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Australia and Indonesia
Beyond Stability, towards Order
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Although Indonesia is Australia’s largest and most important neighbour, the relationship between the two profoundly different societies has been punctuated by bouts of high tension, suspicion and mutual mistrust. Despite Australia’s diplomatic support for the de-colonisation of the Dutch East Indies after the Second World War, Canberra and Jakarta have experienced a troubled diplomatic relationship virtually since Indonesia’s independence (Lee 2001). Attempts to resolve enduring problems have been a recurring theme in Australian diplomacy and academia since the 1950s. And yet despite considerable effort on both sides, remarkably little progress has been made in constructing a long-term engagement which satisfies the aspirations of both peoples.

This paper seeks to identify some of the structural faults in the relationship and explore the opportunities and limits of future cooperation. It will be argued that before a more mutually satisfactory and successful relationship can be built, new foundations of understanding will need to be laid. This presupposes recognising earlier faults which have periodically led to diplomatic cracks in the relationship and prevented enduring levels of civility from developing. From an Australian perspective, this paper assesses the prospects of co-existence between two independent, differing political communities.

Poor investment
For much of the period since the 1950s, Canberra has underestimated the extent to which Indonesian nationalism was part of a broader ‘revolt against the West’ and a reaction to the colonial mission civilisatrice. Indonesia’s political aspirations, expressed in the traditional Western discourse of self-determination, sovereignty and independence, led many Australian policy-makers to believe that the newly independent state would imitate the Western route to political modernisation (Bull 1984). They were soon disappointed.

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Ignorance, divergent strategic interests, suspicion of communist sympathies and a legacy of racism combined to push Australia away from its large northern neighbour. In Indonesia, hostility towards the West, of which Australia was seen as an outpost, together with assertions of ‘nationalist’ unity, frequently situated Indonesia against Australia.
By the early 1960s President Sukarno was seen in Canberra as a dangerous ultra-nationalist, economically incompetent, anti-Western and a likely conduit for eventual communist rule, given the broad-based popularity of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and his increasing support for it. Sukarno's demise and the annihilation of the PKI by Major-General Suharto in 1966-66 was therefore warmly welcomed in the West (see, for example, Burchill 2001). Suharto's pathological anti-communism and his decision to open up the economy to Western capital was as much appreciated as his iron grip of a contended and inherently fragmentary state. For the next three decades Suharto was cast in the West as the only person who could prevent a return to the chaos of the late Sukarno period, and secure Indonesia against Communism. His repression and corruption were easily forgiven.

The move to a militarily dominated authoritarian government which came to power in a massacre of horrific proportions was a problematic start, but Jakarta's bloody and clumsy invasion of East Timor in 1975 and the lies it and Canberra subsequently told about the situation there, along with repression and censorship throughout the archipelago, showed that Indonesia and Australia were developing along fundamentally different political paths.

Misreadings

From the perspective of Australia's policy-makers, Indonesia is viewed as densely populated, strategically vital, regionally influential and inherently fragile. This last point is reflected in constant calls by many Australian 'Indonesianists' to support the unity of the Indonesian state. What they failed to recognise, however, was that, fragmented, federated or non-existent, Canberra's concerns remained irrelevant to Indonesia's actual political development. What it did demonstrate was Canberra's own anxiety about Indonesia (see, for example, Mackie 2001).

This anxious reading of its modern history meant that Indonesia has never been 'normalised' in Canberra's international relations, instead occupying an exceptional status in Australia's diplomatic and academic cultures. In one way or another, Indonesia has been regarded as a perpetual concern for Australia—a problem to contain—for which special allowances had to be made.

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One consequence of this anxiety led the Menzies Government in the mid-1950s to make provision for Indonesian studies at universities in Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra, and the cultivation of what was thought to be a significant body of expertise in the area. Yet despite having a large number of Indonesian scholars in Australia who have had considerable influence on the formation of government thinking in Canberra, there have been numerous mistakes and surprisingly few benefits to show for this intellectual investment.

In part this can be explained by the concentration of most of these 'experts' on culture as the key method for understanding Indonesia. This culturalist approach went far beyond anthropology, pervading the disciplines of politics, history and even the 'science' of economics. Yet this approach has rarely been used to analyse other, especially Western, societies. Whereas the West is understood through its history and politics, the East is said to be best understood through its culture (Legge 1990).

As they see it, the challenge for most 'Indonesianists' has been to uncover the deep significance of Indonesian (read Javanese) culture in understanding Indonesian politics and society which should, in turn, direct how Australia should engage Indonesia. It's an essentially and Orientalist outlook (Robison 1986, 1996).

Past mistakes

There are, however, serious problems with such Orientalist understanding. It helps to reinforce and reproduce notional differences between the Orient (Indonesia) and the Occident (Australia), differences that may well be illusory or simply artificially constructed by the West for its own purposes (Steadman 1969, Said 1979, Turner 1978). 'Our' civilisation is always known, accepted and normal. 'Their' is different, strange and exotic. Religions, races and ethnicities are collapsed into broad reductive categories, sweeping generalisations, and rigidly separated national cultures which are assumed to be fixed rather than dynamic.

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Orientalist approaches, such as those adopted by a number of Australia's Indonesian 'experts', have confused the notion of 'culture' with the social, political and economic interests of the ruling elite in a country (Pemberton 1994). In the case of Indonesia, this constituted a conflation of predominantly Javanese culture (reconstructed as state culture) and the culture of authoritarianism associated with the New Order regime of Suharto (which in turn derives from the 'modernist' (fascist) origins of Indonesian state philosophy). The reification of Javanese culture stresses harmony, deference and obedience, hierarchy, conformity and the avoidance of conflict in Indonesian society. The state philosophy emphasises 'state rights' over individual (or community) rights (Bourcier 1996, Moejodjanto 1996, Mangunwijaya 1992).

However, all of this fails to adequately account for the diversity of interests and ideologies which exist in Indonesia. Harmony and order do exist, but so too do conflict, dissent and opposition, centre and periphery, Islam and secularism, the unitary state.
and the communal group, reform and entrenched interests, extremes of wealth and poverty.

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The mistake of many has been to presuppose an ‘idealised’ notion of Indonesian culture and base political judgements upon it. For example, it was asserted by some Indonesiasthat Indonesians are uncomfortable with Western concepts of liberal democracy and prefer strong rule to fit their dependent personalities and unitary political needs. On this basis, Suharto’s repressive rule was excused and defended. However, this argument was contradicted by popular support for the fall of Suharto in May 1998 and the process of political reform which followed. Until this was too overwhelmingly obvious to refute, many of Australia’s Indonesian ‘experts’ insisted that all was basically well with the Indonesian body politic.¹

Culturally relative arguments for ‘Asian values’ in the West, the essence of Orientalist thought, have also been played back to the West by authoritarian leaders in East Asia who object to the ‘imposition’ of Western values and institutions. Given their experience of European colonialism, it is unsurprising that East Asian leaders portray the West’s human rights ‘agenda’ as a thinly disguised form of cultural imperialism. The identification of human rights with the West provides a number of them with effective immunity from both internal and external criticism.

Nevertheless, it is ironic that Asian exceptionalism has its roots in the West’s Orientalist discourse, and is strategically manipulated by Asian politicians to exploit notions of a common threat (the alien West) and the enemy within (domestic political opponents as ‘un-Asian’). The claim that Asians are uniformly and culturally different has provided leaders in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia with a useful, if artificial rationale for different standards of human rights, freedom of expression and other universal benchmarks. However, the suggestion that Asians as a group have different human values from the rest of the world — and even the proposition that values are culturally specific—is a difficult one to sustain (Bauer and Bell 1999, Sen 1999, Kingsbury 2001:33–6,46).

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A serious implication of cultural relativism is the claim that Australia should not judge Jakarta’s behaviour by its Western values. This argument leads to a position of amoral indifference about the fate of those beyond Australia’s borders, and encourages governments to adopt the ‘realist’ view that the internal political complexion of a state is no business of outsiders.

If there is one lesson Australia can learn from its post-war regional history it is the irrelevance of cultural differences in the development of, in particular, commercial links. The establishment of Australia’s most important trade relationship with Japan is a reminder of money’s imperviousness to cultural barriers. As economic globalisation proceeds, the expansion of Australia’s economic links with the region depends not on its perceived cultural identity but on the country’s industrial relevance.

The other significant error in Australia’s attitude to Indonesia centres on assumptions about territorial boundaries. The succession and fragmentation of nation-states is not necessarily the same thing, though they are both a normal feature of international life. Just as independence for Tibet would not break-up China, neither would the separation of Aceh or West Papua ineluctably ‘Balkanise’ Indonesia. The secessionist movements in Indonesia’s eastern and western most provinces are largely the product of Jakarta’s military brutality and economic exploitation. The future shape of the republic will depend on whether these citizens still feel their bond with Indonesian nationalism is worth salvaging, and will not be decided by the preferences of neighbours who reflexively favour “stability” in Indonesia regardless of what is being stabilised there.

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Canberra’s stated preference for regional stability and the status quo assumes an immutability of political boundaries which is historically rare. The perceived stasis of boundaries in South East Asia fails to take into account accommodations that have occurred since 1945 (Kingsbury 2001: Ch. 1). The borders of the region are largely a consequence of the colonial era, and given the previously malleable nature of regional politics there is no inherent reason why boundaries should remain intact for long.

To date, Australian strategic planners have shown little understanding of the processes by which recently drawn political boundaries are quickly made ‘non-negotiable’, how modern traditions and feelings about homelands are invented for expeditious political and nationalist purposes (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1992). When they contemplate the destruction and suffering that have resulted from the defence of existing territorial boundaries, it might be prudent for Australia’s diplomats

¹ One regrettable and distorting manifestation of this approach has been the close identification of many Australian academics and diplomats with other societies, especially Asian societies. In his autobiography, Bill Hayden noted that shortly after becoming foreign minister in 1983, he “detected a preference among some to be overly agreeable towards certain outside interests and accordingly not independent enough in catering for the national interest. At its worst this could manifest itself in a severe infection of ‘localitis’, where a diplomat serving too long at an overseas post came to be more identified with the host country’s interests than Australia’s” (Hayden 1996:367–8).
and political leaders to adopt a more open-minded approach to territoriality than has been their custom. State creation is not necessarily a once-and-for-all event at the time of decolonisation. And it is a mistake to equate stability with a corrupt or brutal status quo, which is inherently unstable.

Indonesia is a state more arbitrarily constructed than most. At its base is an ideological paradox; it inherited its shape and form from a colonial system widely considered illegitimate by Indonesian nationalists. It's potential for fragmentation is openly conceded by the use of armed forces deployed to suppress internal political dissent and contain centrifugal forces rather than for external defence. Indeed, without the presence of a minatory function, Indonesia would have changed shape, and possibly disappeared, on a number of occasions. It is this apparent necessity for inclusive compulsion that primarily defines the political character of Indonesia, which stands in sharp contrast to the Australian experience.

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In this respect, the political distinctions between Australia and Indonesia are far more significant than the cultural differences between them. Australia is a participatory and representative liberal-democracy. Indonesia's political culture is highly constructed, relatively arbitrary, immature and coercive. One is voluntary, stable, predictable and firmly within the Western liberal tradition. The other is militarised, politically fluid, evolving and subject to internal destabilisation. The two political systems do not mesh easily because of absent complementarities and antithetical foundations.

**A way forward: Order rather than stability**

Trade, investment, tourism, education and development assistance will continue to secure links between Australia and Indonesia, providing they do not directly impinge on the political processes of either. But one further way forward for Australia is to understand and acknowledge structural political differences, appreciate the value of heterogeneity, and work in those areas where there is mutual interest. Differences should be acknowledged and faced in a courteous and straightforward manner, rather than hidden by obsequiousness or submerged beneath artificial politeness.

This means explicitly rejecting claims of irreconcilable cultural differences leading to inevitable clashes between Western and non-Western civilisations, as forecast by Samuel Huntington (Huntington 1996). Instead, according to the "rationalist school" of Martin Wight, Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, it is important to focus on the high degree of order which can exist in a global environment.

Rationalists have argued that a high degree of order and cooperation can exist between states with very different cultures and ideologies can come together in a "society of states" because they share a belief that international society is the only legitimate form of world political organisation. A pragmatic need to co-exist is sufficient to produce what Bull called a 'diplomatic culture'—that is, a system of conventions and institutions which preserve order between states with radically different aspirations and domestic complexions. According to John Vincent, this international society is "functional" or utilitarian rather than "cultural" (see Burchill 2001:107).

The foundations of international order, according to Bull, requires every society to protect the three 'primary goals' of (a) placing constraints on the use of force, (b) upholding property rights, and (c) ensuring agreements are kept. From this base, transcultural values and ethical standards can be progressively developed between states. Where there is divergence between Australia and Indonesia on these criteria, Australia can and should maintain its focus on these primary goals. The failure by one interlocutor to adhere to international norms does not imply that the other should do likewise, or that the maintenance of primary goals is in any way compromised.

Importantly, an open dialogue which places emphasis on order rather than stability, can bridge many of the differences between states such as Australia and Indonesia. Diplomacy should be the means through which the different, the suspicious and even the hostile reach some common ground. Appeasement or estrangement is a false dichotomy, especially within this particular bilateral relationship (on the rationalist tradition in international relations, see Linklater, in Burchill 2001).

Michael Doyle correctly points out that modern liberal states eschew violence in the conduct of their relations, but he also reminds us that liberal democracies retain a healthy appetite for conflict with authoritarian states. On the important question of how liberal states should therefore conduct themselves with non-liberal states, prominent liberals such as Doyle and Francis Fukuyama are surprisingly silent (Doyle 1986, 1997, Fukuyama 1992).

John Rawls, on the other hand, is concerned with the extent to which liberal and non-liberal peoples can be equal participants in a 'Society of Peoples'. He argues that principles and norms of international law and practice can be developed and shared by both liberal and non-liberal or even hierarchical societies, without an expectation that liberal democracy is the terminus for all. The guidelines and principle basis for establishing harmonious relations between liberal and non-liberal peoples under a common law—the extension of a general social contract idea—takes liberal international theory in a more sophisticated direction because it explicitly acknowledges the need for
utopian thought to be realistic. This is the plane on which Australia–Indonesia relations can be broadened and deepened, providing certain basic conditions are met (Rawls 1999).

Rawls outlines the ‘fair terms’ for political cooperation between liberal and non-liberal peoples. The challenge for liberal peoples is to recognise non-liberal peoples as equal participating members in good standing of the ‘Society of Peoples’, with certain rights and obligations, but with no requirement that they become liberal. The West cannot demand that other societies live according to its moral conventions, though it can and should expect legal and constitutional consistency.

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In fact the idea of limited power and respect for the rule of law contained within the idea of ‘constitutionalism’, ‘which is present within, but not entirely synonymous with, liberal democracy’, may be one way forward (Linklater 1993:33). According to Rawls, the criteria for mutual respect and tolerance between liberal and decent hierarchical societies—which together Rawls calls ‘well ordered societies’—need not be exclusively Western or liberal. A decent hierarchical society should:

- have judges and others who administer the legal system who sincerely believe the law is guided by a common good idea of justice (Rawls 1999:84–8).

These principles avoid perceptions of one imposing its values upon the other. And they short-circuit the connection between periodic political disputes and invocations of irreconcilable cultural differences.

A common basis of understanding which is not susceptible to short-term political crises, or overly dependent on transient or authoritarian political leaders, needs to be established between Australia and Indonesia so that the whole relationship is not put on the plane on which Australia-Indonesia relations can be broadened and deepened, providing certain basic conditions are met (Rawls 1999:64–8).

Can a brutal state which places a premium on the coercive unity of the state ever develop along democratic lines?

In maintaining the state, contemporary leaders of Indonesia will find it increasingly difficult to rely on earlier modes of legitimation. Attempts to reinvent ‘monarchy’ (traditional legitimacy) by Sukarno and Suharto ended in chaos. Cults of personality (charismatic legitimacy) are also unlikely to work without becoming ‘routinised’. The material aspirations of the masses are not being met as fully now as they were a decade ago (eudaemonic legitimacy). And locating themselves in the nationalist, anti-colonial tradition (official nationalist legitimacy) won’t provide leaders with the same resonance as in the past. The prospects of a novel vanguard (new tradition legitimacy) or relying on the achievement of long-sought aims such as independence (goal-rational legitimacy) are also not likely to induce mass support.

Increasingly, Indonesia’s contemporary rulers will need to rely on legal-rational legitimacy—the rule of law, participatory values, freely contested elections and popular consent—if they are set aside the seemingly permanent threat of system failure and legitimation crisis. The extent to which they achieve this, as well as other major challenges, such as the depoliticisation of the armed forces and the independence of the judiciary, will largely determine whether Indonesia can be fairly described as a ‘well ordered society’ (see Holmes 1993:8–19).
Secondly, even if Indonesia falls short of these criteria now, Australia will need to continue to encourage it to move in this direction. Political cultures are rarely static for long, so encouragement towards becoming ‘well ordered society’ are likely to enhance Indonesia’s internal and external opportunities.

Tolerating difference

It cannot be assumed that the Western path to modernity will ultimately command universal consent, and Australia needs to accept that Indonesia could follow a different route. The value and advantages of liberal democracy should nevertheless be actively promoted to those within the Indonesian polity striving for higher levels of political development, but in ways that doesn’t lecture or hector.

The success of the bilateral relationship is too often narrowly measured against the temperature of official ties, which in turn comes to be defined as ‘the whole relationship’...

Similarly, both countries should seek to participate in each other’s civil society and develop links which can prosper in the public space of non-governmental and non-military domains. The success of the bilateral relationship is too often narrowly measured against the temperature of official ties, which in turn comes to be defined as ‘the whole relationship’. Government to government relations are only one aspect of a much broader and deeper set of associations.

While it continues to be necessary for Australia to engage in regional trade and investment, foreign policy should not be predicated on regional acceptance or an emphasis on Australia’s ‘regional identity’. This approach presupposes the need for cultural adjustment if Australia is to find a sense of belonging, when this is both domestically unpopular and ignores the appeal of Australia’s distinctiveness in East Asia and beyond (see, for example, Fitzgerald 1997, Mackie 2001: 89, 93). Meaningful engagement will result from neighbourly relevance to regional concerns, rather than contrived identity politics. Engagement must be tangible, sought on equal terms, and not conducted in a fawning or craven way. Exclusion from regional fora such as the ASEAN + 3 group, for example, must be understood as a short-term political tactic rather than a long-term cultural objection.

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Australia’s reaction to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 indicates that Canberra retains a limited regional focus. The Howard Government’s failure to consult with other governments in the region prior to making a military commitment to the US-led coalition was strikingly reminiscent of the Hawke Government’s response to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990. In moments of global crisis, Canberra’s policy process defaults to the trans-Pacific alliance rather than to a common South East Asian approach, despite almost two decades of official ‘regional engagement’.

Australia has two great advantages in forming regional relationships; the secular and multicultural nature of Australian society. In theory it is better prepared for engagement with such a heterogeneous region as East Asia than virtually any other state. And yet Canberra has failed to develop these and other features of contemporary Australian society. And just as it should avoid misleading representations of the Orient in European culture, Australia should also seek to dissemble perceptions in Asia of the West as a monolithic and homogenous entity.

Foreign policy should not be reduced to reactive problem-solving. A productive working relationship between Australia and Indonesia should be seen as a means to other ends—enhanced people contacts, educational exchanges, modernisation and democratisation, economic reform, security dialogue, institutional ties, and so on, and not be elevated to a policy objective per se.

A more sophisticated understanding of each other’s political agenda is also needed. The breakdown of co-operation on the issue of asylum seekers and people smuggling from Indonesia to Australia reflects a failure to understand that its priorities are not axiomatically shared in Jakarta, which faces much greater difficulties on a number of fronts. Canberra needs to take Jakarta into its confidence and consult about potential bilateral problems before presenting them to a domestic audience and, consequently, a bemused interlocutor.

Yet bilateral consultation does not preclude openness. Foreign policy-making in Australia would benefit from greater levels of community participation and transparency: the failure to do so leads to the policy debacles of the kind witnessed in relation to East Timor between 1974 and 1999, while the secret diplomacy which produced the 1995 security agreement between Australia and Indonesia should be abandoned altogether. Only popular consent confers legitimacy on public policy, and the quiet councils of academia and bureaucracy cannot be the sole locations for foreign policy discussion. Only when these criteria have been met can relations between Australia and Indonesia be fully normalised.
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