

# WebMemo



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## Secretary Clinton's Asia Trip: Indonesia's Role in the Spotlight

*Walter Lohman*

Expectations for Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Indonesia are sky high on symbolism and low on deliverables. Accepting that balance—unsatisfying as it may be to many American policy-makers—is the key to engaging Asia.

It is encouraging that the Administration seems to understand this. One can only hope that the appreciation for Asia's diplomatic ways is rooted in a deeper understanding of America's strategic objectives in the region. From a strategic perspective, the trip is an excellent opportunity to tend to America's two most important allies in Asia (Japan and South Korea) and consult with its chief competitor for regional influence (China).

It is surprising and well-noted in the media that Asia should be Clinton's first official destination as secretary of state. But whenever she took this trip, Japan, South Korea, and China—in this order—were virtually guaranteed a place on her schedule.

So where exactly does Indonesia fit in?

It is tempting to see Indonesia entirely through the lens of engagement with the "Muslim world." Indeed, Indonesia is the world's most populous predominantly Muslim country. Its gentle faith, deep spirituality, and respect for pluralism are an inspiration and example to the world. An Indonesian face on Islam has the potential to completely change the way many in the West view Muslims.

Due to both President Obama's connections to Indonesia and the strong diplomatic foundation created by President Bush, U.S.–Indonesia relations

are poised for a constructive new era. There are two things, however, that Clinton should keep in mind as she prepares to usher it in: First, Indonesia is much more than a "Muslim country," and second, it is a developing democracy under assault from a determined Islamist minority.

**Much More Than a "Muslim Country."** Indonesia is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations's (ASEAN) indispensable member. With Indonesia, ASEAN has a population of 575 million. Without it, the association is 40 percent smaller. With Indonesia, ASEAN's GDP is about \$1.2 trillion. Without it, its GDP is only two-thirds that figure. Indonesia's 17,000 islands stretch over three time zones and more than 40 percent of ASEAN's land area. Without Indonesia, ASEAN is mostly packed together on land along China's south.

As China's gravitational pull grows, only Indonesia has the critical mass necessary to anchor ASEAN in an independent and outward-looking orientation. The combination of the remainder of ASEAN nations is too disparate in political outlook and interest to provide the balance. Without Indonesia at its center, there is no ASEAN. And without ASEAN, each country in southeast Asia would be

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forced to fend for itself in the face of China's meteoric rise.

For several years following the collapse of the Suharto regime in 1998, Indonesia took a break from regional leadership to deal with political revolution and economic tumult. When Indonesia returned as a regional leader, it did so with a democratic government.

And anyone who does not think that makes a difference in Indonesian foreign policy is not watching carefully enough. Concern in Jakarta about the strength of ASEAN's commitment to "promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms" has led Indonesians to question the value of ASEAN membership. In the debate over the ASEAN charter last year, the Indonesian House of Representatives went so far as to virtually condition its approval of the charter on progress toward this goal.

Geopolitics in Asia is overlaid with the pattern states cut relative to their governing systems. America's five treaty allies are all democracies: Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand, and the Philippines. While a security "alliance" with Indonesia is not feasible, a closer U.S.–Indonesia "strategic partnership" clearly is. When he was in Washington this past fall, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono called for the creation of such a partnership. Clinton has indicated that the United States is ready to take him up on the idea. She is right to do so.

The U.S. should be able to strike a deal more closely aligned with Indonesia's values than Indonesia's "partnership" with China. Consider, for example, Burma. Despite their massive influence in Burma, the Chinese have done nothing to help bring about justice in that nation. The Indonesians, by contrast, have emerged as the leading voice on the issue within ASEAN. The U.S. and Indonesia should explore what they can do together to pressure the Burmese junta to release political prisoners and move toward democracy. If Indonesia can nudge ASEAN toward activism on Burma, the Chinese will be hard pressed not to follow. The Chinese have, in fact, acknowledged as much.

Burma should certainly be on the "concrete" agenda Clinton says she wants to hammer out with the Indonesians. ASEAN is at a tipping point in terms of governance. By Freedom House's calcula-

tion, half of ASEAN is "free" or "partly free"; half is "not free." A democratic Burma would tip the scales in favor of liberty. Such a development would be good for all nations concerned: for Burma, for the developing democracies within ASEAN, and for those not yet democratic. And ASEAN's democratic disposition would be good for the United States.

**Uncertain Trends in Indonesian Politics.** To say Indonesian politics today are freewheeling is an understatement. In advance of April parliamentary elections, all parties and possible presidential candidates are jockeying for position. Virtually every combination of parties is being discussed. Many of them make extraordinarily strange bedfellows. For example, PDI-P, the party that serves as the vehicle for Sukarno's pluralist legacy, has been publicly considered as senior partner in a coalition with Islamist parties. The Islamist parties are, of course, widely assumed partners of President Yudhoyono's own Democrat Party—in whose government they already serve. And even coalitions among mainstream Muslim parties and their fierce Islamist competition are on the table.

**Pancasila and Political Parties.** It is often said that political parties in Asia are personality-based as opposed to ideologically based. While often true, such shorthand is a little too simple. For example, in Indonesia, it overlooks a fundamental distinction in the parties. Most Indonesian political parties, in number and representation in parliament, subscribe to *Pancasila*, a word derived from Sanskrit that enshrines the five non-sectarian principles of the Indonesian state: belief in God, just and civilized humanity, the unity of Indonesia, representative democracy, and social justice. Four prominent parties reject *Pancasila* in favor of a Shari'a-based Islamic government.

On the whole, the Islamist parties are more focused, disciplined, and audibly committed to their ideology than other parties. These groups know that even if they never reach the numbers of the pro-*Pancasila* parties, they can still dictate the terms of debate. The efforts of mainstream parties to curry their favor only validate that belief.

Clinton should be mindful of this dynamic and choose her words and interlocutors in ways that support *Pancasila*. Indonesia is not the Middle East.

There is a misguided strain of American opinion calling for dialogue with Islamists in the Middle East—the Muslim Brotherhood, for instance. It is a strain that easily flows into the White House’s new inclination toward dialogue with all comers. The Islamists are much stronger in the Middle East. Going out of her way to accommodate them in Indonesia will give them a new edge on their political competition.

**On the Cusp of a New Era in U.S.–Indonesia Relations.** President Bush’s policies improved U.S.–Indonesia relations. Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono called him “one of the most pro-Indonesia Presidents” in history. President Bush normalized military relations with Indonesia. He secured their highly valuable cooperation in the war on terrorism. In 2006, Indonesia was included in the Millennium Challenge Account Threshold Pro-

gram. President Bush also initiated a widely heralded five-year effort to improve the Indonesian education system. Although wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the Bush Administration’s approach to the Middle East were not popular in Indonesia, disagreements over these issues did not stand in the way of a productive relationship on the things both nations did agree on.

By accident mostly of his birth and upbringing, Barack Obama’s popularity in Indonesia is off the charts. All ears in Indonesia are open to what he and his representatives have to say. The way Clinton frames her visit, what she talks about, and how she says it will set the boundaries on a U.S.–Indonesia relationship that has extraordinary potential.

—Walter Lohman is Director of the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.