

Anticipating Obama's visit to Indonesia and Australia

By Andrew MacIntyre

Andrew MacIntyre (andrew.macintyre@anu.edu.au) is Dean of the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University. This article originally appeared in the East Asia Forum [<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/>].

Barack Obama's upcoming visit to Indonesia and Australia is likely to be one of the less difficult and more gratifying international missions he undertakes this year. But along with the surges of goodwill that will greet him in both countries, there will also be opportunities – in partnership with Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Kevin Rudd – to advance significant common causes in the region and globally. And Yudhoyono's separate bilateral visit to Canberra the week before gives added weight to the moment.

With climate change sliding down the agenda in all three countries for now, the big issue on which the three leaders will find common cause is the G20. A much more difficult issue – but important in different ways for each of them – is the challenge posed by China's continued rise. Also likely to flow through the visits will be consideration of the need for movement to enhance regional frameworks for multilateral cooperation.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this trip is the “diplomatic dots” it invites us to connect. At least at this moment in history, there is potential for these three countries to begin coordinating their efforts in some policy areas. This is not a possibility that could have been given much serious attention previously.

The Obama visit to Indonesia has unusually strong symbolic qualities: America's first black president meeting Indonesia's first democratically elected president. In Indonesia the trip is being billed as *pulang kampung* or visiting back home by Obama. This will be the most salient visit for ordinary Indonesians by any international leader in living memory. It will also be the longest visit any US president has made to Indonesia in decades.

Obama will want to bag some real gains to justify the political risk of being away from Washington while the very important health care debate comes to a head. The emphasis will be on forging a new comprehensive partnership. This is good packaging. It plays to Indonesia's desire to move up a level in world affairs – to get beyond aid and development assistance. It also plays to Washington's interest in forging stronger ties with key Asian countries in response to Beijing's expanding influence.

What are the prospects for leveraging substantive results from the Jakarta-Washington relationship? Indonesia has made significant progress on the counter-terrorism front for some years. Can it now rise to a new level in the spheres of

international economics and even international security more broadly?

The shared international economic agenda relates principally to the G20. Indonesia (like Australia) can't quite believe its good fortune at being part of the G20. Under Yudhoyono's liberal internationalist leadership, Jakarta is strongly motivated to support all moves to strengthen the G20. But Indonesia ranks low among the 20 in terms of its ability to deliver consequential action. All the more so when the president and his otherwise highly capable team of top economic aides are deeply enmeshed in a murky political crisis about a bank bailout. On the international economic front, rather than any direct policy action, the greatest value Jakarta that can offer Washington may be coordinated rhetorical support at the G20 summit in Seoul later this year.

Surprisingly, there may be greater gains to be had from cooperation in the security sphere. For more than a decade, the Leahy Act, prohibiting the US from training military units with a history of human rights abuse, has meant that security cooperation with Indonesia has been limited to police-based counter-terrorism efforts. Both sides now want to move beyond this. Driven by China's growing regional weight, Obama seems prepared to go further than Bush in finding ways to restart military-to-military engagement. There are signs that the Obama administration may seek to re-establish training programs with Indonesia's controversial elite commando unit, *Kopassus*, by engaging with younger officers who could not have participated in past abuses.

If so, this will be a significant change. While much of the fanfare of the visit will focus on the human interest side of Obama's visit and major new US investment in educational and scholarship programs to help Indonesians study in the United States, the beginnings of a resumption of military cooperation between Jakarta and Washington may prove to be the most significant durable outcome of the visit.

The Washington-Canberra relationship is more stable and familiar. Indeed, a substantial component of the visit is routine alliance maintenance. The Obama-Rudd relationship seems to have become as close and dependable as the Bush-Howard relationship before it. But what Obama would most like from Rudd – an expanded and regional leadership role for Australian troops in Afghanistan – seems to be out of the question, especially with the upcoming Australian election. On the economic agenda of the G20, as earlier on climate change issues in the lead-up to the Copenhagen summit, senior Australian and US officials are working very closely. But there is such strong alignment between Canberra and Washington on these issues at the moment, that this is more a matter of fine-tuning than major breakthrough.

On security issues, as Chinese observers have recognized faster than most others, Rudd's much-discussed linguistic

abilities conceal somewhat hawkish instincts. At the same time as welcoming China's deepening engagement with the international economy and its assumption of increasingly global significance, in common with a number of governments in Asia, Canberra is keen to see Washington renew its regional engagement. And here, too, interests seem likely to align.

Rudd remains strongly committed to strengthening the institutional framework for regional cooperation in Asia. Explicit support from Washington would be helpful now in accelerating this cause. While the precise institutional form for achieving this outcome remains an open question, anything that enhances the US ability to advance its core interests in Asia is likely to find favor with Obama.

An upgrading of one or more of the existing pan-regional institutions is an attainable option for advancing this. Watch for coordinated advocacy from Obama, Yudhoyono, and Rudd as an outcome of this flurry of visits in a fortnight's time.