

A New Era In U.S.-Indonesia Relations

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Hillary Clinton deserves credit for making Indonesia the second country she visited as secretary of State. Indonesia may be the world's fourth most populous country, third largest democracy, and home to the world's largest community of Muslims, but it is also the most important country Americans know virtually nothing about. Clinton's visit sends an early signal to Jakarta that Washington recognizes Indonesia's growing international clout and builds a firm foundation for future cooperation.

Clinton's trip had multiple goals: to highlight the example Indonesia's transition to democracy sets for the broader Muslim world; to reinforce U.S. interest in Southeast Asia by visiting the Secretariat of the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN) and to lay the foundation for a strategic partnership with Indonesia. Indonesian officials welcomed U.S. attention to their country and recognition of its achievements over the past decade.

Much of the commentary on Clinton's visit has focused on the example that Indonesia sets as a political democracy in a majority Muslim nation. Clinton praised Indonesia's political transformation for illustrating that "Islam, democracy and modernity cannot only coexist but thrive together." Such statements ignore Indonesia's religious pluralism. Yes, Indonesia is home to the world's largest community of Muslims. 88 percent of its 245 million people profess the Islamic faith, which means that Islam has more adherents in Indonesia than in all Arab states combined. But it is not an Islamic state. Indonesia recognizes Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism as official religions. Most Americans are surprised to learn that Christmas and Good Friday are national holidays.

Clinton noted that Indonesia could help the Obama administration by serving as a bridge to the Muslim world. Many Indonesians believe that their experience with economic development, political reform, and Islamic terrorism gives it the authority to speak to the challenges facing the Islamic community such as poverty, oppression, and "Islamophobia." In a speech in Saudi Arabia, Indonesian President Yudhoyono stressed that Islam was once not only a religion of peace, but also one of progress. He argued that that Muslims should respond to current challenges by embracing technology, modernity, and a culture of excellence. U.S. interests are clearly served when the leader of the world's largest Muslim country makes such statements. Indonesia, however, has

never played a large role in the broader Islamic world, and many Arabs view Indonesians as second-class Muslims. Whether Indonesia can influence its Islamic brethren remains to be seen.

Divergent stances toward Middle East peace also complicate Indonesia's ability to serve as a bridge to the Muslim world. The U.S. supported Israel's 2006 war against Lebanon and its recent invasion of Gaza; Indonesia loudly condemned both. In Jakarta, Clinton acknowledged Indonesian anger over the actions in Gaza. She stated that the Obama administration favored a two-state solution to the crises and would work hard to resolve what she termed a painful and difficult issue. Many Indonesians have high hopes that the Obama administration will move away from what they viewed as the Bush administration's knee-jerk support of Israel and adopt a more even-handed approach. This may reduce tensions between Washington and Jakarta, but it will remain a thorn in the relationship until some comprehensive solution is reached.

Indonesia has also taken steps to promote democracy abroad. It insisted that a commitment to democracy and human rights be included in the ASEAN Charter. Jakarta has pressured the Burmese junta, albeit unsuccessfully, to reform politically. In December 2008, Indonesia launched the Bali Democracy Forum, which will bring together over 30 Asian countries for annual meetings to share experience and work out best practices on political reform.

While a boon to U.S. interests, democracy promotion Indonesian style differs greatly from its U.S. counterpart. Most Americans have never lived under anything but a democratic system, so democracy promotion is often an ideological crusade by people who lack an appreciation of the difficulties involved in building viable democratic regimes. Indonesians, in contrast, lived through decades of authoritarianism before embarking on a transition to democracy in 1998. Indonesia's efforts to promote democracy, therefore, are based not only on ideology, but also on a pragmatic appreciation of the benefits. Many Indonesian diplomats claim that what gives their democracy promotion efforts credibility is their ability to tell others, "if we can do it with all of our problems, you can do it too."

Clinton's trip to Indonesia also underscores the Obama administration's intention to pay more attention to Southeast Asia. In Jakarta, Clinton visited the ASEAN Secretariat – the first by a U.S. secretary of State. Her announcement that the U.S. would begin the process of signing ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, the organization's regional code of conduct, was widely welcomed in Asia. Ratification of the treaty, however, must be approved by the U.S. Senate, and it is far from clear whether that support will be forthcoming.

The U.S. and Indonesia both signaled a desire to forge a “comprehensive partnership” that would expand and deepen all aspects of the bilateral relationship and create a framework to advance common interests such as environmental protection, climate change, trade and investment, democracy, health, education, counterterrorism, and regional security issues. Precisely how this might evolve is unclear. Despite strong Indonesian opposition to the Bush administration’s military invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, relations improved dramatically during Bush’s second term. Washington lifted the military embargo against Indonesia, extended \$157 million of educational aid, rescinded the travel ban, and supported the Aceh Peace Process. Officials on both sides agree that U.S.-Indonesian relations are the best they have been in decades.

In a December 2008 speech in Washington, President Yudhoyono called for a “strategic partnership” with the U.S., but Indonesian officials have backed away from this term in favor of “comprehensive partnership.” Indonesians remember with gratitude U.S. relief efforts in the wake of the devastating 2004 tsunami. U.S. restrictions on military to military relations and on sales of equipment in earlier years, however, have created a perception among Indonesian Defense officials that the U.S. is unreliable and made them wary of over-dependence on the U.S. as a supplier of military equipment. Moreover, Indonesians are staunchly nationalist, guard their national sovereignty jealously and would never permit foreign military bases on Indonesian soil. These factors place limits on future security cooperation.

Environmental concerns, particularly climate change, are issues that both sides see as a basis for strategic cooperation. Indonesia is an archipelagic state that has lost a number of its 17,000 islands to climate change and is one of the world’s largest emitters of greenhouse gases due to deforestation. But there are significant domestic obstacles in both countries to environmental cooperation. For Indonesia, grappling effectively with deforestation will entail cracking down on illegal logging and plantation building, both of which are backed by powerful interests. The Obama administration will likely face significant hurdles attempting to secure congressional support for his environmental initiatives. In the absence of significant domestic support, it is difficult to envision how the U.S. and Indonesia can embark on ambitious cooperation on environmental issues.

Barack Obama is widely popular in Indonesia, and his inauguration has created a new opening for U.S.-Indonesian relations. This is not only because he lived in Indonesia as child, but also because of what his election signals about the U.S. An America willing to elect a man whose father was a Muslim immigrant from Africa and who had an Indonesian stepfather is a country tolerant of diversity and one that lives up to the ideals of equal opportunity it espouses abroad. It is a country that Indonesians can identify with.

Hillary Clinton was wise to seize the opportunity Obama’s election created to enhance relations with Indonesia, despite the obstacles already discussed. What makes Indonesia a unique international actor is its membership in a number of important global communities: it resides physically in Asia but is part of the broader Muslim world, the developing world, and the community of democracies. Its ability to navigate between

these important constituencies in the service of international peace and prosperity makes Indonesia a potentially valuable international player. American attention to Indonesia is long overdue.