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Meeting the defence and security challenges over the next two decades: an Indonesian perspective



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The most difficult thing is not to come up with new ideas, but how we can depart from old ideas which have been part of every corner of our thinking.

John Maynard Keynes
13 December 1935

The rise of China, and the United States and Japanese responses to it, is constraining Southeast Asian states. The region's archipelagic seas are of immense strategic importance. Australia and Indonesia share strategic interests, but collaboration historically has been plagued by cultural differences and mistrust. Australia could assist Indonesia's military, the TNI, build its external defence capability. The two countries also could share intelligence, but first would need to build a strong foundation of mutual trust. Engagement in combined military operations is a long way off. The challenges are not technical, but are due to differences of culture and mind-set.

Key words: Indonesia; Australia; TNI; capacity building; intelligence sharing; cultural differences; mistrust.

It was easier to discuss meeting defence and security challenges during the Cold War era, when any defence or security challenge would be observed in the context of the rivalry between the Western Bloc, led by the United States, and the Eastern Bloc, led by the Soviet Union. For Indonesia, it would have been much easier to address its free and active foreign policy, which involved not taking sides with either of the two conflicting blocs. Weatherbee (2010: 2) describes the strategic landscape of Southeast Asia at that time in these terms: *"At the height of the Cold War in Southeast Asia in 1967, the United States, the predominant regional political and strategic presence, looked across the battlefield divide of Vietnam, to its Cold War antagonists, the USSR and the People's Republic of China. The dominant economic presence was Japan, which through trade, investment and official development assistance, was seemingly turning Southeast Asia into an economic dependency."*

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, which marked the end of the Cold War, the balance of power has shifted. During the Cold War, power was balanced between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. The demise of the Soviet Union led initially to the United States becoming the sole superpower. But developments which followed showed that a sole superpower's influence in managing international relations is very much different to what it was during the Cold War. We saw a transformation from a unipolar to a multipolar global balance of power; and

Southeast Asia was no exception. We have seen the rise of a regional middle power, China, and the changing role of an existing middle power, Japan. *"Today the great power equation has fundamentally changed. The USSR has ceased to exist and Russia has not replaced it as a great power actor in Southeast Asia. Almost as dramatic has been the rise of China as a regional power, and economic and political actor, challenging the relative power position of the United States and Japan"* (Weatherbee 2010: 2).

The above changes left some other aspects unchanged as Donald Weatherbee mentioned in his book *International Relations in Southeast Asia: the Struggle for Autonomy*. *"What has not changed historically for the states of Southeast Asia is the policy problems of how to pursue their national interests within the constraints of the dynamics of the great powers' presence in the region ... The contemporary reinvention of ASEAN is a response to the uncertainties of the rise of China and the American and Japanese responses"* (Weatherbee 2010: 2).

Strategic Importance of Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is roughly bordered by China in the north, the Pacific Ocean in the east, Australia in the south-east, and the Indian Ocean in the south and the southwest. Within these geographical boundaries, the states can be divided into the continent states such as Malaysia, Thailand, and the Indo-Chinese states of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; and the island states of Singapore, the Philippines and Indonesia. *"The geo-*

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graphical compositions of the archipelagic states form some of the most strategic sea lanes of communication and choke points, especially the Strait of Malacca. These states form the maritime commercial and military links between Northeast Asia and South Asia, the Middle East, and on to Europe. Their geographic significance is one of the reasons why Southeast Asia has been a region of great power competition” (Weatherbee 2010: 9).

Southeast Asia is also resource rich. Deforestation has become a major issue in the dialogues of climate change. One factor in the competition for jurisdiction in the South China Sea is the prospect of oil and gas fields under the seabed. Aggressive exploration of fisheries has become a source of political irritation as countries seek to defend their law-of-the-sea defined maritime Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ).

The interests of the Southeast Asian states are not only born out of traditional economic, social and political requirements, but also stem from the diverse history, culture and religious backgrounds of the various states.

Cultural Considerations

The above depiction of the region forms a backdrop to any defence and security co-operation that states may wish to develop. It is a different situation to that pertaining in Europe where states can be characterised in black-and-white terms as either allies or opponents. A further bias can develop if we fit the European template to the Southeast Asian situation. Chin Kin Wah, in referring to the different mind-set in the development of the concept of strategic or security culture, and surprisingly referring to Australian academics, said: *“It is also not surprising that the more persistent efforts at understanding the strategic cultures of the region have been pursued by academics in Australia, a country which finds itself at the interface of a still dominant mode of Western strategic thinking which reflects a traditional emphasis on external threats and use of military force, and a Southeast Asia region that constitutes its immediate security environment and whose ‘security problematic’ in both its external and internal dimensions has long exercised the minds of Australian strategic planners”* (Wah 2000: 3).

The advent of democracy in Indonesia is another aspect which adds to the uncertainty where a state undertakes a strategy of defence and security co-operation with Southeast Asian states. We can only be certain of the foreign policy of a country for the term of office of the elected head of government. The foreign policy can change when the head of government changes as a result of a general election.

Historic Strategic Co-operation between Australia and Indonesia

If Australia is to find opportunities to nurture defence and security co-operation with Indonesia, it would be best to start by making an inventory of what we have in the bilateral relationship, particularly by searching the

historic record of such co-operation. It is not difficult to see that, although the two states are neighbours, bilateral relations have experienced some extreme ups and downs in the past.

The best of the high tides in the bilateral relations were firstly the support the Australian Labor Government gave in facilitating the negotiations with the Dutch in late 1940s which led to the independence of the Republic of Indonesia. The second occurred during the term of office of Prime Minister Paul Keating, and in strategic co-operation terms, was one of the best relationships between an Indonesian President, President Soeharto, and an Australian Prime Minister. The best example of the employment of the Australian Defence Force to Indonesia was in 2004 to conduct disaster relief operations as a result of the tsunami disaster in Aceh and Nias Island.

Examples of the lowest level in bilateral relations between Indonesia and Australia, unfortunately, also lie in the domain defence and security relations. Throughout the era of the Cold War, beginning from the inception of the Republic of Indonesia, Indonesia never received any defence or security co-operation. Indonesia, based on a conviction of a free and active foreign policy, declared that it shall not belong to any military or defence pact. In contrast, surrounding neighbouring countries like Malaysia and Singapore were members of the Five Powers Defence Arrangement. The Philippines was home to United States military bases – Clark Air Force Base and Subic Bay Naval Base. Practically, Indonesia was left isolated. Perhaps it was no wonder that Indonesia turned to the Soviet Union for defence assistance. We also should not forget that the lowest level of defence and military co-operation between Indonesia and Australia occurred when Australia intervened in East Timor in 1999 to lead the Interfet operation. The foregoing are examples which show how difficult it can be to fit Australia into the strategic landscape of Indonesia, and otherwise to fit Indonesia into the Australian strategic landscape.

Current Strategic Opportunities

Recently, defence and security top officials have been paying greater attention to the bilateral relationship. Yet, although much progress has been made, we are yet to see concrete results emerge from that co-operation. As though a legacy of the past, some ambiguity still exists as evidenced by the concern expressed in Australia’s 2009 Defence White Paper about nearby states developing the capacity to undertake sustained military operations within Australia’s approaches. I agree with Hugh White’s (as quoted by Sambi 2012) observation that, while there are possible opposing interests, the capabilities Indonesia requires to ensure its own security in its northern approaches could be instrumental in both Indonesia and Australia securing their strategic interests.

Currently, the TNI², which only recently (1999) started to reform itself from a political military into a

professional military within a democratic political system, is still in the process of transformation. Much of its transformation falls in the category of institutional capacity building. It is a big change for a military, which is used to focusing its attention and capability on internal threats, to switch its focus and capability to external defence. It can range from human resources investment in professional education and technical and specialist competence, to the provision of modern equipments and weapon systems able to meet the challenges of the future. Australia can provide assistance in these fields.

Intelligence sharing would be most valuable, adding value in real-time to defence and security operations. This would have to be built on a strong foundation of mutual trust. A gradual build-up of mutual trust can be gained by intensifying communication at all levels and establishing various institutions for this, such as alumni associations, or 'second track' discourses³ which are not bound by government policies and so can provide a second opinion.

As a professional military in a democratic political system, TNI also has to reach its final required form in the defence structure, especially to accommodate the effective implementation of joint doctrine, whether the joint doctrine be amongst the services, or in healthy civil-military relations and reflected accordingly in the defence establishment.

An example of effective defence co-operation was the United States International Military Education and Training Programme during the 1970s. The yardstick of effectiveness of the co-operation and assistance programme was not in the conduct of joint exercises in itself, but in how the co-operation and assistance programmes influenced modernisation of the TNI, by absorbing and adopting the various results of the programmes into the structures, doctrines and equipment inventory of the TNI. This gradual process may by itself lead to easier interoperability when the situation requires. But reaching interoperability without first laying a foundation of trust will never be easy, and the reason for not laying such a foundation would be questioned.

Another classical example of successful recent co-operation, which is still in progress, is the co-operation between the Indonesia Police with the Australian Federal Police. It was initiated in response to the Bali bombing incident in 2002 which provided the Indonesian Police and Australian Federal Police with a common perception of threat. So a common interest in ownership of the programme could easily be felt in that situation. The co-operation subsequently was incorporated into Indonesian Police education and training programmes,

which led to direct incorporation into the Indonesian Police internal management system.

A common factor in the two examples was that both were supported by the strong political will of the civilian government. Indeed, the determining factors which lead to success are factors which we should look for in the search for opportunities to establish effective co-operation and assistance in defence and security. A basic requirement is a sound, common interest shared by both Indonesia and Australia at the strategic, policy and political levels. Without it, it is not possible to move ahead into effective defence and security co-operation.

Conclusion

It will probably be well into the future before we see the TNI and the ADF taking part in a real military operation on the ground, in the seas or in the air. In the meantime, it will be good enough to see a declared policy on bilateral co-operation consistently reflected in budgetary provisions that support a systematic co-operation programme accepted by both parties. The challenges of the coming two decades, I believe, will not have changed much from those of the last two decades, because the challenges are not technical, but are due to differences of culture and mind-set. It requires *more than words* (Sambi 2012) to establish effective and constructive defence and security co-operation. For the time being we will settle at "you say it best when you say nothing at all".

The Author: Agus Widjojo, a Senior Fellow of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Indonesia, is regarded internationally as one of Indonesia's leading strategic thinkers. He is a former Vice Chairman of the People's Consultative Assembly and a Chief of Territorial Affairs of the Indonesian National Army (TNI). During an earlier appointment as Commandant of the TNI Command and Staff College, the TNI think tank, he was responsible for restructuring the political and security doctrine of the TNI. He also serves as a member of the Indonesia-Timor Leste Commission of Truth and Friendship; was a Visiting Senior Fellow of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies in Singapore; and an advisor on the Board of the Institute for Peace and Democracy, Udayana University, Bali. He has written numerous articles on security issues in the Asia-Pacific Region.

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²Tentara Nasional Indonesia (Indonesian National Armed Forces)

³Second Track' discourses or 'Track II' diplomacy refers to unofficial, non-governmental contacts and activities between private citizens or groups of individuals of two or more countries. It contrasts with official Track I diplomacy that occurs inside official government channels.