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What’s behind the hints towards better U.S. ties with Indonesia? Lecturers at Deakins University in Australia, Dr. Damien Kingsbury, a co-editor of ‘Reformasi’: Crisis and Change in Indonesia, and Scott Burchill who teaches international relations, discuss the issue.

GEELONG, Victoria (JP): Following the visit by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, security issues in the region are starting to look much clearer. A widespread belief that Indonesia is edging towards disintegration should now be laid to rest.

It has become a truism of secessionism that, to be successful, it often requires the support of an active external sponsor. Some examples of successful secessionism, or fragmentation, include Panama from Columbia (supported by the United States), Bangladesh from Pakistan (India), the Soviet satellites and states, and Yugoslavia (U.S. and NATO) and East Timor (Portugal and the United Nations).

Indonesia has numerous trouble spots but only two, Aceh and West Papua, officially Irian Jaya, have the clear goal of secession. Dissent in Riau, near Singapore, is largely rhetorical and the recreation of Republic of South Maluku in Ambon is a faint echo of the secession movement of 1950 amplified by communal conflict.

It has been suggested, however, that the success of one secessionist movement in Indonesia could, domino-like, trigger more. This raises the issue of external support. The only country that has the capacity to support secession is the U.S. To do this, the U.S. would require that its strategic and economic interests were best served by such secession.

On his recent visit to Indonesia, Rumsfeld said that he would like to see renewed military aid to Indonesia’s armed forces, the TNI. This is despite a lack of meaningful reform of the TNI and indeed its reinvigorated political influence, as well as the fading of an already dim prospect of trial for those responsible for the carnage in East Timor in 1999.

The reason for the support of the U.S. for the TNI is because the Bush administration has decided that, as a part of its renewed focus on East Asia, the unity of Indonesia serves a greater strategic purpose.

Despite the superficial friendliness of the visit to Beijing by Powell and Rumsfeld, China is now seen by the U.S. as the major strategic threat, not just to Asia but to the world. Russia, India, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan already flank China, and Southeast Asia completes the circle.

There has long been a view in Southeast Asia that an economically enhanced China would, almost by definition, throw its weight around in a region it has historically considered its "backyard". Hence the states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations developed the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), as well as a less formal strategic coalition. The lynchpin of ASEAN, and of a China-containment coalition, is Indonesia. And Indonesia has been a useless strategic partner since 1997.

Within Indonesia, if Aceh and West Papua were successful in their bids for independence this would not necessarily destroy the core of the state. However, as two of the biggest sources of state revenue, from oil and minerals respectively, their loss would further damage Indonesia’s still moribund economy.

Even more so than East Timor, their loss would send Indonesia's political elite into a rage, which despite all else has remained committed to the idea of maintaining a united (and unitary) state. This sentiment remained strong under the presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid, and has been further enhanced by the election of Megawati Soekarnoputri.

Should another country support secession in particular in Aceh, Indonesia could be expected to call into question the repayment of existing U.S.-backed loans from the International Monetary Fund and would bring the ARF undone. It would also further limit the compromised use of the Straits of Malacca, and probably close the main Indian-Pacific Ocean nuclear submarine passage of the Ombai-Wetar Straits in East Nusa Tenggara.

To this end, a united Indonesia with a mollified political elite all under the watchful eye of a re-armed TNI fits the larger U.S. game plan much better. Australia’s primary concern in this is securing the border between East and West Timor, and this was no doubt part of Powell and Rumsfeld’s trade-off with the TNI. Thus assured, Australia is further strategically beholden to the U.S. As such, Australia is likely to become more conservative on the Aceh and West Papua issues.

As with support for Soeharto's New Order during the Cold War such a political scenario will not resolve Indonesia's many regional problems, but rather screw the repressive political lid back down again. In the greater strategic game,
it seems, there remains a school of thought that believes repression is acceptable.