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Indonesia: strategic threat or strategic partner?

Posted By [Evan Laksmana](#) on January 17, 2018 @ 6:00 am

Does Indonesia pose a strategic risk for Australia? The answer might be 'no' if one looks at the recently released Australian [foreign policy white paper](#). It argues that Indonesia—along with Japan, India and South Korea—is an 'Indo-Pacific democracy' that is bilaterally and regionally important to Australia. Australia, it says, will therefore 'work closely with Indonesia in regional and international forums to support and protect a rules-based regional order'.

The premise that Indonesia and Australia can leverage their relationship into a strategic partnership with regional effects perhaps follows the vision in the [2016 defence white paper](#). That document [shifted the bilateral tone away](#) from the traditional security ambivalence into a partnership based on shared geo-economic and maritime interests.

Nonetheless, parts of the Australian strategic community still consider Indonesia a possible strategic risk. One example is a recent ASPI report, [Australia's management of strategic risk in the new era](#), by Paul Dibb and Richard Brabin-Smith. The report wasn't about Indonesia as much as it was about China. It focused on key warning indicators and defence capabilities Canberra should consider, as 'a major power threat' can't be ruled out.

The issue with Indonesia was 'whether Islamic extremism is entering the mainstream of Indonesian politics, and so eventually posing a direct threat to Indonesia's domestic stability and having implications for' Australia. If Indonesia becomes 'some sort of aggressive Islamist extremist state', the authors argue, it could pose 'a fundamental threat to Australia's security'. After all, Indonesia's growing economy would 'give it the option of developing much more serious military capabilities'.

Concerns over Indonesia's strategic trajectory are certainly not new; they [go back](#) to the 1960s and 1970s. But today, the argument that Indonesia could pose strategic risks for Australia (in the way Dibb and Brabin-Smith conceive it) is fundamentally flawed because it's based on problematic assumptions, not sound or systematic analysis.

First, the 'Islamist extremist state' argument assumes that (1) the 'mainstreaming' of Islamic extremism will lead to a 'takeover', (2) the process of such a takeover will lead to 'domestic instability', and (3) such a state will be 'hostile' towards or perhaps intent on attacking Australia.

Putting aside the fact that none of the key terms (such as mainstreaming extremism or instability) are properly defined, these assumptions rely on a logic whereby the entry of Islamic extremism into mainstream politics automatically leads to 'takeover' and 'hostility'. Given that logic's complexities, the analysis should be empirically supported rather than conjectured through assumptions.

Further, the assumptions aren't about contested strategic interests if an 'Islamic extremist state' arises or about whether Indonesia has the requisite offensive capabilities or hostile intentions. Instead, they're about Indonesia being 'different', whether defined by religion (Islamic) or regime type (non-liberal democracy). Assuming that a different Indonesia will pose a strategic risk just because it's different sidelines any effort to understand the country on its own terms—a hallmark of [strategic analysis driven by ethnocentricity](#).

One could misinterpret such analysis as a variation of the erroneous myth that Islam as a

religion or Islamic societies are inherently or irrationally hostile towards a 'liberal Western' state like Australia. While I don't believe that's what Dibb and Brabin-Smith are arguing, without a clear elaboration one could misread it as such.

Second, the argument that economic growth leads to improved and offensive military capabilities assumes that (1) defence planning is externally oriented and 'rational' (that is, a threat-based, value-maximising assessment of the strategic environment and goals within existing constraints), and (2) Indonesia could be threatening because its intentions could change overnight.

Indonesia's economic growth has indeed been correlated with the rise of its defence spending (roughly US\$6–8 billion in recent years). But most of that money (around 65% to 75%) goes to personnel in the form of salaries, education and other benefits. Indonesia spends only around US\$1–2 billion annually on procurement (divided equally among the three services).

Indonesia also faces numerous challenges to modernising its defence forces. [Planning has been erratic](#) and subject to bureaucratic politics and civil–military contestations. The operational readiness of most of its ships and aircraft is currently in doubt too. Overall, Indonesia doesn't have the offensive capabilities to attack Australia to begin with, nor does it plan to acquire them.

The question of intentions, on the other hand, is always elusive. But Indonesia's military has always been strategically defensive—major military exercises, along with doctrinal developments since the 1990s, can attest to that.

Even the examples invoked to paint Indonesia as a possible 'threat'—the 1960s West Irian campaign and *Konfrontasi*, as well as the 1975 Timor invasion—were [driven by domestic concerns rather than regional expansionism](#). Politically, [Indonesian elites](#) often express annoyance about and a lack of trust in Australia's intentions. But except for the occasional political scandals, Jakarta [hasn't seemed to care](#) much about Australia in recent years.

Perhaps Dibb and Brabin-Smith's arguments are based on worst-case forecasting, which makes sense given Australia and Indonesia's turbulent bilateral history. But the assumptions that spring from such a premise could crowd out efforts to better see Indonesia in its own terms. If so, perhaps [Ken Booth](#) is right: worst-case forecasting is to strategic analysis what the 'god of the gaps' is to theology—it fills in for what we don't understand.

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[1] foreign policy white paper: <https://www.fpwhitepaper.gov.au/>

[2] 2016 defence white paper: <http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/docs/2016-defence-white-paper.pdf>

[3] shifted the bilateral tone away: http://www.academia.edu/25520352/Indonesia_in_Australias_2016_Defence_White_Paper

[4] *Australia's management of strategic risk in the new era*: <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/australias-management-strategic-risk-new-era>

[5] go back: <https://www.regionalsecurity.org.au/Resources/Files/vol3no4DibbandBrabinSmith.pdf>

[6] strategic analysis driven by ethnocentricity: <https://books.google.com/books/about>

[/Strategy_and_Ethnocentrism.html?id=sbMrAAAAYAAJ](#)

[7] Planning has been erratic: **<https://www.academia.edu/16383416>**

[/The_Hidden_Challenges_of_Indonesia_s_Defence_Modernisation](#)

[8] driven by domestic concerns rather than regional expansionism:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080>

[/10357718608444921?journalCode=caji19](#)

[9] Indonesian elites: **<https://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg/publication/419>**

[10] hasn't seemed to care: **<http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook>**

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