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India and Indonesia: A New Strategic Partnership?

By C. Raja Mohan

Synopsis

Indonesian leader Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has been invited to India as a special guest for India's Republic Day celebrations. The Indian gesture bears significance for the future relationship of the two Asian giants.

Commentary

INDONESIAN PRESIDENT Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's just concluded visit to New Delhi has drawn the two Asian giants – Indonesia and India -- together again. As rising democratic powers, India and Indonesia are looking beyond non-alignment for a larger role in world affairs.

In hosting the Indonesian leader as a state guest twice in the last five years, New Delhi has underlined its high stakes in building an enduring partnership with Jakarta. President Yudhoyono's trip to India in 2005 put an end to prolonged mutual neglect between the two countries. His second trip at the end of January 2011 as the chief guest of India's annual Republic Day celebrations saw the injection of genuine strategic content into the bilateral relationship.

Changing Agendas

Besides helping clinch US\$ 15 billion worth of business deals and setting an ambitious bilateral trade target of \$25 billion by 2015, President Yudhoyono and the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh signaled their commitment to deepen political cooperation.

This framework is very different from the agenda that brought the two nations together when they became independent more than six decades ago. Sixty two years ago, when India became a Republic it invited the Indonesian President to join the festivities. What united India and Indonesia in the middle of the 20th century was the gumption of its bold leaders—Jawaharlal Nehru and Sukarno -- to reject the Cold War blocs and invent non-alignment as the natural choice for emerging nations.

In Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru argued that the essence of freedom was an independent foreign policy. In Jakarta, the founding fathers of the republic sought a 'free and active' global engagement. Nehru was determined to insulate India from the vagaries the Cold War; Jakarta talked of 'rowing between two reefs'. For a nation composed of thousands of islands, the maritime metaphor was indeed natural for Indonesia.

Making a Difference Together

As they rise on the world stage today, India has the potential to emerge as the third largest economy in the coming decades, Indonesia as the sixth. Their challenge today is not to seek 'strategic autonomy' from the major powers, but contribute responsibly in the management of an increasingly complex world. In addressing Indonesia's contemporary foreign policy tasks, Yudhoyono's metaphor? again maritime -- is about 'navigating the turbulent ocean' that the world has become. Amidst a historic redistribution of power in favour of Asia and a series of trans-national challenges facing the world, that is India's task as well.

One common conception that has endured the many twists and turns of the Indian and Indonesian foreign policies is the belief that they deserve to play a large role in world affairs. Despite their rise today, neither of them can unilaterally transform the world. Acting in concert, however, Delhi and Jakarta could make a difference.

Four themes stood out in the talks Premier Singh and President Yudhoyono.

First was the desire to transcend the North-South divide that once animated Delhi and Jakarta. The traditional non-alignment of India and Indonesia involved more than surviving the East-West divide. It was also about articulating the collective interests of the newly independent nations. Today as members of the G-20 India and Indonesia see themselves as potential consensus-builders on such global issues as trade, environment and rebalancing the world economy.

Rising Democratic Powers

The second is about shared democratic values. In the immediate aftermath after decolonisation, the natural emphasis in Delhi and Jakarta was on promoting third world solidarity rather than political liberalism. Today, India and Indonesia have begun to assert their identity as democratic nations.

India has shed traditional inhibitions to support the United Nations Democracy Fund and often shared a common platform with the other democracies in the Asia-Pacific region. Indonesia, which survived two dictatorships, is proud of its hard won democratic freedoms, and is more vigorous than India in articulating support for promotion of democratic values.

Neither New Delhi nor Jakarta would want to join the Western crusades for democracy and political change in the developing world. But an independent initiative coming from India and Indonesia would have a lot more political credibility across Asia than the Western hectoring on democracy.

In the joint statement issued at the end of their talks, Premier Singh and President Yudhoyono declared that "Indonesia and India are natural partners as two developing democratic countries in the region". Underlining their shared commitment to "multiculturalism, pluralism and diversity", the two leaders affirmed their desire to "play an active role in the promotion of democracy, peace and stability in Asia Pacific region and the world at large".

Third, India and Indonesia have a big role in shaping the evolution of the balance of power in Asia. Nearly six decades ago, it was Delhi and Jakarta that worked together to promote the Asian unity and the rejection of military blocs. Today amidst the rise of China and the relative decline of the United States and Japan, India and Indonesia have begun to expand and institutionalise their defence cooperation to ensure that Asia's economic prospects are not endangered by renewed regional conflict.

Constructing a new Indo-Pacific Region?

Fourth, Premier Singh and President Yudhoyono are acutely conscious of the importance of their shared maritime spaces in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. As India seeks to consolidate its role as security provider in the Indian Ocean and raise its profile in the Western Pacific, strategic partnership with Indonesia is critical for the success of both the objectives.

As the archipelago bridging the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Indonesia is destined to play a major role in both. A more intensive maritime engagement between Delhi and Jakarta, then, would end the artificial separation between the two oceans and help construct a new Indo-Pacific region.

C. Raja Mohan is Adjunct Professor of South Asian Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore and Strategic Affairs Editor of The Indian Express, New Delhi.