

Navigating the Timor Sea: Can PM Albanese Deliver Timor-Leste's Dream?

By: Dionisio Babo Soares (personal opinion), 4 May 2025

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and the Labor government have secured victory in the Australian elections, ushering in renewed optimism and renewed scrutiny of Australia's foreign policy priorities—particularly in its immediate neighborhood. Among the most closely watched issues is the ongoing negotiation with Timor-Leste over the Greater Sunrise gas project, a long-standing ambition for the young Southeast Asian nation to directly pipe natural gas from the Timor Sea to its shores.

Currently, the caretaker period—marking the transitional phase before a fully empowered government takes office—places constraints on Canberra's ability to enact new policy directions. While this may seem like a bureaucratic technicality, it has real and immediate implications for

Timor-Leste. Strategic projects like Greater Sunrise, which demand long-term commitments and clear policy signals, face potential delays. This moment of pause, however, also provides an opportunity for both sides to recalibrate and reinforce their mutual commitments before the next phase of negotiations begins.

For Timor-Leste, the dream of bringing the pipeline onshore is not merely an energy project but a declaration of economic sovereignty and a bid for structural transformation. The proposal is tied closely to creating a national infrastructure fund financed by projected revenues from the field. This fund would be instrumental in delivering jobs, diversifying the economy, and improving living standards. However, for this to materialize, Dili needs unwavering signals from Canberra that Australia is a reliable and strategic partner.

Significantly, Timor-Leste has preferred working with established partners such as Australia, Woodside Energy, and Osaka Gas rather than turning to new players like China. This is not only a geopolitical calculation but also a reflection of trust in transparency and shared long-term development goals. In this context, the outcome of the Australian elections matters greatly: it will determine whether momentum can be sustained—or whether policy uncertainty will open the door for rival influences to reshape the playing field.

As a longstanding development partner and regional leader, Australia has a moral obligation and a strategic interest in helping Timor-Leste achieve this vision. Supporting the onshore pipeline would anchor Timor-Leste's economic future and serve as a powerful symbol of Australia's commitment to a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific. Assisting its smaller neighbor to secure energy sovereignty and long-term development reduces vulnerabilities that can otherwise be exploited by external actors, thereby strengthening regional resilience.

Moreover, Australia's support would bolster its credibility as a champion of rules-based cooperation, regional development, and peaceful coexistence. By enabling Timor-Leste to harness its own natural resources on its terms, Canberra would reinforce the principle that sustainable development and sovereignty can go hand in hand—an important precedent in a region where smaller states often navigate between competing powers.

Despite the current pause, the broader bilateral trajectory remains promising. Initiatives such as the Timor-Leste–Australia Labour Mobility and Skills Partnership and the proposed infrastructure fund suggest a durable commitment to regional development and shared prosperity. These initiatives reflect more than transactional cooperation—they represent a strategic vision for partnership based on mutual growth and stability.

However, challenges remain. Whether the final shape of the Greater Sunrise project includes an onshore LNG facility in Timor-Leste or continues to favor established routes to Darwin will define the economic architecture of Timor-Leste for decades. This decision is loaded not only with technical and economic considerations but also symbolic weight, signaling whether the region's larger players are prepared to back the ambitions of smaller, emerging nations striving for independence in both energy and identity.

As Australia emerges from its caretaker period, the question is whether Prime Minister Albanese can mobilize his renewed mandate to deliver a policy framework that aligns strategic interests with Timor-Leste's aspirations. If so, Greater Sunrise may become a beacon of gas, growth, resilience, and genuine partnership in a peaceful Indo-Pacific. (*)