

Turnbull Meets Jokowi: A New Chapter in Australia-Indonesia Relations?

Written by Howard Dick

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HOWARD DICK, DEC 20 2015

When Australia's new PM Malcolm Turnbull met Indonesia's President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) in Jakarta on November 12th, the thaw in personal and diplomatic relations was palpable, nowhere more so than in crowded, hot and sweaty Tanah Abang textile market where both leaders with big smiles stripped off their jacket and ties. One should always be wary of exaggerating the significance of personal relations between leaders because neither is ever as much in control of government and affairs as the public likes to believe. Nevertheless, some warmth helps to maintain an open dialogue and offers a safety valve if tensions build up. Chillness, by contrast, makes all relations more formal and encourages ministers and bureaucrats to be obstructive.

Recent Past

Over the past twenty years or so Australia-Indonesia relations have been a rollercoaster. Paul Keating (PM 1991-96) cultivated a warm personal relationship with President Suharto (1966-98) to the benefit of both nations, the highlight being the bilateral Security Agreement of 1995. Then came the change of government in Indonesia and the bloody independence struggle in the province of East Timor (now Timor Leste). Animosity emerged, relations soured. Presidents Habibie (1998-1999) and Megawati (2001-04) scolded John Howard (1996-2007) for his meddling and 'megaphone diplomacy'. Eventually Australia's generous assistance to Aceh after the December 2004 tsunami paved the way to better relations between Howard and President Yudhoyono (2004-14) and in 2005 the comprehensive Agreement on the Framework for Security Cooperation (Lombok Treaty) was signed to replace the abrogated 1995 agreement. Relations warmed under foreign policy specialist Kevin Rudd (2007-10) but were impaired under Julia Gillard (2010-13) when Australia unilaterally suspended beef exports without regard to the recently agreed consultative framework.

When Tony Abbott (2013-15) came to power he made a point of going to Jakarta to meet President Yudhoyono on his first foreign visit and said all the right things about the priority of the Australia-Indonesia relationship. Then came revelations of Australia's spying on the personal communications of the Indonesian president and Australia's insistence upon a unilateral 'turn-back-the-boats' policy towards asylum seekers. The former was a personal slight, the latter a national affront along a common border. Neither policy was within the spirit of the Lombok Treaty. Yudhoyono, his ministers and the Indonesian media began to feel that Australia was taking Indonesia's goodwill for granted. If Australia was determined to look to its national interests, Indonesia could likewise look to theirs. In protest, Indonesia recalled its ambassador.

It did not help the relationship that 2014 was a year of both general and presidential elections in Indonesia. Australia became a convenient whipping boy for nationalist sentiment. In Canberra there was apprehension that whoever became the new president would have no predisposition to better relations with Australia. Former general Prabowo Subianto had been Special Forces (Kopassus) commander in East Timor while Joko Widodo had no foreign relations experience and no ties with Australia apart from his eldest son being a graduate of the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). Jokowi duly won the election and took office in October 2014, ushering in a period of tentative diplomatic relations between the two countries. By April 2015 relations had cooled to frosty. The President's determination to press ahead with the executions of convicted Australian drug traffickers Andrew Chan and Myuran

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Sukumaran in defiance of a media frenzy in Australia and formal representations by the Australian government led to recall of the Australian ambassador.

So how much should be read into the recent, brief personal exchange in Jakarta between Jokowi and Turnbull and their subsequent meetings in Manila and Paris? Perhaps the most important thing is that it recalibrated a working relationship at the top level. In the background the two country's foreign ministers, Julie Bishop and Retno Marsudi have always got on well as woman to woman and consulted frequently on issues of common concern. However, neither was in control of their government's political agenda and actions, which could at times be destabilising. While Abbott's goodwill towards Indonesia had been genuine and practical, the diplomatic relationship was always subsidiary to the government's aggressive politics on asylum seekers and Abbott's instinct to prioritise relations with the Anglosphere, emotionally with Britain and policy-wise with the United States. Nor did it help that Abbott's personality tended to be direct, physical and even confrontational, none of these being attributes that Indonesians admire. His off-the-cuff remark that he would 'shirt-front' Russian President Vladimir Putin after the shooting down over Ukraine of Malaysian flight MH-17 was characteristic bravado but betrayed a woeful lack of skill in international relations. As did his remark during the Chan-Sukumaran episode that Australia's aid to Indonesia could be in jeopardy. Nor was that weakness held in check by his chief-of-staff, Peta Credlin, whose focus was always on domestic politics. By all accounts, relations between Credlin and Bishop had become icy.

Enter Turnbull

Australia's overnight change of prime ministers in September 2015, said to have been triggered by Bishop, was therefore an immediate change of style but also, as it has since transpired, of substance. While Turnbull has little direct experience of Asia, he is cosmopolitan, well-travelled, well-networked, well-informed and, by inclination, a problem solver who looks to find consensus. He also has a very astute wife who is herself widely engaged and very much his equal. These qualities would seem to have played well during their brief Jakarta stopover en route to Berlin. Film clips of his sessions with the President suggest that they engaged personally with each other. A smile goes a long way in Indonesia and both leaders were smiling a lot. Their banter in crowded Tanah Abang market as they stripped down in the heat suggested the same thing. They can do business together, and in the meantime, the foreign ministers can get on with the job.

But what is the job? There is a backlog of unresolved issues in the Australia-Indonesia relationship, of which boats, beef and the death penalty have been the most controversial. Yet in most cases, including these, there is a common interest. Failure to realise that common interest is usually because domestic political agendas take precedence. When politicians deal in irresponsible slogans and unleash a media circus, a win-lose outcome can be demanded and the reverse actually be delivered. Each of these three examples illustrates the point.

The sudden and unexpected ban on live cattle exports to Indonesia in June 2011 over concern at slaughtering practices in Indonesian abattoirs was an extraordinary foreign policy blunder by the Gillard government that paid no regard to the agreed protocols of consultation. In both countries the industry was thrown into turmoil while in Indonesia beef prices began to soar, impinging on macroeconomic stability and making consumers very unhappy. As slaughtering practices could hardly be changed overnight and research was needed as to where the problems were located and how they could be overcome, this controversial issue lent itself to a consultative approach. Indonesia did monitor and improve its abattoirs but was in no hurry to resume imports of Australian cattle, while of necessity Australian exporters turned to China. Only now are serious discussions taking place as to how both countries can collaborate in a sustainable industry.

The Coalition's unilateral 'turn-back-the-boats' policy helped it to win office at the 2013 election and became the self-nominated litmus test of its effectiveness in government but at the cost of abandoning joint-action with Indonesia and challenging the security of its borders, always a sensitive matter in the archipelago. Australia insisted upon the integrity of its own borders, moved its naval forces forward to Indonesia's southern border in a highly secretive operation (Operation Sovereign Borders), and was apparently surprised that Indonesia then stood ground on its own sovereignty. At enormous financial and diplomatic cost the Australian government has all but halted the inflow of asylum seekers but many thousands remain stranded in Indonesia unable to go forward or back. Indonesia lacks the

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means to monitor the whole length of its porous sea and land borders so pushing the problem back on Indonesia is hardly good neighbourly. Bilateral cooperation in ASEAN context is the only sustainable way to manage the rising tide of refugees over the long term.

The failure of the flurry of Australian diplomacy over the executions was in turn a direct consequence of Australia's abrasive, unilateral 'turn-back-the-boats' policy. Indonesia's once considerable goodwill had been drained away and there was no longer any inclination on the part of the new President to grant Australia another favour, let alone under perceived duress. Since convicted drug traffickers of other nationalities were being executed, clemency would have required special consideration. There were grounds, but reportedly the President did not read the petitions and brushed off even the pleas of his own son Gibran.

Yet barely a week after PM Turnbull's visit to Jakarta, the Indonesian Government announced a moratorium on further executions. This came not from Jokowi himself but from arguably the most powerful man in the Indonesian cabinet, Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, former general Luhut Pandjaitan, who himself had just returned from discussions in Canberra. He acknowledged that the issue had been discussed in Australia but emphasised that Australia had promised not to interfere in what was a domestic matter for Indonesia. Quiet diplomacy with respect on both sides eventually brought about what noisy and nosy intervention had failed to achieve. Chan and Sukumaran were the fatal victims of confrontational politics on both sides of the border.

A challenge for both the Australian and Indonesian governments is managing relations with China. Australia has had unbroken diplomatic relations with the Republic of Indonesia since 1950, with China only since 1972. Given that Indonesia is Australia's closest neighbour in Asia, a priori it might be expected that after more than 66 years we would have consolidated a strong and mutually beneficial relationship across many fields, not least in trade and investment. Instead the newer relationship with China has flourished and matured while that with Indonesia is still, in many respects, in its teething stage. While most Australians have come to regard the former communist enemy of China as an opportunity, Indonesia is still generally seen as a problem – too big, too Muslim and too close. On the Indonesian side, diplomatic relations with China were ruptured between 1967 and 1989 but are now flourishing. Mindful of the suspicions evoked by its forward defence in the South China Sea, China is courting Indonesia as the key to the strategic balance in Southeast Asia and actively promoting trade and investment, not least in Indonesian infrastructure. Meanwhile, Australia has actually cut back its aid to Indonesia. Indonesia is wary of China's strategic intentions and seeks a peaceful balance of power that includes the United States. But just what is Australia's role in this regional balance of power? When the Gillard government announced that United States forces would be stationed in Darwin, it did so without consulting and giving prior notice to Indonesia, whose territory lies just a few hundred miles across the Timor Sea. Reassurances were promptly given but it was a gratuitous slight that once again ignored the obligations and expectations of the Lombok Treaty.

Towards a Common Partnership?

These periodic diplomatic debacles caused by both Labor and Coalition governments are not accidents but the result of poorly aligned mindsets in Australia and Indonesia. For all kinds of reasons there are, of course, marked differences between our two neighbouring countries, not least in cultural conventions and norms of behaviour. Nevertheless, if we are to live harmoniously side by side and do business with each other, representatives need to be aware of those differences and be mindful of the impact of their words and actions upon the other. Expressions of common interests and goodwill are not enough. There must also be conscious intercultural negotiation and learning. On the Indonesian side this is usually manifest. Indonesians grow up with the realisation that theirs is a complex society of many islands, languages, cultures and faiths, a triumph of 'Unity in Diversity'. For most Indonesians, the national Bahasa Indonesia as taught in schools is in fact their second language after regional and household languages such as Javanese, Sundanese or Madurese, Banjar, Batak or Bugis. For high school and university graduates looking to employment in a globalising world, English is becoming a third language that from 2016 will be a dual language in university teaching. Indonesian diplomats, officials, business people and academics who deal with Australians, are therefore in most cases bi, tri- or even quadri-lingual and proficient in using language for intercultural negotiation.

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Australians, by contrast, are an insular, monolingual, and inclined to believe, with all the arrogance of the Anglosphere, that things are best done their way. We have the privilege of being able to conduct international business and diplomacy in our own version of English with the implicit assumption, seldom challenged, that every intelligent person should be able to speak fluent English and behave more or less like us. The trap is that many Indonesians do speak good English, are smiling and polite, and may easily be seen as understanding, thinking and feeling in the same way. Misunderstanding easily arises when Australians approach matters very directly and even abrasively without first seeking to build trust and find common ground. The aforementioned cases of cattle exports, border protection and the death penalty are all examples of Australian leaders pushing their agendas in ways that Indonesians perceive as aggressive and offensive, as aptly summed up in former president Megawati Sukarnoputri's expression 'megaphone diplomacy'. In Indonesian eyes, this is not the way friends should behave towards each other. It causes embarrassment and erodes trust and goodwill. Consequently members of the Indonesian government, parliament and, more broadly, the Indonesian intelligentsia, have come to see Australia as an unreliable, hot-and-cold friend. Australia has been seen as demanding whatever is in its own immediate interest but placing little value on Indonesia's longstanding goodwill and takes little account of Indonesia's massive security, developmental and political challenges. Indonesia is now big enough, rich enough and confident enough to begin to show its impatience.

A reality check. Australia and Indonesia are both large, sprawling countries, one a continent, the other an archipelago. Yet Australia is a nation of only 25 million people, Indonesia of 250 million. Although Australia is still a large enough economy to be included among the Group of Twenty (G20) nations, in purchasing power terms it is already much smaller than Indonesia (also a G20 member) and falling further behind by the year because its growth rate is barely half that of Indonesia. Thus by most counts Indonesia is now the Big Neighbour, Australia the little Neighbour. Although 250 million Indonesians will become increasingly fluent in English and move towards urban, middle-class lifestyles, they will not adopt the cultural and religious norms of 25 million Australians. These realities are understood in Indonesia: they are not much understood in Australia. And while geography obliges Australia to look north, it does not oblige Indonesia to look south.

If Australia wants to build a common partnership with Indonesia, to meet oft-repeated aspirations, we therefore need to go about it in a much more nuanced way, as indeed we are learning to do with China. What will not succeed with Indonesia any more than with China is Little Brother trying to be Big Brother and telling Big Brother what to do, which gratuitously reminds Indonesians of white supremacy in their colonial past. Instead all Australians – and especially those in government and business – need much better knowledge of Indonesia's geography, history, politics and society. Yes, Bali is part of Indonesia! There is no excuse for those dealing with Indonesians not to be reasonably well informed. Secondly, it is highly desirable that future leaders gain some proficiency in Bahasa Indonesia and develop their cross-cultural skills and sensitivity to cultural difference through educational exchange and internships. Most of Indonesia's national politicians speak at least some English but I am not aware that any Australian parliamentarians speak more than a few simple words of tourist Bahasa. Australian business managers and expatriate staff are not yet expected to learn Bahasa as demonstrable proof of commitment to mutually productive engagement with Indonesia. This is a glaring imbalance that reflects a national failure in language and cross-cultural education since the Howard government foolishly terminated funding for the National Asian Languages & Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS) program. This in turn reflects a big difference in attitudes towards education in general. Indonesians place very high value on advanced education as a means of self-improvement and upward mobility. Within two generations, Indonesia has been transformed from a society with very high illiteracy to one of near universal literacy and a high rate of secondary education. Over the same period, Australian governments have decided that there are few votes in education and continue to find ways to drag funding out of education and reduce its quality while shifting costs onto individuals. The consequences of these opposite trajectories are becoming more and more apparent.

Final Thoughts

Rebuilding and developing the Australia-Indonesia relationship will therefore need more than Mr Turnbull's smile and politeness and Ms Bishop's patient diplomacy but it is a good start. Indonesia is keen to engage with Australia as part of a regional balance of power and it welcomes trade and investment opportunities from Australia, which despite

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proximity is not yet a major economic partner. Ministerial exchanges have resumed and the Australia-Indonesia Business Council (AIBC) and its counterpart (IABC) are both very active. Australian universities have been energetic in recruiting Indonesian students but slow to build links with Indonesian counterparts, but there are now signs of progress with the recent Australia-Indonesia Centre working as a catalyst.

Nevertheless, if the Turnbull government is serious about the quality and stability of the long-term relationship, it needs to review *how* Australians are going about it. A government seeking to promote innovation might acknowledge that cross-cultural skills and facility in non-English languages are an important part of being a global citizen and doing business in a global world. Jetsetting and roaming in English is just to skim the surface. From primary school upwards there should be to opportunity to learn about the world we live in, not least our closest neighbour Indonesia, and pathways and incentives to acquire language and cross-cultural skills. On the Indonesian aside, Australia does not yet feature in the school curriculum and there are almost no resources in Bahasa for those wishing to learn about us. Nor are there yet internationally recognised proficiency levels for Bahasa: this is an obstacle to foreign study of Bahasa and a good opportunity for Australia-Indonesia collaboration. In any marriage, it is wise to consult and listen. Where partners have different native languages, it is wise that each becomes to some extent bilingual. In such ways we build affection, trust and confidence to enjoy the fruits of a shared future. When Mr Turnbull can go with Pak Jokowi to Tanah Abang and speak some Bahasa, as Mr Cameron can go to Paris and speak some French, then truly we will have arrived in a new era.

About the author:

Howard Dick is an Honorary Professorial Fellow in the Faculty of Business & Economics at the University of Melbourne and Conjoint Professor in the Faculty of Business & Law at the University of Newcastle (NSW). He is a member of the Editorial Board of the *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* and Associate of the Centre for Indonesian Law, Islam & Society (CILIS). He recently published 'The Mind Gap: Australia-Indonesia Relations', in Antje Missbach & Jemma Purdey (eds), *Linking People: Connections and encounters between Australians and Indonesians*. Berlin: Regiospectra Verlag (2015), pp. 27-45.