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Indonesia, the United States and Australia: New Age, New Issues

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The rescheduling of Obama's visit to Jakarta does not alter the fact that the US and Indonesia are entering into a new age in ties driven by "green issues". This new phase is also extending to Australia. What will this mean for the region?

THE POSTPONEMENT of President Barack Obama's trip to Indonesia from March to June does not detract from one significant fact: the United States and Indonesia are on the cusp of a new era in bilateral relations. The world's most powerful country and the world's largest Muslim democracy are entering a "new age" in ties. This will be marked by a major, if not tectonic, shift from Washington's long-standing obsession with traditional security issues and human rights to new concerns – or what is increasingly being referred to as non-traditional security issues, ranging from climate change and energy to transnational crime and terrorism.

Green Diplomacy

This new phase in US-Indonesia ties is captured in the Comprehensive Partnership Agreement (CPA) that was supposed to be signed last month when Obama was originally scheduled to visit Indonesia. From Jakarta, Obama was due to travel to Australia but that too has been postponed. Indonesia has indicated that it may not wait till June to get this new agreement with the US off the ground. If this plan comes to pass, it is a sign that Jakarta is eager to move ahead with relations with the US – and away from the old paradigm that was the hallmark of the Bush era.

In the past, during the Suharto years, Indonesia-US ties had been punctuated with tension and acrimony over human rights issues at a time when the military dominated and the authorities were strong-fisted in local politics. Post-Suharto, Indonesia is taking on a completely different persona. It has transformed itself into a champion of human rights and democracy in Asia, at least within Southeast Asia.

US-Indonesia ties now have new drivers. These are the non-traditional security issues that will be a major part of the CPA. Secretary of State Clinton last year mentioned the need for stronger partnership in energy and food security. Her counterpart, Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa, speaking last month to a US audience, identified the “wide range of sectors” in the CPA to include not just energy and food security but also environment, health and good governance -- apart from the usual areas of education, science and technology and trade and investment. Reflecting the new thrust on green issues, US Secretary of Commerce Gary Locke is to lead a clean energy trade mission to Indonesia next month.

Indonesia’s redesigned foreign policy

This updated thrust in US-Indonesia diplomacy – or what can be called “Green Diplomacy” -- reflects a congruence of mutual interests in a new age dominated by climate change. This diplomacy is increasingly being defined by “green issues” – reflecting the extensive and pervasive impact of climate change on a wide range of human activity. But this new dimension may also have a lot to do with Jakarta’s changing foreign policy priorities as a result. We are seeing a more assertive Indonesia in the area of green or environmental issues. Nothing reflects this better than the major role played by Indonesia – hosting COP13, the UN Climate Change Conference in Bali in 2007 that built up to the Copenhagen Summit last year.

Jakarta is also emerging as a major and responsible player in leading the region on green issues. One example is the Manado Ocean Conference to conserve marine and coastal resources. Another is the Coral Triangle Initiative to conserve marine biodiversity. This project now involves regional countries like Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste. Indonesia even initiated the F-11 or Group of Eleven tropical forest nations to push for the conservation of tropical forests.

All these initiatives never existed in the 1980s or 1990s. They reflect how fundamentally changed Indonesia’s foreign policy has become.

Indonesia and Australia: New Issues

Indeed, climate change diplomacy has also altered the content and emphasis of Australia-Indonesia relations and foreign policy. It appears that the Australians are more engaged with the Indonesians than the Americans when it comes to green diplomacy. This came out clearly during President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s recent visit to Canberra during which he cited the “green” initiatives that Jakarta has taken, such as the F-11 and the Manado Conference.

Indeed the CPA with the US was preceded by a Comprehensive Partnership with Australia in 2005, which President Yudhoyono described as a “watershed”. This declaration on partnership with Canberra was closely followed a year later by the Agreement on the Framework for Security Cooperation, also known as the Lombok Treaty. Yudhoyono billed the Lombok Treaty as a landmark for Indonesia because it enabled a “forward-looking” partnership in the fields of both traditional and non-traditional security.

Interestingly, Yudhoyono identified “new issues” among the key challenges facing Indonesia-Australia ties going forward. These new issues first surfaced to define bilateral ties in recent years in the form of tsunami, terrorism, people smuggling and drug smuggling. But more broadly, the Indonesian leader said, the new issues have evolved around climate change, financial crises, infectious diseases and terrorism – among many more. While in Canberra, Yudhoyono stressed the critical need for their partnership to develop the capacity to deal with these new issues.

Regional Impact of Green Diplomacy

The US is a world power. Indonesia and Australia are regional powers. When three such powers align their interests in a constellation revolving around climate change, there is bound to be an impact. One clear impact will be on the broader landscape in the regions that affect them. Indonesia's new diplomacy is bound to affect ASEAN, which is also increasingly grappling with climate change and non-traditional security issues. Indonesia traditionally dominates ASEAN until the fall of Suharto. But of late Jakarta is becoming more assertive of its "free and active" foreign policy. It is unlikely that Indonesia's green diplomacy bringing Indonesia, the US and Australia closer together will be at the expense of ASEAN. If at all, it will see Indonesia resuming its leadership role in the grouping.

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