



**TIME TO TAKE THE US-INDONESIA
STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP
SERIOUSLY**

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At a time when democracy is in retreat and China is ascendant, the strategic partnership between the United States and Indonesia should be flourishing.

The world's second and third largest democracies, each set to be an economic dynamo of the 21st Century, share converging interests in upholding an agreed upon set of rules that seek to treat countries as equals, protect sovereignty, and provide a counterpoise to those who would settle their disputes through coercion and threats of force.

For Presidents Joko “Jokowi” Widodo and Donald Trump to realize a truly comprehensive and strategic partnership over the next decade, these two Pacific powers will need to craft an inspiring vision that acknowledges their shared history and ideals, create more concrete proposals for collaborative projects, and instill a greater sense of urgency to US-Indonesia relations.

There is no better time than the present to focus on a shared strategy for transforming the bilateral relationship, as 2019 marks 70 years of diplomatic relations between the United States and the independent Republic of Indonesia. When Jokowi visits the US in September, the two leaders should undertake three steps, the first of which should be to highlight the partnership's historic origins, which most Americans and Indonesians are unaware of.

1. Articulate an inspiring vision evocative of shared history and ideals

The US decision to support Indonesian independence from colonial Dutch rule was tied to global geopolitical considerations in the aftermath of World War II. The US contributed substantially to the negotiations by providing the warship *USS Renville* as a politically neutral location for the United Nations Security Council-backed talks in Jakarta.

But Washington's intervention was also influenced by pragmatic economic and strategic considerations. This mix of geopolitical concern and economic and political pragmatism is precisely what is needed to take contemporary US-Indonesia relations to a new level of cooperation.

Beyond investing in a wider appreciation of history, the Trump and Widodo administrations should embrace democracy at a time when authoritarianism is on the rise and representative governance is particularly vulnerable in Southeast Asia. The recent democratic elections in Indonesia and India suggest some of the largest and most thriving economies are committed to free and fair elections in which individual expression is diligently protected. Support for democracy can come in many varieties, but both government officials and civil society – if given the resources – have vital roles to play in ensuring that this democratic legacy is maintained.

The two leaders should challenge their administrations, business communities, and societies to augment existing cooperation with new proposals.

2. Advance concrete proposals for cooperation

The bilateral relationship stands to benefit from more innovative collaborations between both the public and private sector. Realizing mutually beneficial economic opportunities, and showcasing tangible progress toward achieving them, should be the centerpiece of US-Indonesia relations. Expanding opportunities for Indonesians and Americans to deepen their understanding of one another through study and training, encouraging mutually prosperous fair trade and investment, and erecting new institutions of cooperation through public-private

partnerships will ensure that US-Indonesia relations ascend to the next level of strategic cooperation.

The Trump administration is keen to unleash greater private-sector involvement in Indonesia's development. It is not a lack of capital, but a lack of imagination that is holding back a new consortium of public and private partners from showcasing the growing economic opportunities between these two great Pacific countries. Imagine coupling investments in infrastructure with education and training, in sectors that generate reciprocal growth that investors from both countries can augment.

Cooperation can be facilitated by deploying the United States' best and brightest diplomatic talent to Indonesia. Ambassador Sung Kim, who has represented the United States in Manila during President Rodrigo Duterte's administration, will be transferring to Jakarta to pick up where Ambassador Joseph Donovan has left off. Capable leadership from experienced diplomats like Kim and Donovan will ensure that proposals are implemented in a timely and competent manner and reach a broader public audience.

3. Set 2030 as a deadline for strengthened relations

A rising Indonesia will naturally begin to play a larger regional and global role, and the United States must act with greater urgency to recognize Indonesia's burgeoning influence. On its current trajectory, Indonesia will become a global top-10 economy by the end of the next decade and a top-five economy by mid-century. The United States should capitalize on shared values and take immediate action to expand economic opportunities that will lay the foundation for mutual prosperity in the decades to come.

For instance, Indonesia could host a future meeting among other major democracies – including the US, Japan, India, and Australia – with an agenda designed to promote practical cooperation over strengthening democratic institutions, as well as maritime security, counterterrorism, and cyber security.

This proposal is not an attempt to create an expanded alliance for the sake of containing an opposing actor, but rather illustrates how democracies can stand

together to promote both a favorable balance of power and the rule of law.

While the US and Indonesia have approached the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific from different vantage points, both are deeply committed to common values. As Assistant Secretary of Defense Randall Schriver said earlier this month at Hudson Institute (for an event co-sponsored by Hudson Institute, the US-Indonesia Society, and the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia), shared values include “equality and reciprocity, respect for international rules and norms, [and] respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty.” Far from asking Indonesia to make a choice between the US and China, he added, Washington wants Jakarta to stand up for its interests and values whenever they are challenged.

For Indonesia, the desire to retain stable supply chains and economic development militate against provoking Beijing. Furthermore, Washington's threat of tariffs and tolerance for trade friction with China is anathema to Jakarta. Indonesia is a proud independent actor, and it will continue to seek beneficial trade with China – just as the US wants fair and reciprocal trade with China. At a time when Beijing's assertiveness and influence is on the rise, it is necessary to overcome this false dilemma about choosing between one of two major powers.

In addition, both Indonesia and the United States will benefit by ensuring that Beijing's activities in the South China Sea are bound by a fair code of conduct. Multilateral negotiations between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China show scant possibility that Beijing will restrict its influence.

That is why Indonesia is critical; not only can it help prevent ASEAN from striking a deal to restrict the sovereign choices of Southeast Asian states (for instance, over resources and military exercises), it can reprise its earlier role as a lead promoter for South China Sea confidence-building measures. As the sponsor of past inclusive talks to develop a South China Sea code of conduct, Indonesia is the key to preserving strong and independent Southeast Asian states and maritime order in one of the world's crucial waterways.

This rules-based order can be reinforced by increasing the quality of interactions between US and Indonesian defense forces, coast guard, and law-enforcement counterparts. The two nations already participate in more than 240 military engagements together each year, and they plan to continue improving the scope and depth of engagement by instituting new venues, such as the U.S. maritime exercise with ASEAN this September.

The next decade will be a crucial time for Southeast Asia to decide of its own accord how it will contribute to or depart from the concept of a free and open Indo-Pacific. One of the best means of securing a safe and prosperous future for the region is for the United States and Indonesia to find ways to turn phrases like “strategic partnership” into a tangible reality.

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