opportunities for your people.

Australia recognises that Timor-Leste's path to independence and sovereignty has been long and arduous.

You rightly seek to make your own choices, without having them encroached by others.

Timorese have struggled, through colonisation, and occupation, to achieve what we all seek – our place in the world and the ability to decide our own future. The white star on your flag – representing peace and having overcome so much.

Since independence, Timor-Leste has proudly taken its place in the region; a champion of human rights; a vibrant democracy emerging successfully from conflict that is assisting other post-conflict countries, including through the g7+ organisation of conflict affected-countries.

It has always been true that for small and medium countries, our sovereignty is enhanced by our support for the rules and norms that protect us all, and our engagement in multilateral organisations.

That's why Australia has been so committed to supporting Timor-Leste's participation in regional and multilateral organisations, including your bids to join ASEAN and the World Trade Organization.

Australia was ASEAN's first dialogue partner almost 40 years ago, and has since become its first Comprehensive Strategic Partner.



From this position we have been among your strongest supporters for ASEAN membership. So we warmly welcomed ASEAN's in-principle decision to admit Timor-Leste as the 11th member of ASEAN and formal admission as an observer.

ASEAN matters for Timor-Leste because it is at the centre of shaping the future of this changing region; the core of regional peace and stability.

And Timor-Leste's membership of ASEAN will reinforce that centrality.

We've heard Prime Minister Gusmao's reflections that you have more work to do to ensure you can meet the stringent technical requirements for ASEAN accession.

Which is why we are so committed to supporting you to build your capacity, including helping your biosecurity and statistics agencies to enhance their capabilities, a key step in meeting ASEAN's accession requirements.

And it's why today I announce that we are increasing our package of support for Timor's accession to ASEAN and the WTO, by a further \$2 million – bringing the total to \$8.6 million.

But Australia's support for your sovereignty goes beyond our support in international organisations.

We understand that for you to maintain your sovereignty, you need to be economically resilient.

Key in that ambition will be the sovereign choices Timor-Leste makes now.

We will keep striving to be the best possible partner, and a partner who will stand by you today and throughout your future.

The partner who shares Prime Minister Gusmao's belief in the Timorese people's “fundamental right to decide their own future”.

A partner who wants you to have your own, powerful voice. Who won't ask you to toe a line.

That means listening carefully to your interests and priorities.

That means being a partner who will support the sustainable growth of your economy and deliver the greatest wealth and security for your people.

And avoiding the risks of unsustainable lending that have hobbled other countries.

That is why Australia is so deeply committed to working with Timor-Leste to realise the development of Greater Sunrise.

But before I talk about the future of Greater Sunrise, I want to acknowledge some of the past.

There have been past instances in which Australian governments have acted in ways that Timorese people – and many Australians - found disappointing.

Timor-Leste was right to initiate compulsory conciliation, as you were entitled to do under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

The Australian Government should not have formally challenged the competence of the Conciliation Commission, when a broader, more understanding approach was needed that reflected the unique relationship we had with such a close neighbour.

It was not in the spirit of our friendship, from our struggle together in World War Two to our support for your young nation after independence.

Labor recognised this problem in 2016, when from opposition we pledged to reopen good-faith negotiations with Timor-Leste on our maritime boundary.

As our then Shadow Foreign Minister, Tanya Plibersek, said at the time, “the maritime boundary dispute has poisoned relations with our newest neighbour...this must change for their sake and ours.”

And after the challenge failed, Australia's then Government, with Labor's support, embraced the Conciliation process, reinvigorating Australia's good faith approach in a way that better reflected the spirit of our friendship.

This became the first compulsory conciliation ever initiated under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and its success is a model for how countries in similar maritime disputes can work to resolve them.

And it was a powerful signal globally of respect for the rules-based order at a time when those rules are being challenged.

The result was that in March 2018 we signed the Maritime Boundary Treaty delimiting permanent boundaries, and setting out a Special Regime for Greater Sunrise.

This Treaty was a historic reset in our bilateral relationship, and a chance for new beginnings.

It finally agreed permanent maritime boundaries, long sought after by Timor-Leste, on a basis that is fair and equitable, and consistent with international law.

Australia looked at this issue too narrowly and without properly considering the importance of this issue in the context of your path to sovereignty.

The Australian Labor Government I represent has a deep appreciation of just how much your economic resilience is key to your sovereignty.

And we recognise Greater Sunrise is unfinished business.

Australia has only one ambition for Greater Sunrise: to see the field developed as soon as feasibly possible to support Timor-Leste's development.

Prime Minister Gusmao was right to say that Greater Sunrise needs to be a feasible and economically sound solution, that creates a petroleum industry that can yield direct economic dividends for your people.

There is a new government in Timor-Leste, and a new Australian Government.

And a genuine, good faith commitment to developing Greater Sunrise.

That's why the Prime Minister appointed Steve Bracks, a longstanding friend and supporter of your nation, to be the Australian Government's Special Representative for Greater Sunrise.

I am so pleased that Steve Bracks was able to join me on this visit.

Australia has been listening carefully to understand your ambitions for Greater Sunrise. I can assure

you that Timor-Leste's commitment to onshore processing and to the south coast Tasi Mane project is clearly understood.

Timor-Leste is the majority shareholder in the joint venture, alongside Woodside and Osaka Gas. Technology is evolving, and the joint venture is looking afresh at the options. That is why its study into the options for Greater Sunrise should go ahead as soon as possible.

Our support for Timor's economic resilience is also why we strongly support your ambitions to convert the Bayu-Undan field.

It has been such a major contributor to your economy for over sixteen years, and we want to work with you to transition it into a commercial carbon capture and storage project.

We have recently introduced a Bill to our Parliament to give effect to amendments to the London Protocol, allowing us to meet our international carbon obligations and facilitate commercial consideration of Bayu-Undan.

We will continue working with you on these and other projects to support your economic resilience and sovereignty.

And I believe we are embarking on a new phase in our journey together.

We are dynamic nations, in one of the economically fastest growing regions of the world.

We share strong civil societies, backed by the close links between our communities.

There are some 10,000 Timorese living in Australia today.

And so many Australians have spent time in Timor-Leste, and continue to feel great kinship with your people.

Our ties span local governments, universities and schools, churches, NGOs and community groups, and of course our veterans.

Many of these links go back decades, and endured when governments were in serious dispute over our shared maritime boundaries.

Our Australian Labor Government seeks to move beyond past divergences.

To work with you to shape the future we share.

Wherever the future may take our two countries, whatever challenges we may face, I want our friends in Timor-Leste to know that we in Australia will always be with you.

Through thick and thin.

In good times and in bad.

Because our friendship is deep and it is broad.

It has already stood the test of time since the days of independence.

And it is the foundation on which we can build our futures, together.

Thank you, and obrigada wain.

# Press Conference, Dili, Timor-Leste

## 7 July 2023



Minister for Foreign Affairs  
Senator the Hon Penny Wong

**Penny Wong, Foreign Minister:** Thank you very much, Honourable Minister, for the opportunity to meet with you and the opportunity to give this speech today. This is my third visit to Timor-Leste, but my second in a year as Minister, which reflects the importance of our relationship.

**Foreign Minister:** I'm conscious - I'm sure you have questions. I simply want to thank my counterpart, I want to thank his Excellency, the President, for honouring me with his attendance today, and with his meeting with me earlier. I want to thank the Prime Minister for his very generous meeting with me and his generous gift. And I want to again say we want to work with you to shape the future that we share.

**Journalist (via Interpreter):** Question for Minister Wong, what has motivated you to visit Timor-Leste and the second is, do you say Greater Sunrise is unfinished business? And the third is, please will you be specific about how cooperation agreement is going? To what extent is this means to be different?

**Foreign Minister:** I'm here, which is this first question, I'm here because we are friends and partners, and there is a new government and as Foreign Minister I wanted to come early in this new government to engage my counterpart and new Prime Minister, incoming Prime Minister to recommit to our partnership and to working together.

**Foreign Minister:** The question in relation to Greater Sunrise, what I have said in the speech, I meant, which is we have only one ambition for Greater Sunrise and that is to see it developed as soon as feasibly possible. We agree with Prime Minister Gusmão that there needs to be a feasible and economically sound solution, and we would encourage the work to be done within the partners in Greater Sunrise for that to occur.

**Foreign Minister:** I want to say something about, you asked about China. We do what we do because of who we are and who you are. It's not about other people, it's about our relationship and our region.

**Journalist:** Minister, from listening to your speech, there is seems to be a content of some mea culpa on the part of the Australian Government - about some of the things that were done in the past, and the firmest ever commitments of - on really wanting to get Sunrise, and so recognising the wishes of Timor. How confident are you that this will be done in the foreseeable future? That's the first question.

And second, Australia's relationship with the region, particularly the Pacific has been troublesome. Is this a relationship where you're trying to consolidate with Timor, and attempt to do things slightly different? What should be the new approach in the way Australia deals with the region?

**Foreign Minister:** Well, I've been Minister now for a year, and I articulated how I wanted to deal with the region as Minister, and how our government wanted to engage with the region in action and in word, in what I said and what we did, and in the first year of being Foreign Minister, I have visited every nation of ASEAN, except Myanmar, and every member of the Pacific Islands Forum, and I did that, not just because I wanted to be able to say it in a press conference. I did it because it is a statement of who we are, and an expression of intent.

We understand this is a world where there's a lot of competition and a lot of change, but we all want peace, stability, prosperity, and we all want to protect our sovereignty. Australia understands that in great part that means working with and in our region, and that's why we're here.

**Journalist:** You didn't answer my question on the Sunrise.

**Foreign Minister:** Excuse me, I've answered a couple of questions on Sunrise, and I'm going to someone else.

**Journalist (via Interpreter):** So Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão's government has a commitment to bring Greater Sunrise to Timor, and what is Australian position?

**Foreign Minister:** I think I directly dealt with that in the speech, that we understand very clearly that is the position. We want Greater Sunrise, we have one ambition for Greater Sunrise, which is to see field developed as soon as is feasibly possible to support the development of Timor-Leste and we agree with the Prime Minister that there needs to be a feasible and economically-sound solution.

So we look forward to the work that is being done to enable that to occur. And people might recall when I was last here, after a meeting with President Ramos-Horta, I said it's clear to me that the project is stuck, and we wanted to unstick it, and in part that's why we appointed Mr Bracks, who's standing next to you.

**Journalist (via Interpreter):** President Ramos-Horta also has called for Australia to increase foreign aid to Timor-Leste. Is this something you commit to?

**Foreign Minister:** Well, I think I've just announced today some additional aid, and I would make the point that we are already providing, I think, 118 million Australian dollars in this year. What I have said to the President, and to my colleague here, and to the Prime Minister, is that we are willing to work with you on your priorities, because we want Timor-Leste to fulfil its full aspirations.

**Foreign Minister:** You had a second question?

**Journalist (via Interpreter):** The second question, how do you justify supporting a big oil and gas project like this one, when the world slowly transitions to the renewables?

**Foreign Minister:** Look, I think we all understand that we're in a transition. The global economy is in transition and Australia is in transition. I do represent a government that has got very ambitious targets when it comes to climate change, and we were elected with a strong mandate to act on climate, and we will. However, we do also understand the economic imperative for Timor-Leste through this period, and why Greater Sunrise matters to your people.

**Foreign Minister:** That's okay, you're doing well.

**Interpreter:** Thank you.

**Foreign Minister:** It's a hard job.

**Journalist (via Interpreter):** The Government of Australia has promised to provide Timor-Leste two patrol vessels to help Timor-Leste control its waters. We just want to know from your side, why were you [indistinct] at this time?

**Foreign Minister:** It's a question of our maritime security and the Guardian patrol vessels, and my recollection, and my staff might tell me, is that, it's in the middle next year, some time, we're looking at the delivery of those vessels. Someone from the post? They're nodding, yes, that's right.

But can I just make a point about maritime security - do you want me to stop there, and you do the next bit? Okay.

**Interpreter:** Yes.

**Foreign Minister:** Protecting your maritime zone is about your sovereignty. It is about the revenue, and it is about preservation of fish stocks, it is about food security. So we are very clear for Timor-Leste, frankly, for many countries in the Pacific, and in Southeast Asia, about why we have to not only protect UNCLOS, the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea, which your people know so much about, but also the protection of rights under UNCLOS in terms of access to fishing.