A way forward for Indonesia–Australia relations
It is hard to avoid a sense of déjà vu when one looks at Indonesia-Australia relations today. Our fundamental strategic interests mostly converge – from regional and maritime stability to managing China's growing power – even if our policy preferences diverge in various issue areas. And each country realises the importance of the other.

But although the Indonesia-Australia relationship looks balanced and sturdy from the outside, it is easily knocked down. ‘Exogenous shocks’ – from terrorism to asylum seekers, beef exports and executions – regularly test the relationship.

Yet those shocks also offer some lessons. Even though, under President Jokowi, the relationship is at a low point, we are not entering uncharted waters. We have been here before, which means we can build on a familiar narrative. Analysts did this when they pointed out what both countries could do to repair the diplomatic damage created by the Chan and Sukumaran executions.

But if we want Indonesia-Australia relations to break free from this pattern and enter a new phase, we should start sketching out what a genuinely equal strategic partnership would look like.

On Canberra’s side, one can start by abandoning outdated lenses to make sense of Indonesia. For example, we can debate the extent of a ‘cultural gap’ between the two societies, but to cast the relationship as one of ‘cultural divide’ or to argue that it suffers from lack of ‘cultural intelligence’ is unhelpful. For one thing, cultural variables are often immutable as far as policy is concerned. For another, using cultural lenses to view policy problems might lead to a xenophobic slippery slope. There are certainly differences between our societies, but they are not the ‘root’ of all the bilateral problems.

Indonesia is a now a democratic state, and it should be understood as such. How often does Australia consider its problems with other democratic countries in the region as one of ‘cultural difference’?

Indonesia should be understood on its own terms, rather than defined by preconceived fault lines such as culture. But of course democratic consolidation is a messy process, which makes it difficult to fully understand Indonesia's trajectory. As Richard Woolcott once noted, Australia sometimes overlooks how long it can take to fashion a stable democracy. However, we should be encouraged that, as a recent Lowy poll noted, there is growing pragmatism among the Australian public over better ties with Indonesia, and perhaps a greater appreciation that Indonesia needs time to stabilise its democratic politics.

There will be times when Indonesians and Australians elect leaders with different views, ties and personal stakes in the bilateral relationship. For a stronger partnership to survive, we need to think harder about institutionalising the relationship beyond the personal ties. Efforts to move in that direction have begun in recent years with the establishment of regular ‘Strategic Partner’ talks between defence ministers. But dialogues shouldn’t simply be high-level events where prepared statements are traded. They should be a series of regular, sustained discussions before and after those meetings. Regular consultations breed familiarity and help to avoid surprises (such as when Jakarta felt slighted over the placement of US Marines in Darwin).

On Jakarta’s side, an equal strategic partnership means Indonesia needs to start picking up the tab in terms of investing in its own governance institutions – from corruption to education. As long as Jakarta relies heavily on foreign aid, a strategic partnership with Australia will never be equal. Some in Jakarta are realising this imperative. After all, as Hugh White noted almost a decade ago, no one, especially Indonesians, likes to need help, and gratitude is usually tempered by the unease at being placed in the position of supplicant. This is perhaps why Jakarta's reaction to the cut in Australia’s aid budget to Indonesia was so subdued.

Jakarta needs to be more proactive in driving the agenda in the partnership. Indonesia’s passive stance stems from another outdated lens; one that has historically seen the country as the ‘geopolitical prize’. This is exacerbated by a misguided sense of entitlement, both within the elite and general public, that Indonesia is a rising global power. Jakarta needs to abandon this passive approach. Rising power means a rising responsibility, and the foremost responsibility is to maintain a stable regional environment, for which our relationship with Australia is key.

Furthermore, a more proactive Jakarta gives Canberra a better sense of Indonesia’s priorities, and it signals that we are as invested in understanding and engaging our neighbour as the other way around. In short, if Jakarta wants to be treated as an equal partner, it should start behaving like one.

Photo courtesy of Flickr user G20 Australia 2014.