U.S., Indonesia Must Avoid False Promises and Pitfalls

Evan A. Laksmana  |  Friday, March 26, 2010

JAKARTA, Indonesia -- Before U.S. President Barack Obama's scheduled visit to Indonesia this week was postponed, expectations in both Washington and Jakarta were running at a fever pitch, especially in anticipation of the possible signing of a "Comprehensive Partnership" between the two countries


On one side, Washington is eager to strengthen relations with Southeast Asia's largest democracy in the face of growing Chinese influence. The fact that Indonesia is home to the world's largest Muslim population also plays into the Obama administration's efforts to further reach out to the Muslim world and improve its global standing. Finally, Indonesia's geostrategic location -- at the center of gravity between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and controlling the world's busiest maritime trade route at the Malacca Strait -- makes it paramount both for ongoing U.S. military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and for securing the economic and energy lifeline of U.S. allies and rivals in the region.

For his part, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono needs a foreign policy triumph to mitigate plummeting public approval ratings and domestic political crises. The visit, now rescheduled for June, could provide Yudhoyono with especially valuable political mileage if it finally removes the U.S. ban on funding and training for Indonesia's Army Special Forces (Kopassus) -- the last "pebble in the shoe" in U.S.-Indonesia defense relations. Of course, expanded American investment and education initiatives wouldn't hurt either.
Yet, for all the excitement, it's easy to overlook some of the underlying false promises and pitfalls of the bilateral relationship.

First of all, although Indonesia is the world's fourth-largest democracy and has over 180 million Muslims, to expect Indonesia to play a leading role in the "Muslim World," if such an entity exists, would be unrealistic. For one thing, Indonesians are never fully comfortable injecting religion into foreign policy. Not only are they uneasy about the binary distinction between "radical" and "moderate" Muslims in world politics, but they are also leery of compromising the country's "Independent and Active" foreign policy posture. They also worry about the reactions such an overt religious identification might provoke among the country's domestic minorities.

For another, it would be extremely difficult for Indonesia to play a leading role in the Muslim world when Middle Eastern countries do not necessarily "accept" the country as such, especially since Jakarta hasn't exactly been deeply engaged with critical problems like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Second, although the U.S. may be concerned about China's growing influence in Southeast Asia, to expect that Jakarta would somehow be naturally inclined to favor one great power over another, while also driving ASEAN toward a new "regional architecture," would be raising the bar a bit too high. Traditionally, Indonesia has never been very successful partnering with just one great power for a long period of time, a lesson learned from the country's experiences during the Cold War. If anything, to paraphrase political scientist Evelyn Goh, Jakarta seems more comfortable with an "Omni-Enmeshment" strategy that balances ties with several competing great-power "suitors."

At the same time, for all its sense of regional entitlement, Indonesia still punches below its weight, even in Southeast Asia. Jakarta's efforts to drive the process of deepening democracy in the region through the ASEAN Charter and ASEAN Political Security Community, for example, have been thwarted by the "ASEAN Way" of consensual policymaking. In fact, in light of the existing political, economic, and security gaps that exist among ASEAN countries, any one member country would be hard-pressed to push its leadership agenda onto the rest. Little wonder that even Jakarta's own...
relations with ASEAN have been less than steady throughout the years.

Third, while the U.S. has been going on a "soft power" binge in the past year to repair its image in this part of the world, the tactic of engaging a country with promises of American culture, education, and ideology may not necessarily be the best choice for Indonesia. On the cultural side, though Indonesians are somewhat globalized -- that is, they "drink Coke, eat McDonalds, watch CNN, and wear jeans" -- that doesn't make them consistently more favorable to American policy. In fact, a poll by the Indonesian Survey Institute in 2005 showed that 62 percent of Indonesians believe American culture to be "disruptive" to Indonesia's Muslim culture.

Some also condemn the excesses of "liberal democracy" in Indonesia today, which has thus far led to more politicking, corruption, and chaos, instead of delivering good governance, stability, and economic welfare.

More importantly however, at a time when unemployment and poverty are rising, energy sources are growing scarcer, environmental damage is worsening, and basic infrastructure is in disarray, Indonesia needs concrete deliverables, not symbolic gestures, such as lifting the Kopassus ban, or "soft power" approaches.

In fact, Indonesia could use some displays of "hard power." One would be "hard currency," especially economic aid and foreign direct investments. Another would be "hardware," in terms of technological cooperation -- especially technology transfers and offsets -- in the defense, environmental, and life sciences sectors. The improvement in U.S.-Indonesia defense relations in recent years, as embargoes were progressively lifted while joint trainings and military aid gradually rose, could be a model to follow.

Nevertheless, the Obama presidency and his eventual visit do offer a unique opportunity for both countries. And Jakarta is hoping that Obama’s emotional attachment to Indonesia, and more importantly, his sense of pragmatism, help take the relationship to the next level.

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Photo: President Barack Obama with Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono during the G-20 Pittsburgh Summit, Sept. 25, 2009 (White House photo by Pete Souza).

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