



Obama welcomes Jokowi: what for? by Donald K. Emmerson

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Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”) is in the United States for his first-ever presidential visit. What, briefly, can be said about this opportunity to strengthen relations between the two countries?

Indonesia has a “comprehensive strategic partnership” with China, but a merely “comprehensive partnership” with the United States. Words matter. Jokowi’s visit is expected to yield a memorandum of understanding on maritime security cooperation between Indonesia and the United States, including provisions for US assistance to raise Indonesia’s capacity to manage its maritime domain. Considering China’s ambitions for the South China Sea and the dent in Indonesia’s Exclusive Economic Zone east of Natuna caused by China’s “nine-dash line,” the memorandum will have “strategic” significance. In recognition, the “comprehensive” relationship between the US and Indonesia should be jointly acknowledged as being “strategic” as well.

One can also hope that the main, economic purpose of the trip – increasing US investment in Indonesia – can be met, preferably with assurance and evidence that Jokowi’s administration is committed to economic reforms. In the context of such reforms, including robust steps against corruption, the Americans should discuss with their Indonesian counterparts the nature and status of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which – if it is ratified – Indonesia may someday be able to join. The visitors should also be assured that the US would welcome China’s participation if and when it can accept the agreement’s rules.

A closed-door discussion should also explore how Jokowi and his colleagues would regard an effort by the US to cross an extra-legally drawn 12-nautical-mile perimeter around a selected land feature under Beijing’s control in the South China Sea. The feature would have been augmented and equipped by China through reclamation and construction, but would not in its original state have broken the sea’s surface even at low tide. Therefore it would not qualify for a 12-nm perimeter under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Beyond crossing “red lines” that are not legally red, the conversation with Jokowi and his colleagues should also explore Indonesian views across the full range of issues and choices regarding the situation in the South China Sea. The two governments need to brainstorm possible approaches, initiatives, and solutions that do not rely on the naïve hope of some Indonesians that China will someday agree to a

meaningful and enforceable Code of Conduct whose provisions will somehow stop Beijing from turning the maritime core of Southeast Asia – its heartwater – into a South Chinese Lake.

Jokowi’s business-focused meetings in Silicon Valley and the economic opportunities they could open are distinctive and important. They should help to counter the invidiously perceived specialization of roles whereby Indonesia makes security with the US but makes money with China. The visit has other aspects and priorities of course. But both economic and strategic cooperation should be foremost.

The president and his entourage should return to Jakarta reassured that Obama’s “rebalance” toward Southeast Asia has not been back-burnered by Iraq, Syria, Ukraine, or the antics of Donald Trump. Last but not least, one can hope that the two presidents will announce a regular bilateral track two (or track 1.5) dialogue that can serve to reduce bilateral misunderstandings, encourage candor, and help to yield productive amity between Indonesia and the United States – the largest democracies, respectively, in Southeast Asia and the Americas.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.