Getting Indonesia Right

Managing a Security Partnership with a Nonallied Country

By JOHN B. HASEMAN *and* EDUARDO LACHICA

Indonesia's spectacular transformation from the Suharto years to the vibrant democracy of today is one of the great success stories in democratic change in recent history. The change began in May 1998 when—after more than 30 years of the Suharto autocracy—a combination of economic woes, an angry populace, and political pressure from military leaders and civilian cronies forced Suharto to step down. Since then, Indonesia has changed with incredible speed to become the most democratic nation in Southeast Asia.[1]

The results of Indonesia's 2005 and 2009 parliamentary and presidential elections are noteworthy, particularly when compared with the United States, where getting out more than 50 percent of the electorate is considered a "high turnout." As noted by the Indonesia country director of the Asia Foundation:

In 2004, more Indonesians voted in more elections and for more different candidates—and more peacefully—than any other country's citizens, anywhere in the world. In fact, Indonesians actually complained that voter turnout "dropped" from the world's highest in a free society (over 90 percent in the 1999 elections) to about 75 percent in 2004 (still one of the world's highest voter turnout rates). A culture of democracy has not only taken root in Indonesia, but begun to flourish, in ways often not seen in supposedly "mature" democracies.[2]

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Indonesian Defense Forces commander escorts ADM Mullen during arrival ceremony in Jakarta

DOD (Chad J. McNeeley)

The importance to the United States of a strong security relationship with Indonesia is beyond question. Indonesia is one of three littoral states on which America and other trading nations depend for the safety of navigation in the Strait of Malacca. It is a key partner in Southeast Asia in combating terrorism, the trafficking of persons and drugs, and other transnational crimes. Indonesia has returned to the front stage in political leadership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It has also become a voice for moderation in the Middle East, independent from but effectively supportive of U.S. peacemaking efforts.

Since 2005, the United States has sought to rebuild a cooperative relationship with Indonesia's security elements—the Indonesian national police and the Indonesian armed forces (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia* [TNI])—that had been seriously degraded by 15 years of punitive U.S. congressional sanctions. The rebuilding effort began with military-led relief operations after the tragic December 2004 tsunami in Aceh that killed almost 200,000 Indonesians, and was greatly enhanced by the spirit that led to a political solution to the longstanding insurgency in Aceh.

U.S. policy since then has resumed programs to train Indonesian military personnel, has reengaged contacts up to the highest level of government and military leadership, and has broken new ground for cooperation in disaster relief, international peacekeeping, counterterrorism, maritime security, and other areas. But full normalization of the relationship has yet to be achieved because of continued restrictions, capriciously applied, and the demoralizing effect of a new cycle of legislative restrictions on military ties. "We have yet fully to instill trust between our governments," a U.S. diplomat remarked. "Without that trust there is too much potential for misunderstanding."[3]

The Obama administration is fortunate to inherit a security partnership with Indonesia that needs only an extra push to be acclaimed a foreign policy success. It is starting out with some effective working assets. Indonesian officers are returning to U.S. military schools in appreciable numbers, and U.S. officers are enrolled in all of Indonesia's command and staff schools. Intelligence exchanges have been revived. These are encouraging signs that the militaries have started to restore networks of professional friendships with open communication lines that can make seamless interoperation possible. The number of security cooperation events—bilateral and multilateral exercises, official visits, conferences—was well over 100 in 2008, although the pace could slow down in 2009 because of TNI resource limitations.

U.S. assistance is helping the Indonesian national police efforts to transform itself from the nation's least trustworthy public institution to a potential model for security sector reform. The United States has been paid back in many ways, particularly in more effective law enforcement that serves our interests in fighting terrorism, drug trafficking, people smuggling, and other transnational crimes. Still, the Obama administration should not forget how poor and unproductive the relationship had been all through the 1990s and until only a few years ago.

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Shortsighted Sanctions

What began the restoration of effective military relations was the Bush administration's November 2005 waiver of congressional restrictions against U.S. assistance to the TNI. Those sanctions, principally authored by Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont, were intended to punish the Indonesian army for the shooting of defenseless civilians in East Timor in 1991, and for supporting militia violence that swept across the Indonesian province just before and after the August 1999 referendum on its future status sponsored by the United Nations (UN). These measures were intended to assert the primacy of human rights in U.S. foreign policy. However, by the start of the millennium, the embargo had all but lost its relevance. The TNI had already undertaken major self-reforms, which took the military out of politics for the first time in its existence.

DOD (Jerry Morrison)

DOD (Joshua J. Wahl)

Above: U.S. Navy officer and Indonesian armed forces officer speak with patient during medical and dental civic action program

Left: Secretary Gates and Indonesian president meet at presidential palace in Jakarta

At the same time, Indonesia was emerging as the region's most vibrant democracy.

The spanking was aimed principally at the Indonesia army, which was believed responsible for the human rights abuses in East Timor. But the punishment hurt the air force and the navy, which had little involvement in these actions, the most. They were denied replacement parts for their aging fleets of aircraft and ships. This drastic loss of capability was exposed in the horrific consequences of the 2004 Aceh tsunami. For lack of spare parts, the Indonesian air force could not get many of its C–130 transport planes flying again in relief of the disaster survivors.

In the 4 years since the end of the U.S. military embargo, Indonesia on its own volition has stepped up cooperation with the United States on a number of common security concerns. The TNI has returned to international peacekeeping, after almost a decade of virtual inactivity in this field, with the encouragement and financial support of Washington. The TNI is now preparing for its third year of a battalion-size deployment with the UN Interim Force in Lebanon. The Indonesian police is also expanding its contribution to UN peacekeeping, its latest being the dispatch of 140 officers to Darfur. The greatest dividends for the United States have been in the counterterrorism front. Even at the risk of angering Islamic front groups, Indonesian authorities have captured or jailed more than 400 mostly Muslim individuals suspected of terrorist leanings, and all but neutralized the Jemaah Islamiyah extremist group as an imminent danger to Indonesian society and the region.

At the same time, renewed engagement with the TNI is meeting another important objective of U.S. policy: the reform and professionalization of Indonesia's security sector. The gains are more pronounced in the police than in the armed forces because the former, separated from the TNI since 1999–2000, has been more motivated to clean up its image and make use of foreign assistance. One U.S. Department of Justice program is training the police to adopt use-of-force standards that are as high as any observed by Western law enforcement agencies. The TNI lags behind because withdrawing from politics, which it did on its own early in this decade, was the easy part. It would take a government-wide shakeup and more fiscal resources than Jakarta can currently muster to take the further steps of dismantling the army's territorial commands and their built-in sources of off-budget funds. That President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and the parliament have been slow to act suggests that there is less public interest in further high-cost reforms in the military than there is in poverty reduction, job creation, and other more urgent economic issues.

U.S. Air Force (Marilyn C. Holliday)

U.S. Air Force pararescueman trains members of Indonesian air force special forces corps in rescue techniques

High-maintenance Relationship

The Obama national security team should understand first of all that this is not an easy relationship to manage. The President is rarely directly involved in making policy for Indonesia, and the Secretaries of State and Defense are infrequent visitors to the region. This puts most of the burden of stewardship on time-stressed subcabinet and midlevel officials in Washington, who have other responsibilities to look after, and on the civilian and military diplomats in Jakarta who have to put the show together. This is less grand strategy than hands-on enterprise and improvisation at the operational level. To the credit of the U.S. Embassy Country Team in Jakarta, it has improvised well. One of its legacy programs in maritime security is a chain of radar stations along the entire length of the Strait of Malacca and a similar surveillance system for the Makassar Strait. The Country Team got the program going from various pots of money in the State Department and Justice Department, tapping as well into so-called Section 1206 money, named after a provision of the National Defense Authorization Act that allows the Pentagon to use these funds to assist other countries in counterterrorism, stabilization and reconstruction, humanitarian relief, and other nontraditional missions.

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The Country Team had to overcome fierce rivalries between the Indonesian military and the police to make these programs work as Washington intended them. The United States and Indonesia have different priorities when they talk of maritime security. The Indonesian navy wanted some of the radar stations deployed further east so that they could help catch Chinese and Vietnamese fishing fleets poaching in the Arafura and Timor Seas. It took some skillful diplomacy to persuade the navy to accept the Makassar Strait locations, where they can watch out for pirates, drug-runners, and the movement of terrorists between Indonesia and the Philippines.

Winning Over the Nonaligned

The challenge for the Obama administration is the same one that the Bush administration took on: how to make willing and effective security partners of nonallied countries that are nevertheless friendly and capable of acting in support of U.S. objectives. This in essence defines what the United States should do to achieve its security objectives in Southeast Asia—and is an example for pursuit of security objectives elsewhere in the world.

All but two ASEAN members are nonallied countries whose regard for the United States ranges from friendly to much less so. Singapore is arguably now the most valuable of the near-allies, and the United States should

be thankful that this tiny but economically muscular island state has come aboard virtually on its own volition. Indonesia is a harder sell, but the Bush administration made a bet that before too long, this country could become the region's unquestioned leader and its strongest voice for democratic governance. The Obama administration should follow up with robust efforts to improve upon the relationship.

A little-noticed aspect of the Bush diplomacy was its play for the active support of key members of the community of nonaligned nations. Indonesia, of course, is no longer the strident voice of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) that it was in Sukarno's time; nor does the NAM have anything close to the influence it had during the Cold War, when it could affect the balance of power between the Western allies and the Soviet bloc. Yet in the changed landscape of the early 2000s, the Bush administration recognized the increasing weight of the movement's two most prominent democracies, India and Indonesia, in determining questions of peace and stability in their respective regions. The difference in the way that the United States has behaved toward its treaty and nontreaty partners has blurred to some degree, sometimes to the irritation of its treaty allies.

It is hard to imagine President Obama, having spent 4 years of his childhood in Jakarta, being anything but inclined to make that bet his own. He can learn from the previous administration's experience in managing a nontreaty security relationship. The Bush team did not try to impose its wishes on Indonesia, for that would not have worked in any case. It was more successful allowing Indonesia to pursue its "free and active" foreign policy in directions where the interests of the two countries intersect or at least do not collide. For this kind of diplomacy, success is measured not so much in what Indonesia does but what it does not do.

Despite strong public opinion against America's conduct of the Iraq War or its moves to sanction Iran on charges of nuclear proliferation, Indonesia did not use its nonpermanent seat in the UN Security Council to block either of these actions. On the issue of pressuring Burma into restoring the rights of democratic opponents, Indonesia actually stood closer to the U.S. position than to that of many of its fellow ASEAN members. It was no surprise President Yudhoyono called President Bush "one of the most pro-Indonesian American presidents in the history of our bilateral relations." Even though they did not always agree, the Indonesian president said in Washington in November 2008 that the two leaders sought to "advance our relations, seek new opportunities and resolve outstanding issues with a constructive spirit."[4]

In Southeast Asia, the United States already treats Indonesia on a par with, if not in some respects better than, its two treaty allies, the Philippines and Thailand. In terms of U.S. economic and security assistance in fiscal year 2008, Indonesia received a good deal more ($152 million) than either of the two U.S. allies. Indonesia's lion's share can be justified by the sheer size of its population and its comparative needs alone, but it probably reflects other geopolitical calculations as well.

Both the Philippine and Thai alliances are showing their age (the first dates back to just after World War II and the second to the Vietnam War), and how much more value the United States can wring from them is a legitimate question. Both allies now suffer from severe domestic political problems: Thailand from a long-running social and political schism between pro- and anti-government factions, and the Philippines from successive challenges to the legitimacy of its president. Both countries have suffered from a series of military coups or coup threats. By contrast, the Indonesian partnership is fresher, its full potential is yet to be tapped, and there has never been even the hint of a military coup in Indonesia. The major security projects of the day—fighting political and religious extremism, creating dependable regional security architecture, and proving that Islam and democracy can profitably coexist—make Indonesia as valuable a partner for the United States as any of its treaty allies in Southeast Asia.

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Marine instructs troops from participating nations, including Indonesia, on airfield security during exercise Cobra Gold, Thailand

U.S. Marine Corps (Christopher J. Gallagher)

Partnership of Respectful Equals

The U.S.-Indonesia security partnership will work optimally only if it is conducted on the basis of mutual respect and equality. U.S. policy should continue to champion human rights, but it should recognize and give credit for Indonesia's efforts to improve on its record. With Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, renditions, and tragic violence against civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan on its own record, how can the United States hector other countries on proper military behavior with a straight face? It is true that the question of TNI accountability for the East Timor violence remains unsettled judicially. It is also a historical fact that this tragedy is now a full decade in the past. The Indonesia–Timor Leste commission that investigated the matter found the Indonesian military responsible but had no authority to prosecute the culpable individuals. But the

commission's final report clearly shows the desire of both countries to move on to other concerns. There may be no better alternative for U.S. policymakers but to do likewise.

For the relationship to succeed, some Indonesian elites have to outgrow their prickly nationalism and paranoid attitudes toward Western powers. A report that the Indonesia Attorney General's Office was investigating the publication of Tim Weiner's Pulitzer Prize–winning Central Intelligence Agency history on suspicion that it is "part of a foreign conspiracy" to destabilize the country raises questions about the political maturity of some of Jakarta's bureaucrats. Indonesia's history explains a good deal about why it is still a psychologically fragile and economically insecure country. The bright spot here is that Indonesia also has a modernizing elite—epitomized by President Yudhoyono and his immediate political family. To them, Indonesia is no longer a poor, victimized country but a potentially strong one with an obligation to pull its weight in the community of nations.

If human rights may be yesterday's news, so may be terrorism as the defining factor in U.S. Indonesia policy. It is not that the terrorism threat has been vanquished; the recent Mumbai terror attacks warn against complacency. But Jakarta's attention, like that of other Southeast Asian capitals, is turning to other nontraditional threats such as food security, public health security, and energy security, or economic or humanitarian security in general. This should be a cue for the United States to align its security programs more closely to the region's security concerns.

Economic Security

The Bush administration had already begun to shift some resources to other nontraditional missions such as natural disaster preparedness, resources protection, and, as mentioned above, maritime security and international peacekeeping. The new team would do well to continue the work of capacity-building in these fields. There are multiple agencies involved in the resources protection mission, including the army, navy, and maritime and fisheries department. This mission is primarily of a domestic nature but one aspect of it—illegal logging—has international ramifications and has drawn the attention and support of U.S. environmental groups. A U.S. program strengthening enforcement of laws and regulations against illegal logging could mitigate the country's economic losses as well as improve the capabilities of its law enforcement services. It also is likely to gain the support of U.S. environmental advocacy groups and their supporters in Congress.

The U.S. Congress should see to it that programs of high strategic value started in the Bush administration—the maritime surveillance system, for example—are sustained through continued funding. The drawing of the Pentagon's Section 1206 funds as a means of avoiding possible scrutiny by unsupportive congressional appropriators might have been justified in a few urgent cases, but there is no conceivable need for gaming the system like this with both Congress and the executive branch in Democratic hands. The next requests for security assistance should be made through conventional programs such as Foreign Military Financing or Foreign Military Sales. A transparent process of presenting and defending these programs in open congressional hearings will be healthy for the relationship.

The enormous strain on U.S. fiscal resources could cause sharp across-the-board cuts in foreign assistance budgets. But that would not necessarily constrain continued engagement with Indonesia. Ideally, it should be people-intensive rather than dependent on large amounts of foreign aid. Doubling the amount of International Military Education and Training grants for the TNI, for instance, would cost only $1.5 million, but could have a far greater return in terms of the quality of the military relationship. Some of the best ideas for solidifying the relationship, such as bilateral "retreats" for foreign affairs and defense legislators from both sides, are easily affordable. Above all, the United States needs more mission-dedicated, language-capable civilian and military diplomats working in the field.

Indonesia has signed strategic partnership agreements with nearly a dozen countries including Russia, China, Australia, Japan, Pakistan, South Korea, Poland, and Germany, but has yet to sign one with the United States. However, Indonesia's "all-direction diplomacy" has not been an unnecessary burden for the United States. The fact that Australia is high up on that list of partnerships should give the United States comfort. The Australians are prepared to provide Indonesia with far higher levels of foreign assistance than the United States. Much of this assistance is in educational exchanges, environmental projects, and other areas that Washington would equally support if it had the appropriations for it.

Russia's reemergence as a major arms supplier will be of little consequence while Indonesia continues to defer the acquisition of major weapons systems. China's promise of sharing defense technology has so far produced only a single joint rocket development project of little utility to TNI's nontraditional missions. Defense Minister Juwono Sudarsono's priorities of improving multipurpose airlift and sealift leave the door open for the United States to continue to upgrade Indonesia's fleet of C–130 transport planes. The United States can also assert its strength in communications and defense electronics in this still-limited arms market.

President Yudhoyono is eager to start a dialogue with the Obama administration. In his November 2008 Washington speech on U.S.-Indonesian relations, President Yudhoyono left a strong hint of what he thinks a U.S.-Indonesia strategic partnership should be: It has to be based on an "equal partnership and common interest . . . a force for peace, stability and cooperation in the international system. And it has to respect Indonesia's independent and active foreign policy, where there is always room for both sides to agree to disagree."[5] The Obama administration can hardly disagree with any of these terms; these are fully compatible with the President's own aspirations. During her February 2009 visit to Jakarta, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton confirmed U.S. agreement with President Yudhoyono's call for a "comprehensive partnership" between the two countries. The administration could turn this relationship into an early foreign policy success if it approaches Indonesia with an open mind and a willingness to be creative. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] Walter Lohman, "Guidelines for U.S. Policy in Southeast Asia," Backgrounder #2017 (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, March 20, 2007).

[2] Douglas E. Ramage, Representative to Indonesia and Malaysia, The Asia Foundation, statement to the Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, U.S. House of Representatives, March 10, 2005, available at <http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/intlrel/hfa99826.000/hfa99826_0f.htm>.

[3] Interview, Jakarta, July 2, 2008.

[4] President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, "Indonesia and America: A 21st-Century Partnership," speech delivered to U.S.-Indonesia Society luncheon, Washington, DC, November 14, 2008.

[5] Ibid.