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President Obama Adds a Personal Touch to the US-Indonesia Relations

BY ENDY BAYUNI

Finally, President Barack Obama made it to Indonesia in his third attempt this year, and although he only stayed for less than 24 hours, Obama made a big impression on his Indonesian hosts who enthusiastically welcomed him. While this visit may not have added much substance to a relationship that has already been growing closer in recent years, Obama provided reinvigorated US-Indonesian ties something that few other bilateral relations exhibit: a personal connection.

Obama was visiting not only Southeast Asia's largest country and an important strategic partner for the United States; he was returning to the country where he had spent four years of his childhood and the country where his late mother Stanley Ann Dunham dedicated much of her professional career to helping the poor. It was evident that this visit to Indonesia as president of the United States was personally emotional for Obama, especially when he told a packed audience at the University of Indonesia in Jakarta: "*Pulang kampung nih.* (I have come home.)" However, Obama also made it clear that he was more interested in looking ahead to what the two nations can achieve together and how he would personally further US-Indonesian bilateral relations while he is in the White House.

Anyone expecting much more from Obama's visit to Indonesia was bound to be severely disappointed. Many observers compared it to his three-day visit to India, where he worked hard to further US-Indian economic and political ties. They say this should put a reality check on where Indonesia ranks in US foreign policy priorities in Asia, despite Obama's childhood memories of Indonesia. That is probably an unfair comparison, just as it is unreasonable to ask where Indonesia stands relative to China or to other US allies in Asia like Japan and South Korea. For historical and ideological reasons, Indonesia will never become an ally to the United States, although it will strive to be a friend and a partner in Asia.

Increasingly convergent self-interests have led Indonesia and the United States to forge closer relations in the last decade to the point that bilateral ties between the two nations are at their historic best today. However, another important factor at play is that as Indonesia transformed itself from a Cold War dictatorship into a full-fledged democracy, the two nations have learned that their shared values and principles on issues such as freedom, democracy, human rights, and pluralism make it easier for them to talk to each other.

Indonesia's importance to US strategic interests cannot be understated. Indonesia is both the world's third-largest democracy and a country with the largest Muslim population, a counterpoint to skeptics who argue that Islam and democracy are incompatible. The country is a major supplier of energy and natural resources, and as an archipelagic nation linking Asia and Australia, it controls vital international sea lanes. As

Endy Bayuni, Senior Editor of *The Jakarta Post*, argues that President Obama's personal links to Indonesia are another element of strength in the reinvigorated ties between the United States and Indonesia although the bilateral relations rests on the firm foundation of "increasingly convergent self-interests."



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its largest member nation, Indonesia plays a pivotal role in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that drives much of the economic and political integration currently taking place throughout Asia. Furthermore, Indonesia is also the only Southeast Asian member of the G20.

President Obama’s visit may be short on substance and high on rhetoric, but it was an important visit nevertheless, even more so after he had previously canceled twice this year because of pressing domestic issues—in March over the healthcare bill debate and in June because of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Indonesians had been left wondering, before last week, if he was really serious about visiting Indonesia. For many Indonesians, Obama’s presence in Jakarta was symbolic of Indonesia’s evolving importance to the United States.

Physical presence is important in Asian diplomacy. The Bush administration made the mistake of repeatedly missing out on important gatherings throughout Asia. This absence, however, alienated the United States from the changes that have been taking place within Asia this past decade. Happily, Obama’s tour of Asia shows that he understands the importance of continued US engagement with the region. Moreover, he knows that he had to visit Indonesia this year, even if that visit was for less than 24 hours.

Obama did not come to Jakarta completely empty-handed. With President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, he launched the US-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership, which brings all existing cooperation programs between the two nations under one umbrella. The Partnership reflects that the US-Indonesian relationship is already broad and deep, and that much of the hard work to reach this point actually preceded Obama’s presidency. No longer are bilateral relations defined by one single issue, as counterterrorism was in the early years of the Bush administration. Today, Indonesia and the United States are working together on a more expansive agenda including economic, strategic, and security issues, as well as in socio-cultural or soft-power areas, particularly concerning health and education. The two countries are also resuming full military ties that had ceased when the United States imposed an embargo because of human rights abuses and subsequent impunity for Indonesian military perpetrators. During his visit to Jakarta in June, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced the lifting of the last of these obstacles.

The Comprehensive Partnership also identifies room for improvement. On the economic front, Obama told Yudhoyono that he would like the United States to become Indonesia’s top trading partner as the two countries negotiate free-trade arrangements. On education, he pledged to double the number of Indonesians studying on scholarships in the United States and of Americans studying in Indonesia. Though not specifically stated during Obama’s visit, the United States has offered to give secondhand F-16 fighters in the form of a grant to Indonesia.

One important area where Indonesia and the United States will be collaborating is in the establishment of a new East Asian regional architecture that takes into account the changing power distribution brought about by the rapid rise of China. Indonesia helped facilitate the US admission into the East Asia Summit this year, and it will play host of the 2011 meeting, an event that Obama plans on attending.

Indonesia and the United States were already forging close relations even before Obama’s rise to the presidency and despite his repeatedly thwarted plans to visit Jakarta. Closer relations would have developed regardless of Obama’s visit because Indonesia and the United States know that their nations’ mutual interests converge, in addition to the fact that both nations have found interacting with each other increasingly easier. Check again next year when Obama returns to Indonesia whether his personal touch has any bearing on US-Indonesia relations.