

The power of norms and leaders in constructing normative relevance: The case of Timor-Leste

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journals.sagepub.com/home/pol**Pedro Emanuel Mendes** 

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Abstract

How can the power of norms triumph over material power? To address this issue this article explores the relational dynamics of structural and agential factors that enhanced the normative relevance of the Timor-Leste question between 1975 and 1999. In doing so, it contextualises the roles of the United Nations, Portugal, and Indonesia; advances a relational theorisation about power, norms, and context; and develops the concept of normative relevance. I argue that the change in Timor-Leste was related to the hierarchical and normative structural transformations of the 1990s, with the new political and ideational environment providing the conditions necessary for the change and emergence of Timor-Leste's normative relevance. Moreover, by activating a sense of normative obligation, leaders and diplomatic officials assume the role of agents of change and reinforce the norm's relevance. However, simply possessing normative reason for resolving an international dispute is insufficient. For normative legitimacy to be effective, norms must be relevant and collectively assumed by the international community.

Keywords

agents of change, international norms, normative power, normative relevance, Timor-Leste

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Introduction

Timor-Leste has been a Portuguese colony since the 16th century. In 1960, the United Nations (UN) added Timor-Leste to its list of Non-Self-Governing Territories. In 1974, Portugal's attempt to decolonise Timor-Leste failed due to local, regional, and international tensions, leading to conflict among Timorese parties and a power vacuum. With political support from the US, Australia, the UK, and ASEAN, the Indonesian military invaded in December 1975 and annexed Timor-Leste in 1976. From a normative perspective, the UN

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did not recognise this annexation, and both the UN Security Council (SC) and General Assembly (GA) demanded Indonesia's withdrawal. Nevertheless, from a power politics perspective, Timor-Leste was part of Indonesia between 1976 and 1999.

Timor-Leste's annexation by Indonesia in the 1970s and its subsequent UN-sponsored independence in the 1990s are paradigmatic of the interplay between power, contexts, and norms. Specifically, it demonstrates how the normative relevance of international conflicts can change over time. The new political and ideational environment of the 1990s precipitated changes in the normative relevance of Timor-Leste, and UN officials were able to harness the shifting sense of normative obligation to act as agents of change.

The shift in international politics had different ramifications for each party. Portugal entailed a growing normative convergence between its foreign-policy ideas on the Timor-Leste issue and the international ideational and political environment. In contrast, it increased the normative divergence between Indonesia's foreign policy ideas on Timor-Leste and the new political and normative environment. For Timor-Leste, it ended international tolerance of military invasions aimed at containing communism, initiating an era of humanitarian interventions against human rights abuses and normative resolutions supporting self-determination. It also marked the end of the international structure that regularised Indonesia's power politics. Above all, the dogma that Timor-Leste's annexation by Indonesia was an irreversible *fait accompli* began to be questioned.

Several classical works on Timor-Leste underline the difficult history of Timorese resistance and the neglect of international norms in the face of the Cold War and the major powers' realpolitik interests (Cotton, 1999, 2006; Dunn, 1983, 2003; Gunn, 1997; Kingsbury, 2000, 2009; Tanter et al., 2001; Taylor, 1991, 1999). Other important works view Timor-Leste as an example of the UN's new humanitarian mission (MacQueen, 2020; Wheeler and Dunne, 2001) and state-building strategies (Leach, 2018; Tansey, 2014). Timor-Leste has recently been the subject of renewed analysis from multidisciplinary perspectives (McWilliam and Leach, 2022; Pereira and Feijó, 2023).

Nevertheless, most international relations analyses of Timor-Leste have adopted a material and rationalist structural approach that emphasises the traditional dimension of material power politics. Drawing on constructivist ideas, the importance of 'practices' (Adler and Pouliot, 2011; Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, 2014), and the 'relational turn' (Jackson and Nexon, 1999, 2019; McCourt, 2016), I present a more relational perspective of structures and agents and of material and ideational power. I read the history of Timor-Leste through a constructivist lens (Reus-Smit, 2008) and demonstrate that a change in the normative zeitgeist and in the ideas and practices of decision makers was decisive. By focusing on the rise and fall of the material logic of the imposition of power and illegal annexation of territory, my analysis of the process of change in Timor's normative relevance offers a compelling illustration of the potential for transformation in international relations. Beyond the *fait accompli* effect (Altman, 2017), I emphasise the historical dynamics that make change possible, particularly the ability to reverse the *fait accompli* of illegal territorial annexations.

In addition to changes in the international order's hierarchical power structure, I argue that the normative structure and the practical process of socialising normative obligations by agents are just as relevant and variable in the case of Timor-Leste. While the latter would not have occurred without the former, from a purely material perspective, Indonesia's hierarchical position in the international order was not fundamentally altered. What decisively contributed to the changes in the Timor-Leste question? Was it a change in the ideational structure? What was the role of agency in this process, particularly that of normative leaders at the UN level?

To answer these questions, this article contextualises the change in political circumstances and the respective normative and ideational structures surrounding the Timor-Leste issue, from its emergence as an international concern for the UN until the start of its resolution. This article demonstrates normative leaders' importance in promoting such changes and identifies the strategies adopted to legitimise or delegitimise norms according to the dominant material interests and the main ideas and practices of Portugal and Indonesia on the Timorese issue.

This article's contributions are threefold. First, it argues that understanding international power structures is not sufficient to explain political changes in normative relevance. Normative relevance variance is relational to the international order's normative structure, ideas, norms, and social practices, notably their collective meanings and shared perceptions (Adler, 2013; Onuf, 1989; Wendt, 1999). The shared assumption of the UN normative principles and resolutions' collective meaning makes them relevant. Second, this article demonstrates that norms – here reflected in UN resolutions – can be instrumentalised or neutralised depending on the concerted interests and strategies of a given international order's political and ideational context. Third, highlighting the critical role of Kofi Annan and the UN General Secretariat team in defining an international solution for Timor-Leste, this article confirms the importance of 'norm entrepreneurs' (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998:895–896) in international relations.

This article is organised into three sections. The first section presents the analytical premises and develops a relational theorisation of power and norms to explain the structural and agential factors that shaped the changes in the normative relevance of the Timor-Leste issue. The second section presents a political and normative contextualisation of the Timor-Leste issue's evolution at the UN, highlighting the normative and diplomatic importance of the UN as a legitimising institution of the international community's ideas, practices, and appropriate behaviour. The third section identifies UN diplomatic agents' main changes and practices from the 1990s onwards, demonstrating how these provided a new impetus to resolve the Timor-Leste question and contributed to the agreement between Portugal and Indonesia.

Power, norms and actors in the dynamic construction of the international order

The concept of power has several dimensions known as the 'faces of power' (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; Baldwin, 2021; Boulding, 1990; Dahl, 1957; Haugaard, 2012; Lukes, 2005). Traditionally, power has been a central theme in international relations (IR), in which international politics has been viewed as synonymous with power politics. IR has gradually integrated more sophisticated and multidimensional concepts of power (Baldwin, 2013; Berenskoetter and Williams, 2007; Diez, 2013; Guzzini, 1993, 2005, 2013a, 2017; Keene, 2013; Keohane and Nye, 1987; Manners, 2002). In this respect, Nye (2004, 2011) adapted the third face of power by coining the typologies of soft and smart power. Barnett and Duvall (2005) revised the various dimensions and introduced a typology encompassing 'compulsory', 'institutional', 'structural' and 'productive' power in IR. Barnett and Duvall's (2005) approach was fundamental in overcoming the hegemonic realist vision of power and presenting a relational vision that integrates both 'power over' and 'power to' approaches. Katzenstein and Seybert (2018: 82) introduced the 'protean power' concept, emphasising 'the explanatory potential of power dynamics operating in conditions of uncertainty'. Based on the 'temporal turn' (Hom, 2018), Drezner (2021) introduced a temporal perspective on power, emphasising the importance of different perspectives on power and time in the discipline's theoretical traditions.

Recognising that interpretations of power are also ‘for someone, and some purpose’ (Cox, 1981), I adopted a pragmatic theorisation¹ (Friedrichs and Kratochwil, 2009; Kratochwil, 2007, 2018) of power that reflects two major approaches to power in IR: (1) power as resources or capabilities, and (2) the relational approach to power (Baldwin, 2013; Barnett and Duvall, 2005; Guzzini, 2013a, 2022). The first approach treats power as a state property and material resource, aligning with realist views on maximising material power. The second approach sees power as a multidimensional relationship, connected to constructivist perspectives in IR. The classical duality in IR between power and ideas arises from the distinction between material and ideational-normative power factors. Material power factors involve the distribution of military, economic, technological, and geographical capacities and their hierarchies in international politics. Ideational-normative factors pertain to the social and normative structures that shape ideas, identities, and worldviews, along with the normative arguments and practices upheld by actors.

Power is a central theoretical element in both rationalist and constructivist approaches (Drezner, 2021; Guzzini, 2022) and is pivotal for understanding normative relevance and robustness. Mainstream rationalist approaches consider material power the primary source of influence and authority in international politics, always outweighing normative power and the logic of normative appropriateness. Conversely, constructivist approaches contend that material power is inseparable from ideational power (Carstensen and Schmidt, 2016; Hall, 1997; Katzenstein, 1996; Wendt, 1999). The power of knowledge (Adler and Bernstein, 2004; Foucault, 1981), emotions, and language (argumentative and discursive power) are equally important and relational to material power (Koschut, 2018; Koschut et al., 2017). Moreover, as this article demonstrates, the ability to politically define, select, and frame norms is a basic form of power. Power is relational, multidimensional, and intersubjectively constructed, evident in the ability to set rules and legitimise normative reasons. Power, as in the Timorese issue, involves imposing or neutralising norms based on material hierarchies and historical context. It also includes empowering and transforming the normative relevance of powerless Timor. This indicates that while material factors are important, normative and ideational arguments are also important and have a relational significance.

Power in international politics is dynamic and mirrors political and normative shifts in the global order. It is connected to social and political practices that establish, reinforce, and perpetuate norms of appropriate behaviour, legitimising the international normative structure. The international normative context is not static and reflects the political will to share ideas and practices of normative legitimacy.

The political significance of international disputes and conflicts varies with the relevance of international norms, influencing changes in actors’ preferences and behaviours. Thus, the relevance of international norms shapes the behaviour of international actors, their shared assumption of legitimacy, and the meaning of normative reason in each international order (Acharya, 2004, 2018; Finnemore, 1996a; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Linsenmaier et al., 2021).

Norms are collective ideas and expectations about actors’ appropriate behaviours (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 891; Katzenstein, 1996: 5) and define the standards of legitimate behaviour. They regulate what actors can and should do. Recent work has problematised the conceptual polysemy of norms, arguing for more conceptual clarity and sensitivity to the various dimensions and processes of contesting, rejecting, or adopting norms (Quissell, 2022). However, it is undisputed that ‘norms must have a moral dimension (the sense of ‘oughtness’)’ (Jurkovich, 2020: 696). The concept of ‘oughtness’

was identified as a 'shared moral assessment' by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 891). I operationalised this concept by focusing on the actors' feelings of normative obligation and the normalisation of normative relevance, which is achieved through a shared meaning and perceptions among the international community's key players.

Normative relevance is the process of intersubjective political construction that enables norms and their prescriptions to be considered fundamental in the ideas and practices of decision makers. Political momentum is essential, as it merges political and ideational contexts that frame the problem, creating a collective perception of the political need for certain behaviours. In international politics, political momentum drives normative relevance by combining material and normative power, thereby activating normative normalisation in actors' practices.

The assumption of decision-makers' political will determines the relevance of norms in a context. As normative entrepreneurs, leaders trigger change and foster the socialisation and activation of political will to act normatively. Material power, interests, norms, and ideas become compatible and mutually reinforcing through shared socialisation, defining the normalisation of the optimal path forward.

Regardless of their politicisation (Shannon, 2000) and contestation (Wiener, 2018), norms influence the set of values, rules, and practices that structure international politics and reflect the evolution of ideas and principles regarding the legitimacy of appropriate behaviour, such as the defence of human rights (Risse et al., 2013) or the contestation of illegal territorial annexation. Although there are different types of norms with varying effects (Hoffmann, 2017; Rosert, 2023; Wiener, 2004, 2007a), they all perform two essential functions (sometimes simultaneously) in that they are both constitutive and regulatory (Goertz, 2003; Kowert and Legro, 1996; Kratochwil, 1989).

While the influence of norms depends on several factors, their relevance is predicated on four related conditions: degree of specificity (Legro, 1997: 34–35), legalisation (Abbott and Snidal, 2000), institutionalisation (Wiener, 2008, 2018), and political normalisation, reflecting broader shared acceptance in the international community (Mendes, 2018; Finnemore, 1996b; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Krzyżanowski, 2020; Risse et al., 2013). It is essential to analyse these conditions in context and in relation to the dynamics of international orders and their respective normative and power structures. Therefore, this article surveyed the current research on the interplay between norm contestation, norm dynamics and robustness (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, 2019, 2020; Percy and Sandholtz, 2022; Vinjamuri, 2018), particularly with respect to how their meanings and legitimacy change over time (Sandholtz, 2017; Sandholtz and Stiles, 2009; Wiener, 2014).

This article's argument is not limited to how interpretations of norms change or the effects of contestation on the robustness and compliance of norms (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, 2020; Wiener, 2004, 2007b). Although such findings are valuable, the puzzling aspect of Timor-Leste's case is why normative reason based on a clear norm legalisation decision lost or gained political relevance. Therefore, this study contributes to the discussion on the meaning and compliance of norms and the reasons for the existence of periods of norm 'erosion' and 'decline' (Clark et al., 2018; Panke and Petersohn, 2012, 2016); as such, it assumes the importance of historical processes and political dynamics in constructing normative relevance.

It follows that the change in the ideational structure of international politics propitiated the socialisation of Timor-Leste's self-determination norm legitimacy. This socialisation activated the process of normalising Timor-Leste's normative relevance. Thus, by socialising

and disseminating feelings of normative obligation, political leaders can achieve the normalisation of normative reason. Normative obligations emerge when decision-makers recognise the need to follow rules and norms, based on a collective perception of the appropriate response to situations challenging international norms (March and Olsen, 2008).

There is constant tension between material interests and normative obligation, and it is not always clear whether normative obligation is a determining factor in decision-makers' motivation. However, in the logic of constructing a situation, it is natural to evoke a feeling of normative obligation during the decision-making process, in which material interests may be framed to align with norms. Thus, a permanent interplay exists between the logic of material interests and normative reason.

The international order consists of two core dimensions: the hierarchical aspect, linked to material power factors, and the normative aspect, associated with ideational and normative factors. Each era's international order manifests a hierarchical and normative structure that defines and influences international political rules and moral foundations (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol, 2020; Barnett, 2021; Cox, 1987; Hurrell, 2007; Ikenberry, 2011). The complex relationship between structure, agency, and contingency in the international order makes the interplay between actors and their structures unpredictable. Rationalist views emphasise the continuity of material power structures and the importance of the most powerful states' interests, arguing that material and hierarchical power differentials are what matter in international politics (Waltz, 1979). While recognising the importance of material and hierarchical power, more reflexive approaches stress the relational logic of power, its normative and ideational dimensions, and the correlative dynamics of normative relevance in the international order.

Changes in the structure of the international order, whether normative or hierarchical, promote transformation in international politics. However, these transformations only occur when enterprising leaders activate exceptional agential moments. Entrepreneurial leaders act as agents of change and motivate decisions and practices that enable turning points (Kingdon, 1995; Schneider et al., 2011). As in a spillover process, these agents are the ones who recognise the 'windows of opportunity' and lead cascading change processes that influence the international community's intersubjective perception of normative reason in each international situation. In these scenarios, a situation that was previously impossible to change owing to the structures' weight and material interests unexpectedly becomes changeable. This is possible because agents of change socialise feelings of normative obligation and begin to perceive structures as surmountable problems. As Timor-Leste demonstrates, change occurs when key actors socialise normative reasons and assume that changes are needed to resolve the situation.

Contextualising the role of the UN in the case of Timor-Leste: Navigating between normative legitimacy and power politics

The UN holds a pivotal position within the institutional hierarchy of the international order, granting it a distinctive normative authority and legitimising capacity (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004; Hurd, 2007; Von Billerbeck, 2020). Thus, the UN plays a decisive role in the generation and diffusion of norms (Finnemore, 1993). Owing to the UN's highly politicised structure, its members can propose and select situations for UN intervention. Nonetheless, when executing a clear mandate supported by a Security Council resolution,

it is assumed that actions follow the mandate. UN mandates are thus legitimated and shared as international guides for action (Voeten, 2005), rendering them a sense of diplomatic impartiality (Foot, 2003: 311). The UN's capacity to exhibit impartiality in international politics is a key factor in its international legitimacy (Tallberg and Zürn, 2019). The shared belief in the UN's impartiality and 'social legitimacy' (Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2015) constitutes an invaluable resource in the organisation's diplomatic endeavours.

However, the UN's most powerful members may suspend or annul the organisation's role – as they did for several decades for Timor-Leste. The resolutions passed by the General Assembly (GA) on 12 December 1975 and the Security Council (SC) on 22 December 1975 were effectively neutralised by Indonesia, together with its special ally, Australia, and the strategic collusion of the US and UK, among other major Western and Asian countries.² On East Timor, the former US Ambassador to the UN, Patrick Moynihan, recalled,

the United States wished things to be as they were and did its best to make them so. The State Department wished the United Nations to be ineffective in any steps that might be taken. This task was given to me, and I accomplished it with remarkable success. (Moynihan, 1978: 279)

Regarding power politics, the UN's initial action in Timor-Leste was sidelined, and its recommendations were reduced to empty intentions written on a UN letterhead. However, this does not mean that the resolutions were insignificant. Although Indonesian annexation continued, the resolutions stubbornly reaffirmed the normative legitimacy of Timor-Leste's right to self-determination. Although the UN did not effectively prevent the invasion of Timor-Leste, the UN Security Council passed a new resolution in April 1976, calling on all member states to respect Timor-Leste's territorial sovereignty and affirming its right to self-determination. Thus, UNSC resolutions 384 (1975) and 389 (1976) affirmed Timor-Leste's right to self-determination, instructing Indonesia to respect its territorial integrity and withdraw military forces. These resolutions also tasked Portugal with administering a non-self-governing territory and ensuring the East Timorese people's right to self-determination (Clark, 1980; Falk, 2000; Krieger, 1997).

However, Indonesia managed to implement effective policies to neutralise the UN's resolution and annexed Timor-Leste as its twenty-seventh province on 17 August 1976. In response, the UN reconfirmed its position in a further resolution in December 1976. From a normative perspective, the UN delegitimised Indonesia's annexation of Timor-Leste. By making it possible to question the annexation of Timor-Leste, this normative delegitimation ultimately proved invaluable.

Since 1976, votes on resolutions in the GA concerning Timor-Leste lost advocacy, as Indonesia and its allies gained influence, countering Portugal's limited annual support for the issue in the UN GA. This shift affected Portugal's strategies and Timor-Leste's resistance, resulting in GA Resolution 37/30 (1982) and initiating UN-mediated talks between Portugal and Indonesia (Gunn, 1997; Mendes, 2022).

Despite this process's meagre results, from a normative perspective, Portugal always held its primary political assets in the UN resolutions of 1975 and 1976. Confident in the principles of self-determination, Portugal kept the issue at the UN level, recognising that only the UN could resolve it. Rejecting secret or third-party proposals to mediate conflicts, Portugal has always preferred official UN diplomacy. Portugal was correct in believing that only the UN could provide a solution to the Timor-Leste issue. However, the fact that the UN alone has neither the power nor the capacity to act independently of

its members will was central to Indonesia's power politics strategy. With its actions premised on the conviction that only Indonesia had the power to define anything in its sovereign territory, it played on the erosion of ideas and norms contained in the UN documents. In a 1980 official publication on Timor, Indonesia peremptorily declared, 'There is no power in this world that can separate the people of Timor-Leste from Indonesia' (Indonesian Department of Information, 1980: 8).

UN member states exhibited politically nuanced positions regarding the recognition of Timor-Leste's incorporation into Indonesia. Where many were rhetorically critical of military invasion, some recognised that, regarding international law, Timor-Leste had not implemented a real act of self-determination. However, these initial positions gradually gave way to a fairly explicit recognition of Indonesia's annexation of Timor-Leste. Indeed, although only Australia recognised the *de jure* incorporation of Timor-Leste into Indonesia at first, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, over 30 UN member countries had either indirectly or clearly acknowledged Timor-Leste as an integral part of Indonesia.

While nations such as India and the United States explicitly acknowledged the incorporation through public declarations, other countries, including Canada, Sweden, Jordan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Oman, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore, demonstrated their recognition by casting votes in the UN General Assembly. Following 1976, several nations implicitly acknowledged Indonesia's control by entering into agreements with the country that incorporated Timor-Leste within the definition of the Indonesian state. This group comprised China, Germany, France, Sweden, Austria, Saudi Arabia, Denmark, Bulgaria, Finland, New Zealand, Italy, Switzerland, Japan, Hungary, South Korea, Brunei, Pakistan, Norway, and the United Arab Emirates (Carey and Carter, 1995; Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation Timor-Leste [CAVR], 2005; Dunn, 2003; Taylor, 1991).

In a broader context, although such support for Indonesia's position in power politics suggested that the status quo would persist, this was not the case in this instance; to employ Galileo's assertion, *e pur si muove!*

Indonesia was aware that the only way to definitively legitimise its power politics was through normative recognition by the UN. Despite its annexationist intentions, Indonesia tried to justify its military invasion of Timor-Leste through normative arguments based on UN principles. On 15 December 1975, Indonesian diplomat Anwar Sani addressed the SC, clarifying that Indonesia's military action in Timor-Leste was aimed at halting the ongoing civil conflict and 'to re-establish peaceful conditions in the territory and to enable the people to exercise, freely and democratically, their right to self-determination' (Krieger, 1997: 63). Indonesian diplomacy never refused dialogue within the UN framework. The intention of this action was to mitigate the critique of Indonesia's stance, while simultaneously projecting an image of openness to negotiation. According to the logic of international order continuity, everything pointed to the fact that Indonesia would normalise the Timor annexation. However, this static image of the ideas and norms of the international order has been proven false.

The end of the Cold War and the emergence of a 'new world order' led to a reconsideration of the UN's role and normative power in resolving international issues. Human rights and humanitarian intervention gained political relevance and normalisation. This new normative environment impacted the Timor issue, heightening the relevance of human rights and self-determination norms to Timor-Leste. Various changes at local, regional, and international levels intersect with these new ideas, creating opportunities for a new vision of the Timorese.

The first was the St. Cruz Massacre in 1991, where Indonesian troops killed more than 200 Timorese's. This event was pivotal for several reasons. It proved that the Timorese continued to resist annexation, contradicting the Indonesian narrative of a normalised integration policy. This also proved the Indonesian army's policy of violence and human rights abuse. Finally, the global dissemination of the massacre broke the Indonesian policy of silencing Timor and placed the issue of Timor on the international agenda. From then on, cumulative international public action spreading the word about Timor fuelled the transnational movement supporting the Timorese cause. This diffusion contributed to activating the emotional power of norms vis-à-vis international civil society and influenced political decision-makers and the normative logic of 'oughtness'. The Nobel Peace Prize award to Ramos Horta and Ximenes Belo in October 1996 culminated this policy of international diffusion and emotional and normative contagion.

Thus, the concerted influence of Timorese resistance and transnational advocacy networks in support of Timor, Portugal's soft power, and normative strategies began to attract the international community, triggering a reversal of Portugal and Indonesia's foreign policy roles and positions. While the normative-legitimate ideas advocated by Portugal gained traction, Indonesia's authoritarian and human rights-violating power, which did not comply with international norms, began to falter. For the first time, the United States and the United Kingdom voted in favour of two UN Human Rights Commission resolutions condemning Indonesia (in 1993 and 1997), and due to Human Rights concerns, the United States began to reassess its policy of unconditional support for Indonesia (ETAN, 1998).

In this context, the Permanent Mission of Portugal to the UN, both in the general framework of its participation in the SC (Monteiro, 1999) and in the specific framework of the Timor-Leste question, emphasised the significance of Portugal's normative foreign policy. It also highlighted the stark contrast between Indonesia and its consistent violation of international norms and human rights (United Nations, 1997a).

A significant change was the replacement of Suharto's New Order regime with Habibie's leadership. The 1997 Southeast Asian economic crisis and subsequent IMF intervention increased Indonesia's reliance on Western aid. This dependency, combined with pressures for democratic and political reforms (Reformasi), prompted new approaches to resolve the Timor issue.

On 9 June 1998, newly appointed President Habibie expressed willingness to grant special autonomy to Timor. Faced with a financial crisis, the Indonesian government made this offer to correct past mistakes, demonstrate regime reforms, and secure IMF economic assistance. Internal and international pressures on human rights and democratic reforms also created a normative obligation to address the Timorese issue, seen as Indonesia's Vietnam (TEMPO, 1999).

On 18 June 1998, Ali Alatas confirmed the details of the special autonomy offer to UN Secretary-General and Portugal. Indonesia viewed its proposal as a comprehensive, internationally acceptable, and realistic solution to the impasse. However, the proposal conflicted with Portugal's principled stance that Timorese should freely and democratically determine its fate. Nevertheless, Portugal expressed a willingness to discuss the Indonesian proposal, emphasising that it saw autonomy as a transitional phase towards self-determination.³

Portugal views the Indonesian transition as a unique convergence of Indonesia's new democratic and human rights values, the pro-human rights international normative environment, and Secretary-General Kofi Annan's leadership and activism. The intersection of national and international ideas amid Indonesia's political, economic, and identity crises creates an opportunity for normative contagion and international pressure on Indonesia.

At the end of June, an EU diplomatic mission visited Timor the first time. Ambassadors from the United Kingdom, Austria, and the Netherlands concluded that the only lasting solution to the problem required direct consultation with the Timorese people. In July, the US Senate passed a resolution openly calling for a referendum under international supervision for East Timor (ETAN, 1998).

The inaugural Tripartite Meeting on Indonesia's autonomy proposal for Timor, held in New York on 4–5 August, fostered a 'constructive atmosphere', enabling the initiation of comprehensive discussions on extended autonomy. Concurrently, Gama and Alatas agreed to enhance their engagement with Timorese leaders to achieve a stable and definitive solution. They also decided to establish interest sections in friendly embassies in their respective countries by year-end. The Indonesian Foreign Minister pledged to progressively demilitarise the Timorese territory (United Nations, 1998a).

Portugal consented to negotiate with Indonesia on an extended autonomy plan for Timor, upholding its stance on the Timorese right to self-determination. Similarly, Indonesia expressed its readiness to negotiate with Portugal on this plan while insisting that Indonesian sovereignty over Timor remained unquestioned during the talks. Between August 1998 and January 1999, an intense negotiation process took place between Portuguese and Indonesian diplomats and the UN Secretariat, moving through a delicate and complex political-diplomatic mosaic where international and domestic politics were constantly intersecting.

Contrary to its assurances, the Indonesian military in Timor supported militias that fostered an atmosphere of instability. The unfolding of events accelerated the intersubjective construction of the gravity of the situation and the reactions of political and diplomatic agents. The normative entrepreneurship of Portugal and the UN Secretariat stood out, particularly in their ability to shape the perceptions of actors who were less convinced of the need for change in Timor. The fundamental idea of power normative argumentation was that autonomy functions as a transitional phase which, upon attainment, facilitates progression to a subsequent stage for examining the ultimate objective of self-determination.

This idea was gaining acceptance among key international players and their diplomatic elites as the appropriate approach to the Timorese issue. Normative influence on main actors like the United States, Australia, the European Union, and other Core Group members, along with the coordination of Portuguese foreign policy and non-state diplomacy by international advocates and activists, has begun to pressure Indonesia. In this way, Portuguese political and diplomatic agents, in conjunction with the UN Secretariat, managed to persuade some important figures in the Australian government, who began to consider that the time had come to adjust their thinking on the issue of East Timor.⁴

In December, Prime Minister John Howard wrote a letter to the Indonesian President, in which he reversed the official policy of unconditional complicity with Indonesia for the first time and questioned Indonesia's handling of the Timor situation. On 12 January, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer announced a significant shift in Australia's foreign policy towards Timor. The new stance supports the Timorese's right to self-determination through a vote, enabling them to decide on potential independence following a period of autonomy.

On 27 January, under political, economic, and normative pressure, the Indonesian government, through Ali Alatas, unexpectedly announced its willingness to consider Timor's full independence to the international community. This decision initiated a new political phase that culminated in the 5 May agreements, which enabled popular consultation in Timor.

With varying interpretations – popular consultation for Indonesia, referendum for Portugal, and the UN – the agreement authorised the UN Secretary-General to consult the Timorese on autonomy for East Timor, paving the way for self-determination. Two days after the agreement, on 7 May, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1236, affirming the UN's aim to organise the referendum. On 11 June, Resolution 1246/99 established the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET), which quickly became operational, highlighting the Secretary-General's commitment and leadership.

The importance of agents of change: The role of political entrepreneurs in the UN Secretariat

In the 1990s, significant changes occurred in the way UN diplomatic agents approached the Timor-Leste issue. In the UN Secretariat, Francesc Vendrell⁵ assumed the role of Director for Southeast Asia and the Pacific, later expanding his responsibilities to become Director for Asia and the Pacific. The UN Secretary-General's ability to conduct a normative analysis of the Timorese issue was considerably enhanced by Vendrell's involvement and his decision to assign Tamrat Samuel⁶ to the Timor-Leste issue. From the early 1990s, Vendrell and Samuel were dedicated to promoting the Timorese cause, primarily by expanding Timorese's participation in the negotiation process. They travelled to Timor-Leste in 1994 for direct meetings with East Timorese of all political persuasions. The trips they embarked on in January and December shaped their ideas on the Timorese commitment to self-determination. Senior officials from the UN were struck by the widespread backing for autonomy and the optimism that Timorese people, particularly their leaders and young population, invested in the UN.

The All-inclusive Intra-East Timorese Dialogue (AIETD), conducted under UN auspices, came to fruition due to Vendrell and Tamrat's efforts. They proposed that the Secretary-General request the Foreign Ministers of Portugal and Indonesia to endorse the concept of inter-East Timorese discussions, aimed at fostering closer ties among East Timorese people. While Indonesia consented to this plan, they stipulated that AIETD gatherings should not address the political position of Timor-Leste. The inaugural AIETD conference took place in Austria during June 1995, with attendees from diverse political backgrounds, including Bishop Belo (Gusmão remained incarcerated at this time). Subsequently, three additional AIETD meetings were convened in March 1996, October 1997, and October 1998. Despite the lack of concrete plans or substantial formal outcomes, these meetings held significant importance. For the first time since 1975, the UN provided East Timor with a platform, endorsing all East Timorese political perspectives to participate in dialogue and find common ground.

Another notable example of UN diplomatic advocacy for the Timorese occurred when Vendrell recommended to the Secretary-General that Indonesian authorities allow a UN Special Envoy, specifically Amos Wako, Kenya's Attorney-General at the time, to visit Xanana Gusmão in Cipinang Prison. This meeting was important because Indonesia fuelled rumours that Xanana, the historical leader of the resistance, had given up and agreed to Timor-Leste's annexation by Indonesia. According to Vendrell, when Wako and Tamrat met Xanana in prison, 'Xanana managed to pass them a letter addressed to the Secretary-General in which he declared and reiterated his commitment to the self-determination and freedom of his homeland' (Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation Timor-Leste [CAVR], 2005: 36). As Kohen (1999: 289) argues, Vendrell was the 'UN official who has played the most relevant role in the East Timor issue since 1975'.

Following changes in executive staff, the UN Security Council recommended Kofi Annan on 13 December 1996, and the GA appointed him as the seventeenth Secretary-General on 17 December 1996. Upon taking office, Annan emphasised, 'the United Nations, along with the rest of the world, must change' (United Nations, 1996). Annan pursued UN reform by reorganising services and embedding human rights within key UN agencies and programmes (United Nations, 1997b). He championed humanitarian intervention and was instrumental in establishing UN resolutions for Timor-Leste's self-determination. Assuming his knowledge and argumentative power, Annan produced six reports on East Timor between May and December 1999 (UNSG Reports, n.d.) that were crucial for the activation of the UN presence in Timor.

The Australian Ambassador in New York, John Dauth, praised the new Secretary-General, asserting that 'Annan has already done more by way of administrative reform at the United Nations than any of his predecessors. He has also done a great deal to build greater coherence in the UN Agenda as a whole' (Dauth, 2002: 4).

Annan immediately aimed to revitalise the Timorese issue, proposing to delay the negotiations set by his predecessor on 21 December (United Nations, 1997c). The varied responses and interpretations from the involved parties necessitated time for Annan to develop a refreshed negotiation framework. Postponing the ministerial meeting did not signify Annan's lack of prioritisation for the Timorese issue. Demonstrating his commitment, Annan discussed Timor-Leste with relevant parties on 3 February 1997 during the Davos Economic Summit. He met with the Portuguese Minister of the Presidency and the Indonesian Foreign Minister to initiate discussions on East Timor (United Nations, 1997d).

On 12 February, Kofi Annan appointed Ambassador Jamsheed K. A. Marker of Pakistan as his Personal Representative for East Timor. Appointing Marker was part of the 'new impetus' to his good offices, aiming at finding a 'just, comprehensive, and internationally acceptable solution to the question of East Timor' (United Nations, 1997e).

This appointment enhanced the UN Secretariat staff's motivation and agency. Together with Vendrell and Tamrat, UN diplomats played an extraordinary role in advocating the cause of Timor-Leste in the 1990s – a stark contrast to Rafeeuddin Ahmed's work.⁷

Departing from previous minister's, intermittent negotiations, Kofi Annan proposed a more intensive and structured negotiation format, initiating continuous diplomatic discussions led by Annan's representatives. Annan, Marker, and colleagues devised a new strategy for addressing the Timor-Leste situation by creating a 'Core Group' of five nations: Japan, New Zealand, Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. This initiative enhanced the relevance of the Timorese issue in global politics and facilitated the socialisation of normative obligation among these key actors. From then on, the UN Secretariat functioned as an ally of the Timorese cause and a privileged interlocutor of Portuguese positions (United Nations, 1997f; United Nations, 1998b).

Senior UN Secretariat officials pledged to support diplomatic talks by travelling frequently between New York, Lisbon, Jakarta, and Timor-Leste to engage with key political figures. Marker visited Portugal and Indonesia to formulate a strategy for the Timor-Leste issue. During a visit to Portugal between 5 and 8 March 1997, Marker established several vital contacts with Portuguese and Timorese political leaders, including President Jorge Sampaio and Prime Minister António Guterres. He visited Indonesia and Timor-Leste during 20–31 March, contacted several political agents, and met President Suharto in Jakarta (Marker, 2003). These trips afforded Marker the opportunity to engage in in-depth discussions with foreign ministers such as Jaime Gama and Ali Alatas. In addition to establishing ties with important diplomatic and governmental agents in Portugal and

Indonesia, Marker developed relevant contacts with Timorese individuals from various backgrounds and with different sensitivities.

Based on Marker's travel reports, Annan invited foreign ministers from Portugal and Indonesia to meet him in New York on 19 and 20 June, respectively. The main purpose was to present a new format for tripartite negotiations. Both ministers agreed with Annan's proposal that initial negotiations should occur at the diplomatic level before moving to the ministerial level. Dialogue and diplomatic links increased sharply after the fall of President Suharto in March 1998, and President Habibie's subsequent decision to grant Timor-Leste 'extended autonomy' in June 1998. Accordingly, on 18 June, Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas presented the idea of Timor-Leste's autonomy to the UN Secretary-General.

During August, Indonesia consented to engage in three-way discussions regarding special autonomy with the UN and Portugal. Marker (2003) played a pivotal role in negotiating an agreement on a special autonomous regime between Portugal and Indonesia by year-end. He sought to involve Timorese leaders and expand UN participation beyond the tripartite talks. This led to the deepening of the AIETD, as Marker cultivated close ties with key Timorese figures. Consequently, for the first time, the UN consulted Xanana Gusmão, José Ramos Horta, and Bishops Ximenes Belo and Basílio do Nascimento on the proposed autonomy model.

However, these suggestions only came to fruition because of Annan's leadership. Annan played a decisive role, giving new impetus to and reshaping the format of the negotiation process, eventually giving rise to the May Agreement. His role in the post-diplomatic agreement period was also crucial in defining resolutions and ensuring their implementation. Thus, Annan constitutes a prime example of UN leadership and self-legitimation (Von Billerbeck, 2022).

Anan's attitude towards Timor-Leste was very different from that of his predecessors, especially Kurt Waldheim (SG 1972–1981) at the time of the Indonesian military invasion and UNSC resolutions 384 in 1975 and 389 in 1976 (Krieger, 1997). Waldheim adopted a passive attitude, contemporing with the geopolitical interests of the main regional powers and the five permanent members of the SC, limiting it to sending a representative to the territory, which did not fulfil the UN mission (Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation Timor-Leste [CAVR], 2005; Carey and Walsh, 2008). In this period, the SG, his representative, and most diplomats in the UNSC were passive and committed to Indonesian power politics, which allowed for the softening and normalisation of the illegal military invasion.

Although the structural conditions under which Pérez de Cuéllar and Boutros-Ghali⁸ operated were more challenging than Anan's, they merely monitored compliance with the negotiating timetable, addressing reasonable requests from Portugal without directly confronting Indonesia, despite Indonesia's annexation of Timor-Leste being a violation of international law and constituent principles of the UN. However, in the context of the Cold War, political reasons overlapped with the illegality of Indonesian annexation and the failure to comply with the norms of Timor-Leste's self-determination process (Fibiger, 2021; Simpson, 2005; Mendes, 2021). Previous Secretary-Generals limited themselves to letting the game run according to the rules of their era without attempting an inventive exercise to change the model. As a result, neither Cuéllar nor Boutros-Ghali could act as agents of change in the Timor-Leste issue.

This was not the case with Annan. He knew how to take risks and made the necessary decisions at the right time to motivate other actors to follow his normative entrepreneurial

style. Praising Annan for his decision to prioritise the Timorese question at the UN, Marker noted,

Looking back on this sequence of events, I feel my conviction strengthened that without Kofi's initial decision to activate a process of negotiations on East Timor, and not only to keep it alive but to push it constantly forward, the United Nations would not have been able to seize the opportunities presented by the evolving political events in Indonesia. (Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation Timor-Leste [CAVR], 2005: 38)

Richard Holbrooke, American Ambassador to the UN, considered Annan the best UN Secretary-General: an 'international rock star of diplomacy' (Maniatis, 2001) with a truly unusual set of diplomatic skills who had 'a nearly magical ability to move people through his personal charm and gentle strength' (Maniatis, 2001). The Australian UN ambassador, Dauth, similarly emphasised Annan's decisive role in 1999 Timor's crisis,

We were never going to invade Indonesia and the military intervention therefore required an invitation from the Government of Indonesia. It was Kofi Annan who persuaded President Habibie that this was necessary and, I believe, that it was only Kofi Annan who could have done so. (Dauth, 2002: 5)

We cannot understand the relational process of change that led to a solution in the Timorese case without emphasising the role of the agents of change. These agents' practices were decisive in shaping the socialisation, learning, and persuasion of Timor's normative relevance. UN diplomatic agents' significant role in finding an international solution for Timor-Leste was recognised by Jaime Gama, the Portuguese Minister of Foreign Affairs. After signing the Agreement on 5 May 1999, Gama reiterated the work of UN diplomatic agents, asserting:

I recognise in this room Mr. Samuel and Mr. Vendrell. Ambassador Marker was an excellent chief negotiator and created all the conditions for getting this diplomatic accommodation. I also wish to thank the Secretary-General for the impulse he gave himself, abiding by principle regarding the dossier of East Timor. Without his commitment, without his endorsement of a clear task for the United Nations in the world today, we could not have concluded the agreement we have just signed (United Nations, 1999).

Conclusion

The new ideational and normative environment, relationally with the activation of the sense of normative obligation by normative leaders, facilitated the construction of normative relevance in the Timor-Leste question and enabled an international solution based on UN norms.

Normative relevance is a dynamic social construction resulting from the political and relational interplay between hierarchical and normative powers in the international order. Contingent on norms, international orders socialise their actors towards the practices of legitimacy and normative frameworks of international disputes. The construction of normative relevance reflects the ideational and political environment, with enterprising leaders motivated by and motivating feelings of normative obligation to become agents of change.

As the case of Timor demonstrates, there is permanent tension between normative reasons and material power interests in international politics. In international orders predominated by power politics, the scales tend to tip towards material and geopolitical power

interests and less towards normative obligations and the activation of appropriate behaviour. Thus, the relationship between norms and power must be historically located and understood. On one hand, norms and the UN play a role in conditioning and counterbalancing pure power politics and hard power strategies. On the other hand, norms can be used as a source of power legitimisation in the foreign policy strategies of less powerful actors such as Portugal or Timorese resistance. Their normative reasons helped legitimise their foreign policy ideas and soft power strategy in influencing the international community.

Therefore, normative reason is important, particularly when norms result from the Security Council and UN General Assembly resolutions. However, its importance is related to the normative structure of the international order and normative assumptions of entrepreneurial leaders. Thus, norms can become relevant or irrelevant depending on international orders' political and normative contexts and political and diplomatic leaders' socialisation practices of the sense of normative obligation.

In other words, it does not matter if rules or norms are violated, even those supported by international resolutions, if decision-makers do not consider them essential and assume them to be behavioural guides. What matters for normative relevance is the ideational and political environment that frames the situation and the decision-maker's assumption of normative reason. As with the Timor-Leste question, a norm resolution may exist for years before assuming normative relevance and practical effects. Norms must be collectively shared by the international community and assumed by political actors to gain relevance and compliance.

This article demonstrates that despite the traditional power strategies employed by states, the UN's negotiation process is integral to legitimising solutions in international conflicts. This argument highlights the importance of the UN as the institution with the most significant normative legitimacy to create solutions for international disputes.

However, possessing normative reason in an international dispute is not enough in itself, particularly insofar as power politics can neutralise and instrumentalise norms. Even within the UN's institutional framework, power politics and state hierarchies play essential roles. Nevertheless, when structural and agential contexts are conducive, normative reason can contradict the traditional logic of power politics. It may take time, *et pur si muove!*

Finally, it is necessary to emphasise the human factor in international politics. Changes in normative relevance are decisively interrelated with entrepreneurial leaders' practices. The motivational commitment and sense of normative obligation of decision-makers who acted as agents of change in the UN Secretariat were crucial. This article helps to demonstrate that the socialisation, learning, and persuasion of normative relevance are relational processes that co-evolve with practices. In short, norms matter, but their relevance is not independent of the power structure of the international hierarchy, the political and ideational environment and its normative legitimacy structure, or the capacity of their agents of change to assume normative obligation.

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Notes

1. Following Kratochwil, I focus on understanding how concepts operate and impact actions, rather than starting with a specific definition and testing ideas that arise from theoretical generalisations that do not account for contingency and historical reflection. This pragmatic option positively interconnects different ways of theorising in IR (Guzzini, 2013b, 2020) and considers the need for disciplinary relevance beyond the ivory tower (Adler-Nissen, 2015; Mearsheimer and Walt, 2013).
2. General Assembly Resolution 3485 was approved with 72 votes in favour, 10 against, and 43 abstentions. European countries, New Zealand, and the United States abstained. Japan, India, the Philippines, and Thailand opposed the resolution, which condemned Indonesia's invasion and called for the withdrawal of its forces.
3. During negotiations, Prime Minister António Guterres and Foreign Minister Gama asserted they could only accept a solution reflecting the Timorese people's freely expressed choice (Marker, 2003: 73).
4. Alongside Portuguese influence and Jaime Gama's successful visit to Australia, a survey of Timorese public opinion, both within and outside Timor, was crucial. This followed a recommendation by Marker and diplomatic efforts by the UN Secretariat and Portuguese diplomats with the Australian UN Ambassador Penny Wensley and Ambassador McCarthy, under the Core Group framework.
5. As the UN official most dedicated to the East Timor issue, Vendrell convinced Under-Secretary-General Tang Ming-Chao to approve a report on Timor in 1975, published in 1976. He helped produce eight GA resolutions on East Timor from 1976 to 1982 before the issue lost UN focus. Leading the UN Department for Asia and the Pacific from 1993 to 1999, Vendrell played a crucial role in Portugal-Indonesia negotiations on East Timor, first as a senior advisor and later as Deputy Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, resulting in the May 1999 Agreement.
6. From 1992 to 2000, he was pivotal in the Secretary-General's diplomatic efforts on Timor, leading to the 5 May Agreements negotiations. He served as the primary UN liaison with all East Timorese leaders and facilitated five rounds of the All-inclusive Intra-East Timorese Dialogue (1994-1998). In 1999, he played a key role in planning and executing the Popular Consultation for independence and led the Jakarta office of the UN Mission in East Timor (UNAMET).
7. Rafeuddin had a bias against the Timor cause and supported the Indonesian position and the realpolitik thesis of *fait accompli*. In this sense, Rafeuddin constituted an 'antipreneur' of change (Bloomfield, 2016).
8. Boutros-Ghali emphasised the need for a persevering attitude while defending the rights of East Timor. In an interview with *Público* newspaper, he claimed not feeling frustrated despite the meagre results achieved (Boutros-Ghali, Interview in *Público*, 19 December 2000).

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