

# WebMemo



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## Adjusting to the Reality of a Democratic Indonesia

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In Washington, inertia often carries the day on even the most anachronistic policy ideas. Congress proved this axiom on June 5 when appropriators in the House of Representatives slashed and conditioned the Administration's request to provide military assistance to Indonesia.

Indonesia today is a large, vibrant democracy and a key piece of the geostrategic puzzle in Asia. It is also among the United States' most important partners in the War on Terror. Approached wisely, the U.S.–Indonesian relationship embodies a convergence of interests on values, geopolitics, and security that is rare among U.S. relationships in the developing world.

The House Appropriations Subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations has charted a strikingly unwise course. Under the leadership of Representative Nita Lowey (D–NY), it has covered its collective ears to the history of the last decade and has forged ahead with a policy that ignores reality and the vital American interests at stake in the region.

**Roots of Contention.** Military assistance to Indonesia first became a matter of contention in Washington following the Dili Massacre of 1991, in which hundreds of protestors in East Timor were murdered by the armed forces of East Timor's erstwhile ruler, Indonesia. The debate was stoked in 1999 by the scorched earth reaction of Indonesian troops and pro-Indonesia militias to East Timor's overwhelming vote in favor of independence. For good reason, these unconscionable abuses strained relations between the United States and Indonesia.

**Democracy in Indonesia.** But since 1999, the world has been turned upside down. An emerging, unstable democracy then, Indonesia is now a flourishing democracy. In October 1999, Indonesia elected a president—albeit indirectly—for the first time in 50 years. Five years later, an astounding 350 million votes were cast in three national elections—including a direct election for president. The final round of the 2004 presidential election, involving 117 million voters and 77 percent of eligible voters, was the largest single election day in history. Among the many remarkable facets of Indonesia's democracy, the 2004 elections produced 61 women members of the 550-seat lower house and 27 out of 128 in the upper house.

Acknowledging that elections do not necessarily equal democracy, it should also be pointed out that Indonesians have taken to vigorously exercising their civil liberties. There are 16 political parties, hundreds of newspapers and magazines, independent television and radio outlets, and countless web sites commenting on Indonesian politics. Lively political debate reverberates across many forums and media. According to Freedom House, Indonesia is the freest country in Southeast Asia.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/wm1495.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/wm1495.cfm)

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Symbolic of Indonesia's progress, in 2005, Indonesian President Bambang Susilo Yudhoyono visited the site of the 1991 Dili Massacre to pay his respects. The East Timorese Prime Minister reciprocated by telling his countrymen to "Forget the past and look to the future." Today, Indonesia and East Timor enjoy a close, cooperative relationship due in major part to the effort of former president and independence-hero Xanana Gusmao. The same week that House appropriators were taking Indonesia to task, in fact, the current president of East Timor, Jose Ramos Horta, was in Jakarta echoing the same sentiment offered by his government in 2005, saying, "The important thing is we don't allow ourselves to be hostage of the past but look forward with courage."

Despite its searing, up-close experience in the 1990s, East Timor has come to peace with Indonesia. Yet, its well-meaning supporters in the U.S. Congress seem unable to acknowledge new realities.

**Strategic Concerns for the United States.** Two other things have changed since 1999.

*First*, the meteoric rise of China has made the presence of a strong, U.S.-friendly ASEAN—the association of 10 Southeast Asian nations on China's strategic doorstep—a critical U.S. interest. Indonesia, straddling waters that accommodate half of the world's commercial cargo transit, is an important part of U.S. geopolitical calculations in its own right. But, as a nation of 235 million people and 17,000 islands, it is also ASEAN's indispensable power.

Every day, China becomes a more effective competitor for the region's interests. Particularly since 2002, its focus in Southeast Asia has shifted from its territorial claims in the South China Sea to lavishing the region with diplomatic attention. Without due vigilance, commitment, and wise policy choices, the time is not far off when the U.S. role as guarantor of regional security and stability will be up for grabs. The United States needs friends in the region; and Indonesia, by whole-heartedly embracing universal democratic ideals, has made being friends as easy as any nation in the world.

*Second*, the United States is six years into waging the good fight on global terrorism. Indonesia and

the U.S. share fundamental interests in this war. Indonesians themselves have been victims of terrorism. Terrorists have directed major acts of violence against the country's tourism industry and foreign communities, killing many innocent foreigners as well as Indonesians.

For many years, the terrorists have sought to inflame sectarian divisions in the same way that al-Qaeda has done so effectively elsewhere in the world. Terrorists have also sought to establish training beachheads in Indonesia's far-flung territories. But the terrorists in Indonesia are losing: There have been no major acts of terrorism in Indonesia since October 2005.

Moderation is in the DNA of Indonesia's national character. Certainly, there is a battle going on for Indonesia's soul, as is being waged in much of the Muslim world. But in Indonesia, the extremists are faced with an extraordinarily resilient foe in Indonesia's famously syncretic, diverse, and tolerant culture. Congress can help strengthen the Indonesian government's hand through assistance and partnership, or it can hamper it by caveating its assistance. Indonesia will fight the war against terror without the United States; but American cooperation certainly improves its prospects. It is in the national interest for the United States to be there for its natural partners.

**Conclusion.** None of this is to suggest that the United States does not have differences with Indonesia. Indeed, Representative Lowey's concerns about accountability for past human rights abuses and the proper role of the military are legitimate. But the United States needs to get to a point where it addresses these concerns with the same respect it affords other democratic partners, like the Europeans or the Japanese. Limiting and legally conditioning military-to-military relations is not the best way to address differences; it is a page from the past. The recent action by House appropriators is counterproductive and damaging to vital American interests in Asia.

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