



Indonesia and the democratic middle powers: A new basis for collaboration?

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INTRODUCTION

It has become fashionable in scholarly and even policymaking circles to describe Australia as a middle power.¹ Middle powers, the argument goes, have particular qualities that not only distinguish them from other states, but which may provide the basis for cooperative relationships with each other. Indeed, a preference for collaboration within multilateral organisations is widely taken to be one of the hallmarks of contemporary middle powers.² What distinguishes Australian foreign policy in this regard is that Australian policymakers have taken what was formerly a fairly obscure academic term and used it to define Australia's overall approach to international relations. After a long hiatus under the Howard Coalition government, the label was resurrected by Kevin Rudd and was enthusiastically adopted by Julia Gillard as the basis for her government's foreign policy.³

Although opinions vary about quite how useful the term 'middle power' actually is, even skeptics would have to concede that it has assumed a sudden salience in Australia. For better or worse, the fashion is spreading: one of the consequences of the remarkable economic transformation of East Asia has been a concomitant rise in the number of increasingly prosperous, potential middle powers in the region. While not actually using the term, Indonesian Foreign Minister Natalegawa's statement that 'in any international forum, including ASEAN and the G20, Indonesia will bridge different visions between nation-states and show Indonesia's moderate and strong views', captures the predilection of middle powers for multilateral cooperation.⁴ Although there is no complete agreement on what precisely makes a middle power, the position of such a power in the international hierarchy of states and its diplomatic behavior are generally thought to be pivotal. In this regard Australia is comfortably in the world's top twenty economies; it possesses a not-insignificant strategic capacity; and maintains a track record of activist, multilateral diplomacy. So, too, do a number of its neighbours.

No country is more significant in this regard than Indonesia. Not only has Indonesia rapidly joined Australia in the world's economic top twenty, and may soon overtake it, but increasingly it functions as a prominent member of the international community. Like the idea of middle powers, this phrase is less illuminating than we might wish,⁵ but it

is suggestive of those states that aspire to greater foreign policy prominence. In this context the possible importance of the middle power label is potentially even more significant for Indonesia than it is for Australia: no longer quite as preoccupied with maintaining internal stability, newly enriched, and internationally recognised as first among notional equals in Southeast Asia, Indonesia has begun to assume a more prominent international profile.⁶ The marker of its transition from a Southeast Asian power to one with global heft was, like Australia, its accession to the G20. Before trying to decide whether this will change Indonesia's relationship with Australia – or the rest of Southeast Asia, for that matter – it is useful to say something about the historical context in which the bilateral relationship has evolved.

THE EVOLVING RELATIONSHIP

The bilateral relationship between Australia and Indonesia is becoming increasingly important. In part, this reflects Indonesia's growing economic and strategic weight in the region as its most populous state, and one that is Islamic. The nightmare at the back of Australian minds—especially in the aftermath of S11 and the Bali bombings—has been that Indonesia's rather relaxed version of Islamism might become radicalised. Thus far, there are few signs of this occurring. The security cooperation between Australia and Indonesia and the success of counter-terrorism operations is testimony to deepening of the relationship, even if it reinforces unfortunate stereotypes about Australia coming to the aid of its fragile neighbour.⁷ However, things have not always been as cordial as this, and there is no guarantee that they will remain so.

It is important to remember that for most of Indonesia's relatively brief history as an independent state, middle power status looked unlikely. Although it is not clear whether aspiring middle powers need to be democratic, it plainly adds a degree of legitimacy that greases diplomatic wheels for those that are.⁸ Indonesia, by contrast, has until recently been ruled by Suharto, with whom Australian policymakers had considerable difficulty convincing a skeptical public of the merits of establishing close ties. Nevertheless, a key part of Paul Keating's 'engagement' with Asia was the attempt to 'throw in Australia's lot with Indonesia in a more committed and unreserved way than ever before'.⁹ Rejection of the Keating agenda in the 1996 election is a reminder of the difficulty of translating major foreign policy initiatives into saleable elements of domestic public policy.

1 C. Ungerer, 'The "Middle Power" Concept in Australian Foreign Policy', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 53(4): pp. 538–51.

2 A.F. Cooper, R.A. Higgott, and K.R. Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order*, (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1993).

3 K. Rudd, 'Advancing Australia's Global and Regional Economic Interests', *Address to the East Asia Forum*, March 26; Commonwealth of Australia (2012) *Australia in the Asian Century*, (CoA: Canberra, 2008).

4 Y. Hermawan et al., 'The Role of Indonesia in the G20: Background, Role and Objectives of Indonesia's membership', Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, available at: www.g20.utoronto.ca/biblio/role-of-indonesia-2011.pdf accessed 15 December 2012.

5 C.E. David, 'On the Possibility of "International Community"', *International Studies Review*, 11(1): 1–26.

6 E.A. Laksmana, 'Indonesia's Rising Regional and Global Profile: Does Size Really Matter?', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, (2011), 32(2): pp. 157–183.

7 R. Chauvel, 'Australia and Indonesia: living in different strategic worlds', in D. McDougall and P. Shearman (eds.), *Australian security after 9/11: new and old agendas*, (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 145 and 159.

8 T.L. Chapman, 'Audience beliefs and international organization legitimacy', *International Organization* 63(04): (2009), pp. 733–764; R.B. Hall (1997) 'Moral authority as a power resource', *International Organization* 51(4): pp. 591–622.

9 R. Dalrymple, *Continental drift: Australia's search for a regional identity*, (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2003).

The great hope now is that a democratic Indonesia—arguably more structurally integrated in capitalist markets than before—will prove to be a reliable and acceptable partner. While this may eventually prove to be the case, it is important to remember that the nature of the future relationship is far from certain and—when judged from the self-interested calculus of *realpolitik*—the old relationship has not been without its merits. Unattractive as the Suharto regime may have been in many ways, it had two great redeeming features as far as Australian policymakers were concerned: predictability and stability. For decades, Suharto maintained domestic order and thus minimised the potential threat posed by a chaotic, destabilised Indonesia. While the direct military threat posed by Indonesia may have been modest, even this could be discounted in the knowledge that its primary strategic focus was internal. Keating pragmatically noted that ‘Suharto is the best thing in strategic terms that had happened for Australia; by bringing stability to the archipelago he has minimised the Australian defence budget’.¹⁰

One of the disadvantages of Indonesia’s democratic transition from the perspective of Canberra is that policymaking in Indonesia has become more complex. More actors and potential ‘veto players’ are involved in the construction of foreign policy in democratic Indonesia, and as a consequence this necessarily makes it less predictable.¹¹ Authoritarianism in Indonesia was not without its attractions, for it dovetailed with Australia’s anxiety about Asia. It is not necessary to become bogged down in relatively arcane debates about the construction of national identities to recognise that Australia’s Western social and political heritage is a potential source of friction when juxtaposed with Asia. The focus of such tensions has often been human rights issues, about which critics argue successive Australian governments have maintained a studious silence.¹² National interests, the argument goes, routinely trump ethical principles.

Yet, the calculus of national interests is equally complex in Indonesia.¹³ Views about Australia generally and the best way to conduct bilateral ties reflect this underlying reality. Kai He argues that different calibrations of international pressure combine with the political legitimacy of the relevant post-Suharto administration to determine patterns of state behaviour across policy issues.¹⁴ Those aspects of Australia represented by its unrelenting pressure on Indonesia to contribute to programs

of deterring asylum-seekers, and as a potential ally to hedge against the rise of China, elicit different responses from within Indonesia. In this regard, Southeast Asian states are no different to their counterparts elsewhere and reflect contingent struggles for power and the expression of competing interests.¹⁵

COMPETING INTERESTS

For Indonesia and especially Australia, relations with other countries are more important than relations with each other. Despite talk about the commonalities that supposedly exist between—if not actually unite—middle powers, the reality is more prosaic and raises questions about how much the international system has changed. Although there is much animated discussion about the rise of the BRICs and the possible inclusion of Indonesia in an expanded BRILCs (Brazil, Russia, India, Indonesia, China, South Africa),¹⁶ at this stage much about the international system looks surprisingly familiar and the foreign policies of Australia and Indonesia continue to reflect this.

For Australia in particular, its principal economic and strategic relations lie elsewhere. China has rapidly become Australia’s main trade partner and the United States remains its foremost security guarantor. Indeed, relations with the United States dominate all other foreign policy concerns, including how it manages its relations with China and the rest of the region.¹⁷ The recent decision to station troops in Darwin was part of Australia’s long-running policy of strategically binding itself to the dominant Western power of the era. It was not only the Chinese who predictably expressed indignation at this turn of events.¹⁸ Indonesia also expressed surprise at the development of a major military base on its doorstep,¹⁹ even though the primary intent of the base was to curb Chinese, rather than Indonesian influence. The point to emphasise is that many of Australia’s most important bilateral relationships remain subordinate to those with the United States, arguably circumscribing Australia’s policymaking autonomy as a consequence.

10 M. Boyle, ‘Policy-making and pragmatism: Australia’s management of security cooperation with Indonesia during the new order period’, *UNSW / ADFA PhD thesis*, (2002), p. 334.

11 J. Ruland, ‘Deepening ASEAN cooperation through democratization? The Indonesian legislature and foreign policymaking, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, (9) pp. 373–402; P. Sulistyanto (2010), ‘Indonesia–Australia relations in the era of democracy: the view from the Indonesian side’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 45 (1), pp. 117–32.

12 A. Burke, ‘Questions of community: Australian identity and Asian change’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 45 (1), (2010), p. 80.

13 On the construction of national interests, see J. Weldes, ‘Constructing national interests’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 2(3), (1996), pp. 275–318.

14 K. He, ‘Indonesia’s foreign policy after Soeharto: international pressure, democratization, and policy change’, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 8 (1), (2008), p. 49.

15 L. Jones (2009) ‘Democratisation and foreign policy in Southeast Asia: the case of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 22 (3), (2008), p. 391.

16 K. Brooks, ‘Is Indonesia bound for the BRICS? How stalling reform could hold Jakarta back’, *Foreign Affairs* 90(6), (2011), pp. 109–118.

17 M. Beeson, ‘Can Australia save the world? The limits and possibilities of middle power diplomacy’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 65(5), (2011), pp. 563–577.

18 M. Sainsbury, ‘Chinese grilling has Stephen Smith on defensive over US ties’, *The Australian*, 7 June (2012).

19 S. McDonald and H. Brown, ‘China, Indonesia wary of US troops in Darwin’, ABC News, (2011), available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-11-17/china-indonesia-wary-of-us-troops-in-darwin/3675866>, accessed 15 December 2012.

But for Indonesia, too, relations with other states complicate bilateral relations. In Indonesia's case the primary independent variable is ASEAN. For all of the states of Southeast Asia, ASEAN has had historical importance as a vehicle with which to manage sometimes fractious intra-regional relations, reinforcing domestic sovereignty, and generally raising the international profile and significance of the entire Southeast Asian region.²⁰ Recently, however, the famed ASEAN consensus has begun to unravel and the organisation has appeared increasingly unable to respond to a rapidly changing regional environment – much to the frustration of some of its more progressive members, such as Indonesia.²¹

In such circumstances, Indonesia has begun to look beyond the region to pursue its increasingly broad-ranging and ambitious foreign policy goals. Indonesia is routinely considered to be one of the more consequential actors in the region, something its growing economic presence and status as the world's largest Muslim country has reinforced. Not all Indonesians agree with this shift of emphasis or Indonesia's evolving foreign policy priorities, something that is manifest in Indonesia's inconsistent international stance. When thwarted by its more authoritarian neighbours, Jakarta has advocated internationalism in the form of a peacekeeping force in an ASEAN Security Community underpinned by liberal-democratic norms. However, its reticence in ratifying the ASEAN Transboundary Pollution Agreement, citing 'national interests', is a reminder of the continuing domestic constraints on policy.²² This is making Australia's increasingly important neighbour less predictable in some ways. For admirers of middle power theory, this may come as something of a surprise, but it is a reminder of how varied conceptions of 'national interests' can be, and just how much national priorities can be shaped by parochial concerns.

STILL STRANGE NEIGHBOURS?

One of the problems facing both Indonesia and Australia is that it is often assumed that there is a relatively clear sense of the national interest when it comes to international relations. And yet, whether we consider specific bilateral ties or a more general international role, there is often intense national debate regarding the content of foreign policy and the best venues for prosecuting it. In Australia's case, this was most evident during the Howard era, when the former prime minister and his foreign minister Alexander Downer displayed a marked preference for bilateral, rather than multilateral relationships where possible.²³ In part this reflected heightened skepticism over the role and value of institutions such as the United Nations. It was also partially an expression of the Howard government's intense strategic loyalty to and ideological affinity with the administration of George W. Bush. But even if we acknowledge that this was an especially controversial geopolitical period, the idea that Australia might have had particular interests that flowed primarily from its position as a middle power looked inherently implausible.

As we have seen, the Gillard government has continued the Howard government policy of cultivating close strategic ties with the United States. But even in an arena where we might expect Australia to take a more independent line and unambiguously establish its independent middle-power credentials, reality indicates otherwise. Australia's successful campaign to obtain a temporary seat on the UN Security Council might mark an important vote of confidence in one of the world's premier multinational organisations, but it is unlikely to result in policies that are out of kilter with an established pattern of strategic and even ideational dependency.²⁴ The idea that Australia would take a position at odds with the United States or key US allies such as Israel is almost unthinkable.

Interestingly, there are signs that newly democratic Indonesia may be more capable of assuming an independent position on key issues than Australia. In some ways Indonesia is fortunate that it is not directly involved in the growing territorial disputes with China to the extent of some of its fellow ASEAN members such as the Philippines and Vietnam.²⁵ But as noted, this has only served to highlight the differences between ASEAN members and to heighten Indonesia's growing frustration. Indonesia is also unconstrained by long-term strategic dependence of the sort that Australia maintains with the United States. Although this confers some notional freedom of action, that action is limited by Indonesia's recognised need to take the actions and preferences of the great powers inside and outside its region seriously.²⁶

20 S. Narine, *Explaining Asean: Regionalism in Southeast Asia*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002).

21 P. Barta and C. Tejada, 'Sea dispute upends Asian summit', *Wall Street Journal*, 15 July 2012.

22 A. Acharya, *Constructing a security community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the problem of regional order*, 2nd edition, (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 254 and 265.

23 M. Wesley, 'The Howard Paradox: Australian Diplomacy in Asia 1996–2006', (Sydney: ABC Books, 2007).

24 R. Peake, 'Council seat demands independent thinking', *Canberra Times*, 20 October 2012).

25 I. Storey, 'Asean Is a house divided', *Wall Street Journal*, 14 June 2012.

26 D. Novotny, 'Torn between America and China: Elite Perceptions And Indonesian Foreign Policy', (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010).

Even where we might expect the greatest potential for collaboration to exist, hegemonic priorities and expectations continue to impose limitations. The G20, which pivots on the ‘compromise’ between developed and ‘systemically important’ emerging economies,²⁷ is a new institution of which both Australian and Indonesian policymakers are delighted to be a part. Schirm’s analysis of contestations within the G20 suggests that new thinking and alignments may be able to overcome divisions between industrialised and emerging states, auguring well for Australia–Indonesia cooperation if true.²⁸ Their joint convening of the ‘Growth with resilience’ chapter of the G20 development working group during 2011, focusing on ‘social protection’, is illustrative of converging expectations about how politics should govern economies: expectations that are only tepidly shared by the G7. Likewise, the G20 potentially offers a venue in which Indonesia in particular can escape the frustrations and limited scope of ASEAN. But as far as the Group’s ostensible rationale of reforming the international financial system is concerned, little of consequence has changed—a circumstance that reflects the continuing influence of the United States, Wall Street, and the sheer difficulty of achieving consensus on needed reforms.²⁹ As Australian officials have also discovered, while it may be gratifying to have a seat at the international table, with the chance to put one’s views, this is no guarantee that they will be taken seriously or make a difference.³⁰

There are a number of other emerging multilateral organisations that have the potential to influence the development of the region in which both Australia and Indonesia are members. In some ways, Australia has more at stake in a regional context than does Indonesia. After all, Indonesia is securely embedded in, if not the de facto leader of, the region’s most established grouping: ASEAN. Australia, by contrast, is potentially an outsider, which makes the very definition of the ‘the region’ and its putative membership far more consequential.³¹ Although Australia has abandoned Kevin Rudd’s brainchild – the Asia Pacific Community – the consolidation of the East Asian Summit achieves essentially the same goals: not only is Australia in, but so, too, is the United States.

27 S. Soederberg, ‘The politics of representation and financial fetishism: the case of the G20 summits’, *Third World Quarterly*, 31 (4), (2010), p. 529.

28 S. Schirm, (forthcoming), ‘Global politics are domestic politics: a societal approach to divergence in the G20’, *Review of International Studies*, p. 2.

29 M. Beeson, and S. Bell, ‘The G-20 and International Economic Governance: Hegemony, collectivism, or both?’, *Global Governance*, 15(1), (2009), pp. 67–86.

30 R.H. Wade, ‘Emerging World Order? From Multipolarity to Multilateralism in the G20, the World Bank, and the IMF’, *Politics & Society*, 39(3), (2011), pp. 347–378.

31 See: M. Beeson, ‘American Hegemony and Regionalism: The Rise of East Asia and the End of the Asia–Pacific’, *Geopolitics* 11(4), (2006), pp. 541–560; Higgott and Nossal, ‘Odd man in, odd man out: Australia’s liminal position in Asia revisited – a reply to Ann Capling’, *Pacific Review*, 21 (5), (2008), pp. 623–634.

Indonesia’s policy towards the EAS, especially in retaining Washington’s external balancing role, is remarkably similar to Australia’s, despite a notionally independent ‘free and active’ (*bebas dan aktif*) foreign policy. Indeed, Canberra and Jakarta have a broadly similar view of the possible benefits of continuing American dominance and engagement in underpinning regional order. Nevertheless, they struggle to act in concert to bring this about. This is in part because of what Hugh White calls Canberra’s ‘strategic ambivalence’ towards Indonesia, and the importance Australian policymakers attach to the alliance with the United States above all else.³² The notion of ‘strategic ambivalence’ conveys something important about Australian policymakers’ historical attitudes towards its most immediate and consequential neighbour: whether Indonesia is strong or weak, it is a source of concern for many in Canberra. Therefore, despite Paul Keating’s recent call for much closer ties with Indonesia,³³ there remain real limits to the degree of cooperation that is possible, either bilaterally or through multilateral auspices.

The point to emphasise, once again, is that Australia and Indonesia maintain considerably dissimilar priorities and foreign policy goals. This should come as no surprise, of course, to observers with a sense of the distinctive histories of the two countries. For all the fashionable talk concerning the possibilities of policy ‘convergence’,³⁴ which is often implicit in discussions of middle powers, it is also plain that the contemporary policymaking context and dynamics in Australia and Indonesia remain very different – the latter’s transition to democracy notwithstanding. Democracies may not fight each other as often as they do other regimes,³⁵ but this is not necessarily because their leaders subscribe to similar world views. Much the same can be said of middle powers. Indeed, it is striking that Australia—a democracy and middle power of some standing—retains what Edward Luttwak describes as ‘the Anglo-Saxon trait of bellicosity’.³⁶ In other words, Australia’s participation in every recent war of note and Indonesia’s relative quiescence cannot simply be interpreted as the result of their respective international circumstances. On the contrary, the foreign policies of middle powers—like those of any others—continue to reflect a complex, contingent amalgam of historical and contemporary influences. What distinguishes them as a group is their relatively limited ability to implement them. Similarly positioned and endowed states could collaborate; whether they will is more an expression of agency than structure.

32 H. White, ‘The New Australia–Indonesia Strategic Relationship: A Note of Caution’, in J. Monfries (ed.), *Different societies, shared futures: Australia, Indonesia and the region*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), p. 45.

33 P.J. Keating, ‘Asia in the New Order: Australia’s Diminishing Sphere of Influence’, *The Keith Murdoch Oration*, (State Library of Victoria, 14 November 2012).

34 C. Xun, ‘Global Networks and Domestic Policy Convergence: A Network Explanation of Policy Changes’, *World Politics* 64(03), (2012), pp. 375–425.

35 B.M. Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a post-Cold War World*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

36 E.N. Luttwak, *The Rise of China vs. the Logic of Strategy*, (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press, 2012), p. 107.

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