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



an address presented at the 3rd International Defence and Security Dialogue
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Australians, generally, have an appalling ignorance of Indonesia. Indonesia is not a threat to Australia. It expects Australia to honour its territorial integrity and provide a secure southern border. Australia and Indonesia can become strategic partners to mutual benefit. Major shared interests include: the protection of the sea lines of communication through the Indian and Pacific Oceans; and countering terrorism. An overstretched Australian Defence Force should focus on co-operation with Indonesia and securing regional sea lines of communication, with the equator as its northern boundary. Developing a meaningful defence relationship with Indonesia will not be easy. Australia will be required to put in the majority of the effort.

Key words: Australia; Indonesia; security relationship; sea lines of communication; terrorism; Jakarta Centre for Maritime Co-operation; IKAHAN SAG.

A couple of years ago, I was invited to participate in a roundtable in the Defence Committee room in Canberra. The topic was Indonesia. I found myself sitting at the Defence Committee table in my old seat as Chief of Army saying something like: “For a large part of the last century, our defence chiefs sat at this table and imagined Indonesia to be a threat”. I then said that what we needed to do was to build a defence bridge to Indonesia as it was a vital part of Australia’s future defence and security environment.

In our xenophobic manner, Australia spent nearly half a century conjuring up Indonesia as a threat. We have wasted a lot of time and energy on a false premise. While the relationship with Indonesia will not always be easy, Indonesia is not a threat and, given the right approach by both countries, we can become strategic partners much to our mutual benefit.

Instead of a sea-air gap to our north, there is actually a bridge – a sea-air-land bridge. Our two countries are inextricably linked. It is time to reinforce the bridge.

Australian Perceptions of Indonesia

It was not only the defence chiefs who misunderstood Indonesia. So, too, did and does the Australian public. A significant level of misunderstanding and ignorance remains. It is a horrible thing to say, but Australians do not know much about Indonesia. This limits the ability to form a strong and binding security partnership.

According to a 2013 Lowy Institute poll, Australians see Indonesia both as a military and terrorist threat. A majority (54 per cent) agree that ‘Australia is right to worry about Indonesia as a military threat’; and exactly the same proportion say that ‘Indonesia is a dangerous source of Islamic terrorism’.

More than a decade after the transition to democratic rule in Indonesia, only 33 per cent of Australians agree that ‘Indonesia is a democracy’. Less than 1-in-4 Australians think Indonesia is ‘a country with a good political system’; and nearly three times as many think it is ‘a corrupt country’. Only 70 per cent of Australians understand that Bali is part of Indonesia. Less than half understand that Indonesia is a democracy, and a majority incorrectly believes that law-making is based on Islamic codes.

Last week I heard a mid-ranking Australian Defence Force (ADF) officer refer to Indonesia as an Islamic state. From a DFAT²-commissioned Newspoll report dated May 2013 we get the following: “Overall, it is clear that Indonesia is perceived as important to Australia (more than a third of Australians spontaneously rate it as one of the top 5 most important countries to our national interest) – but knowledge about it is poor and perceptions are very mixed.”

The most recent Lowy Poll (2014) starts with the headline: “RELATIONS WITH INDONESIA: DETERIORATING BUT FRIENDLY”. Forty per cent of Australians say the relationship between Indonesia and

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Australia is worsening. The 2014 Poll sought to gauge Australians' views on what should be the policy priorities for Australia's relationship with Indonesia. Three clear priorities emerge. Around three-quarters of the population say: 'security in the region' (75 per cent); 'terrorism' (75 per cent); and 'asylum seekers and people smuggling' (73 per cent). Considerably fewer identify 'trade and investment' (57 per cent); and 'aid to Indonesia' (29 per cent); as 'very important'. The recent reduction in aid to Indonesia may have been in part reinforced by this result. Overall the level of ignorance about Indonesia is appalling and does not provide a solid basis on which to build a relationship.

Indonesian Interests

An Indonesian friend, Lieutenant General Agus Widjojo, told me in 1987 that what Indonesia wanted from Australia was a secure southern border. I consider that Australia should seek the reciprocal from Indonesia. A secure northern border would be firmly in Australia's national interests.

It might surprise Australians to know that Indonesians do not routinely focus on Australia. Rather, they look north and think about South East Asia, China, Japan, and the United States. They are interested in territorial integrity, the growth of their democracy, the sea lines of communication (SLOC) that crisscross the Indonesian Archipelago, combating terrorism, how to expand their economy and providing for their growing population.

Indonesia has moved from dictatorship to democracy, they are balancing Islam and modernization, have strong growth prospects and are a leader in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Australia should enthusiastically support and encourage Indonesia's development and work to deepen co-operation and understanding at all levels. A strong and vibrant Indonesia is in our best interests.

Australia's Security Relationship with Indonesia

I wonder how many Australians understand the nature of Australia's formal security relationship with Indonesia. Let us just mention the Lombok Treaty. This Treaty, enacted in 2006, commits each nation to co-operation and consultation in the areas of defence and defence technology, law enforcement and combating transnational crime, counter-terrorism, and intelligence-sharing, as well as maritime and aviation security.

My view of the Lombok Treaty is that it was a necessary response to Australia's involvement in East Timor. Indonesia has always been concerned about its territorial integrity, including in East Timor and West Papua. Australia's involvement in East Timor threatened this integrity and they were seeking reassurance that we would not interfere again. Its impact was for people like me and others who visited Indonesia to be able to repeat the mantra, "the

territorial integrity of the Republic of Indonesia is of the utmost importance to Australia".

This Treaty was recently enhanced by the signing of a Joint Understanding on a code of conduct in relation to intelligence matters on 28 August 2014.

There are other agreements and the level of co-operation between the two militaries is at best adequate. Even after the fantastic level of co-operation around Banda Aceh and other subsequent natural disasters, there are few, if any, routine exchanges of personnel. Doctrine is worlds apart and interoperability is at its most basic level. Much more work is required to ensure that engagement becomes a habit.

Sea Lines of Communication and Terrorism

When Australia goes to Indonesia we should focus on the big issues of the future, rather than our present irritants such as asylum seekers, druggies and cattle trade. Let us pick two to start with; SLOC and terrorism.

The Indian and Pacific Oceans merge around Australia. All regional countries depend on the integrity of the SLOC across the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the strategically vital straits of the Indonesian archipelago. Unhindered sea passage underpins regional prosperity by supporting the movement of energy, raw materials and manufactured goods.

From a defence viewpoint, these straits, and others in the vicinity of Papua New Guinea, are the primary naval approaches to Australia. Australia should contribute to enhancing Indonesia's maritime capabilities so, as security partners, they can make a full contribution to the integrity and security of the region's SLOC and their own archipelagic waters. Introducing enhanced capabilities and improved naval and air interoperability between the two countries would be a good start.

Indonesia deserves praise for the way it has tackled the problem of terrorism. Australia has supported their efforts and this unprecedented and little known level of co-operation should be maintained and used as a model for other common interests. Initial priority areas include customs, fisheries, safety at sea, and immigration.

The Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Co-operation (JCLEC)³ has made a substantial contribution towards controlling the terror threat in Indonesia. The JCLEC should be used as a model for something we could call the Jakarta Centre for Maritime Co-operation.

Implications for the Australian Defence Force

There are implications for the ADF. An increased

³Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Co-operation is a partnership between the Indonesia National Police and the Australian Federal Police. It is a resource for the South East Asia region in the fight against transnational crime, with a focus on counter-terrorism.

level of co-operation will require a greater commitment from the ADF. In my travels to the Middle East over the period of 2002 to 2008, I always thought it passing strange that I flew over Indonesia to get to the Middle East. I longed to drop in and say hello, but we were distracted.

Currently the Australian government is asking too much of the ADF. It is spread across the globe and its budget is inadequate. Territorial, resource and security issues in the China Seas should be left to the various claimants. The focus of the ADF should be on developing strategic and security relationships with Indonesia and looking east and west at the SLOC across the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The Equator provides a decent northern boundary.

Some time ago I was asked by the Australian Prime Minister to carry a letter to President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. This was done at short notice and my irreverent sons now refer to me now as Postman Pete. The Prime Minister asked me to go because he considered the ruckus caused by the spying scandal was damaging the relationship between our two countries and he wanted to impress on the President that he took the matter seriously enough to send me as an emissary.

I was received very cordially in Jakarta and delivered the letter to a senior official in the Foreign Ministry. I did not get to see the President as he was in Bali. But I did get to see a range of my Indonesian friends. What was most significant was that they made the effort to come and see me once they learned I was in town. They all had a consistent message both as individuals but also from very senior government officials in the defence and security community. The message was simple – we are pissed off, but it will not be to the detriment of the overall defence relationship.

Let us get real about this. Indonesia spies, Australia spies. It appears we are better at it than some others. Let us also note that some of the information that Indonesia uses to pursue its terrorists comes from Australia provided through the JCLEC.

IKAHAN SAG

Let me briefly mention IKAHAN SAG. This is a small group of retired Indonesian and Australian defence officials. The Australian side consists of Peter Cosgrove on leave, Jim Molan, Alan Dupont, Bob Lowry, and ex attachés. Most of the Indonesians are retired service chiefs. One notable member is Kiki Syanakri. At our first meeting, he and Peter Cosgrove (the opposing commanders during the 1999 East Timor crisis) formed a warm and productive friendship. The dinner and wine that night in Kiki's house was very pleasant.

IKAHAN SAG is firmly supported by the chiefs of the ADF and Panglima TNI (Indonesian National Armed Forces). We report directly to them and are tasked with talking about those future events which

might provide the greatest difficulties in the relationship and how we might overcome them. The discussions are animated and frank; and our friendship and relationships developed over a long period of time mean that we can discuss things with directness and honesty.

You might be surprised to hear that we do not talk about asylum seekers and beef. As an example, recent topics of discussion have included Papua and the Jakarta Centre for Maritime Co-operation.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with a word of caution. Developing a habitual and meaningful defence and security relationship with Indonesia will not be easy.

At the moment, I am supporting a student who is doing his PhD on the topic of Strategic Partnerships. He is from Thailand, so his focus is on the Australian/Thai relationship and has asked whether it constitutes a strategic partnership. He is having some trouble defining what a strategic partnership is, but is of a mind that it would exist between countries when three criteria are met:

- they have mutual or non-contradictory interests on security and/or economic issues;
- they agree on the same or similar approaches to achieving those interests; and
- they work together by sharing information, resources, skills and even risks.

I think Australia and Indonesia are some way off this type of relationship. Given the lack of knowledge and what I think is Australia's strategic culture, which sees us as being insecure in this southern land, building a natural and easy partnership with Indonesia will not be easy. Most of the difficulties lie with Australia and we will be required to put in the majority of the effort.

The Author: Peter Leahy has been the Foundation Director of the National Security Institute, University of Canberra, since October 2008. He has research interests in security relationships with Indonesia and also in national security, defence and terrorism. He is a retired Australian Army lieutenant general, whose military career culminated with his appointment as Chief of the Army from 2002 until 2008, the longest serving incumbent of the position since General Sir Harry Chauvel the 1920s. He was appointed a Companion in the Military Division of the Order of Australia in 2007. He is also a director of Electro Optic Systems Holdings Ltd; a member of the Defence South Australia Advisory Board; a director of the Kokoda Foundation; and chairman of the board of the wounded veterans charity, Soldier On. He provides occasional media commentary on defence and national security matters. [Photo of Professor Leahy: University of Canberra]