

'Could be one of Australia's biggest strategic blunders': Push for inquiry into East Timor gas project

Anthony Galloway, Sydney Morning Herald. 22 November 2019

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The Morrison government is being urged by a key crossbench senator to support a parliamentary inquiry into East Timor's controversial Greater Sunrise oil and gas project, in a bid to stop China funding the project and gaining access to a port 500km off Darwin.

Centre Alliance senator Rex Patrick will put forward a motion in Parliament on Monday to establish an inquiry into the \$50 billion offshore development.

East Timor is determined to establish the gas processing facility and port on its south coast via a 150-kilometre underwater pipeline, which potential financiers have so far rejected.

Senator Patrick said the parliamentary inquiry would look at ways to support the Timorese government develop the processing facility onshore to stop Chinese financiers backing the project.

"East Timor wants the south coast option and they will [accept] assistance from whomever provides it," he said.

"The Chinese government doesn't think in electoral cycles, they think over decades.



Senator Rex Patrick is moving a motion to establish an inquiry into the Greater Sunrise Project.
Credit: Ben Searcy

"They already have a presence on the south coast and they will build it up over the decade, and I wouldn't be surprised over time if there is a Chinese naval base on the south-east coast of Timor."

The Timorese government is intent on building the pipeline from the oil and gas fields in the Timor Sea to its south coast, rather than refining the gas in an existing facility in Darwin at a lower cost.

The project is being pursued as part of country's huge Tasi Mane infrastructure project, championed by former president Xanana Gusmao.

While Australia has remained officially neutral about where the processing facility should be located, East Timor's ambassador to Australia has previously stated that working with Chinese companies was a strong possibility if other partners could not be found.

Senator Patrick said he did not know the solution to how Australia could help make the project a reality, but it needed to investigate ways to partner with East Timor to keep the Chinese out.

"Not helping the Timorese with their Tasi Mane project, in circumstances where the Chinese will, could turn out to be one of Australia's biggest strategic blunders," Senator Patrick said.

Coalition and Labor are both expected to not back the motion.

A DFAT spokesman said Australia wanted to see the Greater Sunrise area developed in a commercially sound way that maximised the benefits for the Timorese people and contributed to the country's economic development.

A spokesman for Labor's shadow foreign affairs minister Penny Wong said it was up to the Timorese authorities and their commercial partners to determine the development of the gas fields.

The Greens will support the motion, a party spokesman said: "Given decades of past history, we know governments of both stripes need to be scrutinised extremely closely when it comes to engagement with Timor Leste".

The move to establish an inquiry by the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee comes as the Morrison government has been urged to [consider banning the export of sophisticated technologies that could be used by China to boost its military and espionage activities.](#)

The United States government is planning to restrict China's access to certain types of emerging technologies which could include quantum computing, 3D manufacturing and an algorithm that guides artificial intelligence.

In a paper for the China Matters think tank, foreign affairs and security expert John Lee said Australia was "particularly exposed" to the US restrictions and the likely response from China.