

Clinton Prelude: What Next With Southeast Asia?

by Bronson Percival

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Indonesia's inclusion in Secretary Clinton's February trip to Asia symbolizes renewed U.S. attention to Southeast Asia. Her visit was the prelude to President Obama's anticipated return to Indonesia in November during the APEC Leaders' Meeting. Until then, both Washington and Jakarta will be searching for ways to inject substance into a newly declared bilateral "strategic partnership."

The Clinton visit goes a long way toward overcoming an ambivalent, and often sour, public atmosphere inherited from the Bush years. In those years, Southeast Asians were wary of Washington's episodic high-level attention and often offended by the Bush administration's perceived unilateral attitudes. At the same time, dense trade and investment links and success in managing such transnational threats as terrorism provided a foundation for better ties.

Visionaries see a golden opportunity for the Obama administration to transform the U.S. relationship with Indonesia in much the same way that the Bush administration revamped U.S.-India ties. Clinton quickly picked low-hanging fruit by:

- Treating democratic Indonesia, the world's largest predominantly Muslim state, as one of Asia's rising states.
- Indicating U.S. interest in signing ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), an innocuous document enshrining ASEAN's peaceful norms that has already been signed by China, Japan, and Australia.
- Pledging to regularly attend the annual ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) ministerial in Southeast Asia.
- Proposing cooperation on climate change and the return of the U.S. Peace Corps to Indonesia, as well as indicating tactical flexibility in pressing for greater respect for human rights in Burma.

Newly energized government bureaucracies can be expected to work hard to fill in the "strategic partnership" before President Obama visits Southeast Asia for the APEC meeting in November. During the Bush administration and away from the floodlights, the lower levels of the U.S. government quietly and successfully cooperated with their Southeast Asia counterparts to suppress terrorism, improve maritime security, and respond to humanitarian disasters. To this record are now likely to be added – with Indonesia – initiatives on climate change, food security, and energy, as well as a concerted effort to remove irritants to expanded

security cooperation. The U.S. will also continue to publicly stress the president's commitment in his inaugural address to treat the Muslim world with respect.

However, the potential for further cooperation is constrained by several hurdles:

- First, domestic political conditions, including elections, in several Southeast Asian states will limit their receptivity to grand initiatives in the next year.
- Second, though Southeast Asian elites have yet to consistently blame the U.S. for the global financial crisis, tensions in trade relations with Asia's export-oriented economies are inevitable. Over half of China's unsustainable trade surplus with the U.S. is composed of components first imported into China from other parts of Asia, including Southeast Asia. Although Indonesia is weathering the economic storm better than its neighbors, elections and recessions could lead to nationalistic economic policies.
- Third, U.S.-Southeast Asian differences have as much to do with how to accomplish similar objectives as they do with goals. The Obama administration has already begun to modify its predecessor's preference for coalitions of the willing over multilateral organizations. However, no U.S. administration will share Southeast Asians' commitment to ASEAN or more broadly to Asian regionalism.
- Fourth, Indonesia, with more than 40 percent of Southeast Asia's 600 million people, considers itself the "natural leader" of the region. However, resentment among America's other allies and friends in the region could grow if the U.S. and Indonesia were perceived to be constructing an informal alliance to dominate the region.
- Finally, Southeast Asians may not take full advantage of their new opportunities to reach out to the U.S., in part because many continue to cling to outdated assumptions about American patronage when the U.S. is looking for partnerships.

President Obama's election and Secretary Clinton's visit to Indonesia have improved America's image in Southeast Asia. 2009 is likely to prove a particularly productive year as Washington weaves denser ties with the region's predominant state. But it is not clear that Jakarta and Washington share the same vision for the future of their relationship. Neither is there evidence that the American government has yet thought through how new ties with Indonesia can contribute to wider U.S. goals in Asia and, perhaps, the Muslim world. Whatever the answers to these broad questions may be, history teaches us that consolidating American – Southeast Asian ties will require sustained attention beyond 2009.