

Washington, Jakarta and a Multipolar Asia

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When the US State Department Spokesman, Robert Wood, announced at a Washington press conference last week his boss Hillary Clinton's our-nation foray into Asia, a journalist asked him, "Robert, why Indonesia, why Indonesia?"

That Indonesia-despite being the world's largest Muslim nation, third biggest democracy, and fourth most populous country-has had an extremely low international profile is one of the major paradoxes of international relations of our time. That paradox may soon dissolve as the United States prepares to launch a major strategic initiative towards Indonesia.

It will be tempting to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's decision to include Jakarta in her first visit abroad as a sentimental bow to the fact that President Barack Obama had spent his childhood in Indonesia.

There is no doubt that Washington wants to take full advantage of President Obama's Indonesian connection. But the American political decision to build a strategic partnership with Jakarta appears to have been taken in the closing months of the previous Administration. The new and positive American approach to Indonesia was revealed when the US Defense Secretary Robert Gates traveled to Jakarta in early 2008 and reaffirmed the commitment to build a strong relationship with Jakarta.

That Gates stays on at the helm of Pentagon and the new US president has a personal interest in Indonesia has set the stage for what might be one of the consequential foreign policy initiatives of the Obama Administration.

Just as President George W. Bush built on his predecessor Bill Clinton's engagement with New Delhi, President Obama is well positioned to elevate the relationship with Jakarta. The powerful cocktail-sustained economic growth, renewed national self-confidence and high level American attention-that worked for India during the Bush years might turn out to be magical for Indonesia with Obama.

The US interest in a strategic partnership with Indonesia has coincided with a new restlessness in Jakarta, where the foreign policy elite has been fretting about the nation's underwhelming performance on the world stage.

After all there was a moment when Indonesia was among the world's influential voices. It had hosted the first Afro-Asian summit in Bandung in 1955 and was a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement along with India and Egypt.

In the last few decades, however, Jakarta had steadily turned away from the global arena to focus on its role as the lynch pin of a very successful regional organization, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Powerful voices in Jakarta are now calling for a foreign policy that looks beyond the ASEAN. Jusuf Wanandi, the doyen of the Indonesian strategic community, has made the case most sharply last year.

Arguing that an exclusive focus on ASEAN has constrained Indonesian aspirations for a larger global role, Wanandi argued that Jakarta must be "more active in strengthening our bilateral relations with the big countries in the region: Japan, China and India, besides the United States. We should strive to develop closer cooperation with the big democracies among developing nations, such as Brazil, India and South Africa."

Australia, which invests so much diplomatic energy in Indonesia, was quick to pick up on the new signals in Jakarta. In June 2008, the Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd

proposed that Indonesia join the US, China, Japan, India and Australia in building a new Asia Pacific Community.

The Australian proposal aimed at privileging the partnership with Indonesia above that with the ASEAN raised eye-brows across the region. In devoting special attention Jakarta, the Obama Administration is confirming a new political trend among major powers-the recognition of Indonesia's recent achievements and their implications for the nation's changing profile in Asia and the world.

A decade after the 1997 financial crisis that rocked the region, Indonesia has stabilized its economy, deepened its democratic roots, nudged the once powerful Army into the barracks, and peacefully resolved the conflict with a separatist movement in the Aceh province.

While there are no dearth of Western critics pointing to the weaknesses of Indonesian democracy and its economy, Washington appears to have finally woken up to a Jakarta's strategic significance.

A partnership with a rising Indonesia is likely generate many new options for Washington in strengthening regional security in Southeast Asia, promoting a peaceful maritime environment in the Indian Ocean, structuring a stable balance of power in Asia, regaining credibility in the Muslim world, and providing a stronger political framework for countering terrorism and extremism.

While it is basking in the new attention from America, there is no question of Jakarta becoming a subaltern for Washington. As in New Delhi, so in Jakarta, the commitment to an independent foreign policy is absolute. India, which unveiled plans for building a strategic partnership with Indonesia during President Susilo Yudhoyono's visit to New Delhi in November 2005, should welcome the new engagement between Washington and Jakarta and its principal consequence-the creation of a multipolar Asia.

As Indonesia and India go to polls shortly, there is no room now for a major diplomatic initiative between the two countries. But deepening the ties with a rising Indonesia and bringing it into such forums as IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa) should be among the major priorities of the next government in New Delhi.

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