



Toward a True Strategic Partnership with Indonesia

by Alphonse F. La Porta

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[In PacNet #54 of October 23, 2008, Dr. Ann Marie Murphy made the case for the recognition of Indonesia's democratic credentials, though "daunting challenges" remain. Alphonse F. La Porta, retired diplomat and former president of the United States-Indonesia Society, argues for a more mature and deeper "strategic relationship" with this linchpin of Southeast Asia.]

Indonesia, surprisingly to many observers, is a successful Muslim-majority democracy that would resist a return to autocracy. As we approach the turn of administrations in Washington, effective United States approaches to the Muslim world and Asian regionalism call for a deeper relationship with Indonesia.

Indonesia, too often overlooked in the panoply of U.S. policy interests, is becoming indispensable to our key regional objectives, including:

- Restoring U.S. credibility in Indonesian and Southeast Asian public opinion.
- Combating extremism through education and civil society development.
- Developing a comprehensive maritime security system for Southeast Asia; military cooperation with ASEAN is a longer term objective.
- Increasing U.S. investment and mutually beneficial trade.
- Promoting Asian regional integration with the United States as the "indispensable partner."

U.S. interests in Indonesia and Southeast Asia have suffered since the early 1990s due to reductions in diplomatic presence and public diplomacy, insufficient priority given to trade and investment, and underpowered leadership in regional institutions. Especially in light of the current global financial crisis, economic progress is crucial to Indonesia's continued democratization and major investment is needed to create jobs and achieve more balanced social development. The new administration also must recognize that relations with the Indonesian military are central to a meaningful strategic relationship and the armed forces (TNI) are in desperate need of modernization and professionalism. We must also bear in mind that Indonesian nationalism occasionally is problematical for the United States, but can be taken into account through closer dialogue and education.

To initiate a genuine strategic relationship, **President Obama should visit Jakarta on his first Asian trip** to establish a personal relationship with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and meet with next-generation Indonesian leaders. A comprehensive U.S. approach in the following areas is justified, indeed overdue:

Public Diplomacy: A public-relations blitz is needed to restore the U.S. image, although there is still respect for American values and our open society. The Fulbright program (especially for PhD study) should be doubled immediately, also actively recruiting U.S. scholars for research and teaching in Indonesia. Full-service libraries in major cities should be reopened, the number of "American Corners" in Islamic institutions and universities should be increased, new "Information Kiosks" for studying English in Islamic schools and other learning centers should be established, and book shipments should receive funding. Educational innovation projects should be extended to middle and secondary schools and there should be an energetic program to fund partnerships between Indonesian and U.S. universities. Educational advisory centers in major urban centers to promote study in the U.S. should be reestablished. And Indonesia should be removed from special watch lists for student and exchange visitors.

Political: The new U.S. president should initiate a public-private Leadership Forum to regularly bring together senior leaders and opinion-makers. We should step up support for reforms in the civil service, the courts and legal system, and the armed forces. Efforts to promote the reform of Parliament (DPR) and political parties should be expanded, while relations between the DPR and Congress should be enhanced through bilateral "retreats" for key foreign affairs and defense legislators on both sides, orientation visits to Washington for new parliamentarians elected next year, and systematically engaging rising leaders on the provincial and local levels.

Defense: The U.S. should build a near-ally relationship, but without overblown rhetoric and expectations. Measures should include increased U.S. assistance for defense reform, professional training, equipment upgrades, and Indonesia's new national defense university. The U.S. should also support an advisory project to extend the military command and control system to the Ministry of Defense and Office of the President, together with establishing an NSC "cell" to coordinate policy issues, disaster mitigation, and security operations. Indonesian control of their archipelagic space for natural resources protection and law enforcement should be stressed. The target for FMF and IMET funding to support these activities should be to reach \$300 million per year by the end of President Yudhoyono's next term in 2013, while police assistance should be expedited through a special training mission. Human rights training should be included at all

levels and, for their part, the Indonesians should commit to re-address past human rights abuses in the National Human Rights Commission.

Foreign Affairs: Although Indonesia's term on the UN Security Council expires soon, closer relationships at the top of our foreign policy establishments are needed to reinforce mutual understanding. Frequent meetings on the presidential level should continue and structured policy dialogues with the foreign minister and his chief advisors should be held semi-annually. Information-sharing on key international issues should be enhanced.

Economic and Social Affairs: Though benefiting from superlative macroeconomic management under Economic Coordinating Minister/Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati and Central Bank Gov. Boediono, economic nationalism and protectionism have constrained regional economic and trade integration, infrastructure development, and external investment. A Center for Indonesian Studies should be established in Washington, with U.S. "seed money," to supply independent opinions on priority financial, development and public sector management issues. The Millennium Challenge compact process and FTA negotiations should be initiated next year to reflect the new, closer relationship, and in social affairs, support should be given to grassroots public health and environment programs and training for local officials.

A true strategic partnership is more than assistance and deeds. The new U.S. administration will have early opportunities to demonstrate interest in Indonesia and the ASEAN region. Indonesia should be incorporated more fully on a mutually productive and mature basis into the thinking and plans of the United States. The inauguration of the new administration in Washington, with presidential and parliamentary elections coming up in Indonesia later in 2009, is a long-awaited opportunity not to be neglected.

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