

Research note: multi-layered chinese engagement and the “patchwork” of autonomy in Timor-Leste

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31492/2184-2043.RILP2026.49/pp.173-190>

Abstract¹

Timor-Leste, the first new nation of the 21st century, faces a paradox. Although it achieved diplomatic milestones, joining The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2025 and the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2024, the government is facing a critical domestic crisis: the “resource curse” of dwindling revenues (Scheiner, 2022). Desperate for survival, the nation-state has adopted a pragmatic strategy of securing support from various international actors.

This paper discusses China’s growing presence in this strategy, examining it not merely as a geopolitical alignment but as a multi-layered process. Timor-Leste actively engages with China’s “Global Initiatives” triad, utilizing infrastructure projects under the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and aligning with the broader narratives of the Global Civilization (GCI) and Security Initiatives (GSI). This approach is explicitly endorsed by President Ramos-Horta in the 2024 Joint Statement between China and Timor-Leste (Ministry of Foreign Affairs People’s Republic of China, 2024).

This research note argues that Timor-Leste’s diplomacy transcends strategic “hedging” (Cheng-Chwee, 2008), by providing an overview of strategic infrastructure projects, such as Tasi Mane; soft power instruments, ranging from medical teams to education; and the economic impact of Chinese migrants. Instead, the author posits that it is a state-building “patchwork”: a desperate yet pragmatic accumulation of external support designed to maintain autonomy amidst great power competition.

1. A Layered History of Independence in Timor-Leste

The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste is in the midst of a grand experiment in state-building. Its history is carved by overlapping memories of foreign domination and intervention: approximately 400 years of Portuguese colonization, a military occupation by Japan during World War II (1942–1945), and a 24-year occupation by Indonesia starting in 1975. In 1999, through an UN-supervised referendum, the Timorese people overwhelmingly chose independence. However, withdrawing Indonesian military forces and pro-Indonesia paramilitary (or militia) systematically burned and destroyed around 70% of buildings in major

¹ This research note is based on fieldwork primarily conducted in Dili, Timor-Leste. The author conducted the research while serving as a visiting researcher at the Department of International Relations in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the National University of Timor-Leste (UNTL) from July to December 2025. The research was funded by the FCT-CCCM Scholarship (PRT/BD/154528/2022). This account draws on the author’s personal field notes and integrates their observations with the perspectives shared by various local citizens and international residents during their interactions in Timor-Leste.

cities, including the capital, Dili. Basic life infrastructures such as electricity, telecommunications, and water systems were obliterated, and administrative functions ceased entirely. Timor-Leste's independence began from “Ground Zero”(Nevins, 2002) . A chaotic array of actors such as Japan, Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom and the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), and countless NGOs – intervened immediately to maintain security and apply emergency measures to basic infrastructure (Cummins & Boavida dos Santos, 2024; Nevins, 2002). Today, the sight of various flags from donor countries and partners flying over public facilities and infrastructure project sites visually narrates the reality that Timor-Leste is supported by international cooperation and aid.

1.1. The Changing Social Landscape: China by the Numbers

By 2025, nearly a quarter-century after independence, the social landscape of Timor-Leste has undergone a new transformation; “visualization” of China's presence. To support this transformation of the Timor-Leste, Mica Laurentina Barreto Soares (Soares, 2021, 2023) examines the arrival of new Chinese immigrants (Xin Yimin), primarily from Fujian Province, China, to Timor-Leste after its independence. Soares illustrates the resulting economic and social landscape, as well as the social dynamics of their relations with the Timorese Chinese² (also known as Chinese Timorese), who are part of the overseas Chinese community in Timor-Leste. Maubere Lorosae da Silva Horta (Loro Horta), the current Ambassador of Timor-Leste to China, estimated the number of Chinese residents to be approximately 4,000 in his 2012 study. He described them as the second-largest foreign group after Indonesians, who were estimated to be between 10,000 and 12,000 (Horta, 2012). However, more than a decade later, the demographics observed by Horta have shifted dramatically. Current estimates suggest that the number of Chinese migrants has surpassed 20,000³ (Embassy of China in Timor-Leste, 2024), rivaling or exceeding the Indonesian population.

Most of the Chinese immigrants recently coming into Timor-Leste are not familiar with the languages that Timorese people generally use, such as Tetum, Indonesian, English, or Portuguese⁴. Some Chinese immigrants study Tetum after

² Some members of the ethnic Chinese community in Timor-Leste feel questionable with the term ‘Chinese Timorese.’ This is because the word order suggests that their Chinese identity takes precedence over their identity as Timorese. Out of respect for their sentiments, this paper will refer to them as ‘Timorese Chinese.’

³ The exact number of Chinese residents in Timor-Leste is unclear. The 2022 Population and Housing Census, conducted by the National Institute of Statistics (INETL), lacks data on the number of registered Chinese citizens in Timor-Leste.

⁴ The official languages of Timor-Leste are Tetum and Portuguese, while the working languages are Indonesian and English.

their arrival. In addition, the author also observed Timorese people working for Chinese employers using simple Mandarin Chinese for communication. Such a scene was also observed in the immigration office in Dili; many Chinese migrants hire an agent to help with their VISA application, because they need someone to help the communication. There are Timorese Chinese (or Chinese Timorese) merchants who have been running businesses since the Portuguese Timor time. There are multiple origins based on the generation, but currently, Hakka is a dominant group in Timor-Leste (Berlie, 2016; Huber, 2021). Chinese characters overflow on signboards across Dili, and their businesses have permeated every corner of civic life. Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão dismissed concerns regarding over-dependence on China, instead emphasizing the necessity of improving the local business culture in an interview with CNA (2025, 02:18). Meanwhile, Kathleen Goncalves, Vice-President of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and President of the Associação Comercial da Comunidade Chinesa Timor Oan (ACCCTO), described the influx of Chinese enterprises as a “tsunami,” underscoring the severe challenges faced by local businesses (CNA, 2025).

However, as Loro Horta observed in the 2010s, Timor-Leste remains economically dependent on imports from ASEAN, with Indonesia playing a dominant role. According to the World Trade Organization (WTO), Indonesia accounted for approximately 33.5% (around US\$300 million) of Timor-Leste’s total imports in 2023, surpassing China, which ranked second with 14.3% (WTO, 2023). Debates about foreign influence often focus on the influx of Chinese migrants because of their commercial visibility. However, an understanding of the nation’s logistics structure reveals a different reality.

2. Infrastructure Development and the New International Development Order

2.1. From Symbolic Aid to Pragmatic Mega-Projects

The structure of international engagement in Timor-Leste has long been explained by a dichotomy. The UN, Australia, and Portugal oversee soft aspects, such as governance, democratization, and institution-building (Bovensiepen & Nygaard-Christensen, 2018). The notion that Timor-Leste is moving towards modernity is shared by the Portuguese Creole elites in the region, as well as those groups. (Castro Seixas et al., 2023). On the other hands, China and other Asian nations pursue “hard infrastructure construction” and commercial interests (Bovensiepen & Nygaard-Christensen, 2018). However, China’s engagement has taken on a strategic nature that does not fit into this simple binary split. China was one of the first countries to recognize Timor-Leste’s statehood, immediately after its declaration of independence in 2002. Its initial support was highly political;

Beijing adopted a strategy of constructing and donating key facilities that would serve as symbols of the new nation. Representative examples include the Ministry of Foreign Affairs building in 2008, the Presidential Palace in 2009, and the Ministry of Defense and Timor-Leste's Armed Force (F-FDTL) Headquarters (Government of Timor-Leste, 2012; Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China (MOFCOM), 2024; Sahin, 2014). The fact that the central functions of the state are physically supported by Chinese-built infrastructure has the effect of reminding the Timorese government of China's political presence.

2.2. The Recirculation of Development Funds and the Global Development Initiative

Following this gift-giving phase, China's engagement shifted to larger-scale economic projects. According to the analysis by Rajalingam et al. (2025), between 2010 and 2016, the Timorese government spent over \$1 billion on large infrastructure projects, valued at over \$10 million each; approximately 80% of this amount was paid to Chinese companies. More recently, *Hoje Macau* (2023) reported on statistics from the National Procurement Commission (CNA) covering the period from 2011 to February 2023 which were released during an infrastructure development seminar held in Dili. The data reveals that domestic Timorese companies secured 2,351 contracts totaling approximately US\$2.124 billion. Among foreign entities, China (approximately US\$714.6 million) and Indonesia (approximately US\$499 million) were the dominant players. Notably, China's contract count was relatively modest at 44, compared to Indonesia's 72. This indicates that China received a greater number of large-scale projects, resulting in a higher total value.

An essential auxiliary line for understanding this phenomenon is the Global Development Initiative (GDI) pointed out by Watanabe (Watanabe, 2025). GDI was proposed by the Chinese government in 2021. It is a strategic framework designed to confer legitimacy on China-led development assistance by linking it with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), while dodging international criticism regarding the "Debt-trap diplomacy" coined by Chellaney (Chellaney, 2017), associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – such as the case of Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka.

The GDI targets Small Island Developing States (SIDS), like Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands, emphasizing a softer and more comprehensive "development of the global human rights" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). When President José Ramos-Horta visited China from July 28 to 31, 2024, meeting with President Xi Jinping, Ramos-Horta explicitly stated his respect for the GDI, not just bilateral cooperations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's

Republic of China, 2024). This suggests that Timor-Leste is being incorporated into a movement that is forming a new international order, bundled with China's Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), which aims to foster shared understanding, and the Global Security Initiative (GSI), which focuses on safeguarding stability.

3. The Political Economy of Tasi Mane Development

3.1. The Tasi Mane Project (TMP) as a National Century Plan

The Timorese government positions the development of the oil and gas industrial base in the southern coastal region – known as the Tasi Mane Project (TMP) – as the central pillar for supporting future national finances. In the “Strategic Development Plan 2011–2030” approved by Parliament in 2011, infrastructure development was listed as a top priority (Government of Timor-Leste, 2011; Timor Gap, n.d.). At the core of this plan is the TMP, a massive industrial cluster initiative led by the TMP Unit, a subsidiary of the national oil company TIMOR GAP, under the mandate of the Ministry of Petroleum and Minerals. Specifically, the plan involves developing three hubs in the south – Suai, Betano, and Beaco – to establish supply bases, refineries, petrochemical complexes, Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) plants (Timor Gap, n.d.). This supports the efforts of a discussion of “decentralization (Rosario & Novaria, 2025)” away from Dili.

This plan goes beyond mere industrial promotion. It includes the intention of national remodeling, akin to relocating the capital, to disperse economic activity and population concentrated in the capital, Dili, and to achieve balanced development of the national territory (Government of Timor-Leste, 2013).

3.2. The Overwhelming Advantage of Chinese Enterprises: The Suai Highway Case

Chinese state-owned enterprise groups undertake multiple physical construction of government-funded projects. The presence of Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) in Timor-Leste has risen rapidly (Huang, 2024).

As of 2024, there are approximately 20 large and medium-sized Chinese state-owned enterprises registered in the country (MOFCOM, 2024). A symbolic case is the construction of the highway connecting Suai and Beaco. In July 2013, the first section (approx. 30 km) of the southern coastal highway was put up for international tender. In early 2015, a consortium consisting of China Overseas Engineering Group Co., Ltd. (COVEC) and China Railway First Group Co., Ltd. (CRIG) won the bid (MOFCOM, 2024). The section officially opened on November 17, 2018, decisively marking the establishment of “Chinese infrastructure” in Timor-Leste.

Additionally, the Tibar Bay Port project, the country's first international container terminal, was awarded to the French Bolloré Group as a Public Private Project (PPP), but the actual Engineering, Procurement, and Construction (EPC) was handled by China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC). The port officially began operations on November 30, 2022, significantly improving the country's logistics capacity (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China (MOFCOM), 2024). Furthermore, Loro Horta, the Ambassador of Timor-Leste to China, contributed to the magazine, *Macao* by stating that the expansion project at Dili Airport and the laying of submarine fiber-optic cables are underway and Chinese companies are bidding for parts of the projects (Horta, 2024).

The reason why government leaders like President Ramos-Horta support Chinese companies is clear. In a 2025 interview with China Global Television Network, Ramos-Horta praised Chinese companies for their exceptional quality, low cost, punctuality, and risk tolerance during the country's electrification. He specifically noted, "Only China could do it." However, he emphasized that these projects were funded by the national budget of Timor-Leste. For Timor-Leste, where the infrastructure deficit is a bottleneck for economic growth, this immediacy is attractive (CGTN, 2025).

4. Greater Sunrise and the Geopolitical Dilemma

4.1. The Resource Cliff and the "Race Against Time"

Timor-Leste's economy is vulnerable due to its revenue structure, as it has relied heavily on its Petroleum Fund since independence (Scheiner, 2021). While the government has used these savings to finance power grids and road infrastructure, investments in human capital, specifically education and health, have been less (Scheiner, 2021). However, this advantage was not permanent. The Bayu-Undan field ceased production permanently in June 2025 (Autoridade Nacional do Petróleo, 2025). According to the data estimates presented by the World Bank in 2024, the nominal GDP per capita of Timor-Leste is estimated to be approximately 1,300 U.S. dollars (World Bank, 2024), indicating a relatively low-income level by regional standards. According to Stefania Dia, ADB (Asia Development Bank) Country Director for Timor-Leste, Timor-Leste's recent and projected growth is underpinned by domestic demand and public spending, and its sustainability hinges on continued strategic public investment (ADB, 2025). Yet the Petroleum Fund, which finances most of this investment, could be depleted in the early to mid-2030s if no new revenue sources emerge (IMF, 2025). The main hope of avoiding this "resource cliff" lies in developing the Greater Sunrise (GS) gas field in the Timor Sea, and the government increasingly frames the situation as a "race against time" to get the GS development on track before the Fund runs out.

4.2. The Battle over Development Concepts: TLNG vs. Darwin

The biggest point of contention in the GS development has been the pipeline route for transporting the extracted gas. The Timorese government refuses to yield on the “Timor-based LNG Concept (TLNG Concept),” which involves landing the gas in the southern Tasi Mane region to produce and export Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) domestically (Lusa, 2025; O’Connor, 2025). On the other hand, the project operator, Australia’s Woodside Energy, has long argued that laying a pipeline to Darwin, Australia, where existing infrastructure is in place, makes more economic sense (O’Connor, 2025). This long-deadlocked conflict began to move in November 2025, when the Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources of Timor-Leste (MPRM) and Woodside signed a cooperation agreement to advance specific studies of the “TLNG Concept”(Casey, 2025). A final decision on the development location is expected by mid-2026, with operations predicted to start between 2032 and 2035 if all goes well (Government of Timor-Leste, 2025).

4.3. The Realism of the “China Card”

Under these complex circumstances, President Ramos-Horta is deploying skillful diplomacy. Dure the GS negotiations, Ramos-Horta has repeatedly alluded to the potential for investment from China to shake up Australia and existing partners. This is often interpreted as playing the “China Card”(Cardoso, 2023). Its effect has been proven. In the past, regarding a submarine optical cable project, the Australian government offered significant financial support to counter the entry of Chinese companies (such as Huawei). Australia is intensifying its intervention in Timor-Leste, Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea, wary of Chinese companies controlling the “nervous system” of national telecommunications (Remeikis, 2018). However, from Timor-Leste’s perspective, this is not so much an active playing of a card as it is a survival strategy taking advantage of Australia’s security concerns. The “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” agreement signed by Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão and President Xi Jinping in Hangzhou, China, on September 23, 2023, included “strengthening high-level military exchanges” in its 10th item (Xinhua, 2023a, 2023b), which (Fundasaun Mahein, 2023) provoked Australia. Yet, President Ramos-Horta dismissed this as if it is Australia’s overreaction. For Ramos-Horta, China and Australia remain one of the friendly nations (Needham, 2023). Loro Horta, the Ambassador of Timor-Leste to China and son of Ramos Horta, also emphasized this in an interview with *People’s Daily Online* in January 2026. Loro Horta refuted the “China threat theory” and praised the GDI (Zhang et al., 2026). Right before the roadmap for ASEAN accession on 18th Oct in 2025, Ramos-Horta stated in an interview with *The Asahi Shimbun* that the militarization of the South China Sea is unnecessary (Kono, 2025).

Ramos-Horta was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 alongside Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo. Consequently, for Ramos-Horta, the adherence to international law – specifically the respect for the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in the context of the South China Sea disputes – remains importance. Fundasaun Mahein, a Dili-based security sector monitoring NGO, argues that despite Australia’s security anxieties regarding the 2023 China-Timor-Leste Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, Timor-Leste’s perspective remains focused on omnidirectional diplomacy which is maintaining “friends with all” (Fundasaun Mahein, 2023).

4.5. The Diplomatic Triumph: “Parseria Foun ba Era Foun” (New Partnership for a New Era)

The effectiveness of Timor-Leste’s omnidirectional diplomacy was decisively proven on January 28, 2026. During Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s visit to Dili, the two nations signed the “Parseria Foun ba Era Foun” (New Partnership for a New Era) (Government of Timor-Leste, 2026). This agreement marks a turning point in the GS negotiations. Australia officially acknowledged Timor-Leste’s commitment to onshore processing (the TLNG concept) and pledged to contribute at least one-third of its upstream revenue from the project to Timor-Leste’s Infrastructure Fund (Tatoli, 2026). The partnership also includes enhanced cooperation in policing and cybersecurity (Dougherty, 2026), signaling Australia’s determination to counterbalance China’s GSI influence in the security sector in Timor-Leste. For Timor-Leste, this outcome vindicates its “patchwork”. By leveraging Chinese engagement, Timor-Leste extracted significant concessions from Australia regarding the Tasi Mane project and security guarantees. However, the fact that Timorese national leaders praise China’s GDI, GSI, and GCI simultaneously suggests that this outcome is not strategic but rather an attempt at omnidirectionality.

5. Grassroots China: The Digital Economic Zone and the Rift Between New and Old Migrants

5.1. Historical Fault Lines: From Kuomintang Roots to New Migrants

When discussing Chinese society in Timor-Leste, historical fault lines cannot be ignored. While it is the new Chinese migrants, who flowed in after independence in 2002, that currently create the modern landscape of Dili, a foundation of Timorese Chinese from the Portuguese colonial era exists beneath the surface. During the Portuguese Timor era (after the Japan surrendered during the WW2), there were 18 Chinese primary schools and a middle school across the country supported by

the Kuomintang (KMT), providing quality education to the children of overseas Chinese (Kammen & Chen, 2019). These schools were all closed, except for the one in Dili (which also closed in 1976) with a departure of the pro-Taiwan Chinese in the 1970s (Berlie, 2016). During the Indonesian occupation from 1975, many Timorese Chinese escaped to Australia, and many of them were killed in Timor-Leste by the Indonesian military (Berlie, 2016). Timorese Chinese have been basing themselves in districts like Colmera, Audian, Lecidere, and Bidau area in Dili. They are characterized by a transnational lifestyle, moving between Australia and Timor-Leste (Chew & Huang, 2014). In contrast, the new Chinese migrants who have arrived since the 2000s have roots mainly from Fujian (Soares, 2021), migrating alone or with families in search of economic opportunities. They form a new network based on digital technology, distinct from the traditional community.

5.2. The WeChat Economy and the “Involution” of the Market

“WeChat”, China’s social media platform (so called a super-app), supports the economic activities of new migrants. While Facebook and WhatsApp are generally common in Timor-Leste (Melt Water & We Are Social, 2024), WeChat remains the primary infrastructure within the Chinese community. Fernandes et al. (2022) defined Chinese migrants in Timor-Leste during the pandemic as “entrepreneurs with flexible adaptability.” Indeed, they utilize WeChat’s “Official Accounts” and the 24-hour viewable “Moments” to develop surprisingly intricate micro-businesses. These activities range from Chinese food delivery orders and 24-hour taxi arrangements to the buying and selling of fresh fish and meat, all completed within the app. Especially noteworthy is the coordination with rural areas. For instance, in the Manatuto region east of Dili, Chinese businessman cultivate vegetables and fruits jointly with local farmers and have built a supply chain to sell them directly to Chinese customers in Dili via WeChat. However, a sense of stagnation is drifting through this closed market. The term “Neijuan” (Involution), meaning excessive competition, is frequently exchanged on Timor-Leste’s social media (Zhang & Ji, 2023), especially on WeChat. “Involution” essentially signifies a state of fruitless and excessive competition. Zhang and Ji (2023) argue that in the face of such grueling social pressures, contemporary Chinese youth utilize hashtags to target those they perceive as their exploiters – namely “the older generation” and “capitalists” – thereby facilitating the formation of an inward-looking group cohesion. In the context of Timor-Leste, since the purchasing power of the Timorese people remains low, affordable stores and retail shops have proliferated, creating a structure where profit is difficult to generate.

As a result, the market is increasingly consolidating around large-scale supermarkets with significant capital, such as “Mei Mart.” This retailer offers an

extensive range of both imported and locally produced goods. Notably, Chinese products – ranging from seasonings to over-the-counter medicines – are sold at prices comparable to those in mainland China. Mei Mart maintains particularly competitive pricing for products and snacks sourced from Fujian Province. This cost efficiency is likely bolstered by the logistical advantage of Aero Dili, Timor-Leste’s national flag carrier, which operates direct flights to Xiamen, in Fujian.

At the same time, Timor-Leste’s many consumer goods continue to flow from Surabaya, Indonesia. This maritime trade route from Surabaya to Dili remains one of the backbones of the nation’s supply chain. According to Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)’s report (2024), as of 2023, Indonesia’s Meratus Line handles half of Timor-Leste’s maritime imports, demonstrating the country’s strong reliance on Surabaya Port as its primary logistics hub. Following the transition to Tibar Bay Port in November 2022, however, some shipping companies withdrew due to increased cargo handling costs (JICA, 2024, p2-75).

6. Social Development Assistance: Medical and Educational Practices as GDI

6.1. Continuity and Specificity of Medical Support

The Chinese government’s exercise of “soft power” can be seen also in the healthcare sector, which impacts citizens’ lives. China collaborates with multilateral partners, such as the United Nations World Food Program (WFP), by providing support through the Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund (GDSSCF). For example, food assistance provided in collaboration with the World Food Program (WFP) reaches over 30 countries with 40 projects (WFP, 2024), including Timor-Leste.

Bilateral aid includes the ongoing dispatch of medical teams since 2004. These teams operate on a two-year rotation basis, and the 11th team was welcomed in 2025. To date, over 100 Chinese medical specialists have served at Dili’s Guido Valadares National Hospital (Embassy of China in Timor-Leste, 2025). They support core hospital functions, including cardiology, urology, obstetrics and gynecology, general surgery, orthopedics, radiology, intensive care, anesthesiology, and rehabilitation, through their clinical departments, which span a wide range. They also provide acupuncture, a distinctive Chinese medical technique that combines Western and traditional medicine to address the diverse needs of the local population (Zheng et al., 2021). Additionally, China’s naval hospital ship, the Peace Ark, has visited countries in Asia, Africa, and South America since 2010 to provide medical services. It has visited Timor-Leste twice, in 2017 and 2023 (MOFCOM, 2024).

Furthermore, the GX Foundation, an international nonprofit organization based in Hong Kong, has been providing medical and humanitarian support in Timor-Leste. Their initiatives include installing high-capacity water purification systems in local universities, churches, and public spaces to improve community health (GX Foundation, 2024). The foundation has also spearheaded a large-scale dengue fever prevention project, distributing tons of medical supplies and prevention kits to mitigate public health risks (Government of Timor-Leste, 2024). The foundation's efforts extend beyond material aid to human capital development. They support medical students from the National University of Timor-Leste in undertaking internships in Hong Kong and Macau (Lusa, 2026). By integrating vector control with extensive health education and professional training, the foundation empowers local communities to take ownership of their public health safety (GX Foundation, 2025; Presidência da República Democrática de Timor-Leste, 2025). In this sense, China's support encompasses both GDI and GCI elements. GDI elements include medical and water infrastructure, while GCI elements are characterized by their integration into local society and commitment to youth and academic exchange.

6.2. The Struggle over Education and Language

In the field of education, China is strengthening its engagement under the banner of “human resource development.” To date, more than 2,500 Timorese civil servants and technicians have been invited to China for training in practical fields such as public administration, tourism, urban planning, trade, tropical disease control, infrastructure development, poverty reduction, fisheries, and hydropower (MOFCOM, 2024). Additionally, approximately 160 students have obtained degrees from Chinese universities through the Chinese government scholarship quotas (MOFCOM, 2024). In 2023, the Confucius Classroom⁵ has been established at the Institute of Business (IOB) in Dili, serving as a hub for Chinese language education (Institute of Business (IOB), 2023). Meanwhile, moves to rebuild the “Chinese School” that once existed are becoming concrete. Currently, centered around the ACCCTO, construction of a school is underway utilizing the site of the former Dili Chinese School, which is now the grounds of the “Bairro Formosa National Primary School”, formally it was called *Chun Fá Hok Tong Su Pó Sá* (Soares, 2021, 482-483). Local residents still call this primary school “Eskola China (or Xina),” retaining the historical memory in the place name (Tatoli, 2023a, 2023b).

⁵ The Confucius Classroom is under the Confucius Institute's management.

Language competition is also fierce. Among young people, demand for English and Indonesian remains high for obtaining scholarships, and Australia, the US, the UK, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Malaysia remain popular study destinations alongside China. In addition, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of Timor-Leste and the Ministry of Education and Science of Portugal are implementing initiatives such as the Centres for Learning and School Training (CAFE) project, extending to regions outside Dili, to strengthen Portuguese language education and ensure the quality of instruction in the language (AFP, 2023). While demand for Chinese language is high, it remains one of the choices, and the Timorese people possess the insight to weigh multiple languages and study destinations.

7. Conclusion: National Autonomy as a Patchwork

7.1. The Vulnerability of the Patchwork

As Timor-Leste becomes fully integrated into the international community through the ASEAN and the WTO, its relationship with China is entering a new phase of scrutiny. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) warned in their report in Septer 2025 that cybercrime and offshore gambling organizations are infiltrating the Timor-Leste’s Special Administrative Region of Oecusse Ambeno (RAEOA) enclave (UNODC, 2025), underscoring the risks of this “patchwork” strategy. The influx of relocated networks, such as Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs) (Marcos et al., 2026), has forced Dili to comply with ASEAN’s digital and economic frameworks (The Macao News, 2025), and engage in joint enforcement leveraging China’s GSI framework.

However, this episode exposed the instability of Timor-Leste’s governance. The government’s abrupt policy reversal – legalizing online gaming in 2024 to secure revenue only to criminalize it immediately afterward – highlights the unpredictable nature of its policies. This turmoil is not merely administrative confusion, but rather a stark manifestation of the country’s survival-driven patchwork. Under pressure from existential threats, the government is caught between immediate economic needs and long-term international credibility, often forced to make sudden changes.

7.2. Conclusion: Survival Strategy via Patchwork

This field note is the reality of a desperate survival strategy waged by a small nation in the interstices between great powers. With the “resource curse” of Petroleum Fund depletion looming, Timor-Leste has no time to be choosy about donors. For a country without a credit rating, China’s infrastructure construction capability

(speed and price), Japan's technical investment, and institution-building support from Portugal, are important strategic partners in addition to Australia and the UN, which are foundational. Everyone's contribution is indispensable. The omni-directional diplomacy deployed by President Ramos-Horta occasionally invites Western caution as playing the "China Card," but this is an expression of defensive realism for national survival. The author argues that China's increased presence in Timor-Leste is the result of a "patchwork" pattern created because Timor-Leste has chosen to welcome all available funds, donations, and support from various nations in order to secure its survival. It is likely that Timor-Leste will continue to avoid fully incorporating into any specific group while maintaining this interesting yet fragile strategy. The autonomy and future of this young nation depend on maintaining this equilibrium.

Acknowledgment

I am grateful to the National University of Timor-Leste (UNTL) for hosting this research. I also sincerely appreciate the colleagues and friends who generously shared their insights and perspectives.

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Data de receção: 2/2/2026

Data de aprovação: 26/2/2026