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Indonesia's Security Burden

By Stanley A. Weiss

JAKARTA—Locals here quip that while Indonesia is the world's largest archipelago nation—by definition, a nation of islands—it is not a maritime nation. Imagine, they say, a stretch of land covering the distance from Seattle to New York, or Lisbon to Moscow. And now, imagine having fewer than 100 police cars responsible for patrolling that entire area—to respond to emergencies and protect national borders.

It seems inconceivable. And yet, that is the equivalent mission that weighs on the Indonesian Navy today. Its fleet of ships reportedly numbers around 120. If you discount the vessels in dry dock due to funding shortfalls, far fewer than 100 patrol at any given time. And with those vessels, the navy is expected to protect a nation with more than 17,000 islands, covering five million square kilometers.

When the navy appeals to the air force for help, the situation is equally dire. The air force has about 220 aircraft and helicopters, a number of which are unserviceable. Among its fleet of C-130 Hercules aircraft are some that first flew in the 1960s. Planes have been known to simply fall out of the sky.

This would be a regional issue if it weren't for the increasingly central role that Indonesia is playing to American security interests, the fight against global terrorism, and its potential as a check on China's growing footprint.

"Indonesia is as strategically important to the United States as Israel and Egypt," Endy Bayuni, the editor of the Jakarta Post, tells me.

The case can be made on several grounds. There is the maritime argument: more than half of the world's merchant fleet tonnage passes through the straits around Indonesia, including the vital 805 kilometer stretch of water between Peninsular Malaysia and the Indonesian island of Sumatra, known as the Strait of Malacca. More than 80 percent of the critical "maritime pipeline" of fuel from Gulf suppliers to U.S. allies in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan comes through the strait.

There is the democracy argument: with more people than the Arab Middle East, Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim-majority nation, its third largest democracy, and the only Muslim democracy besides Turkey. "If democracy can work in this vast, plural society, it can work elsewhere," says Ted Osius, deputy chief of mission at the U.S. embassy.

Then, there is the reform argument: this nation has made strides against President Suharto's 32-year dictatorship. The national police have arrested hundreds of suspected terrorists, the nation just observed another peaceful presidential election, and the military "has come a long way from the days when it was the political tool of President Suharto," says Bayuni.

And yet, Washington seems stuck in 1991, when Indonesian troops were accused of killing unarmed East Timorese civilians. Since then, cases of human rights abuses have focused almost entirely on the "Indonesian green berets," the controversial special forces group Kopassus, even though most abuses occurred when today's soldiers were in knee pants. Nevertheless, nongovernmental organizations in Washington have largely painted the entire Indonesian military with a Kopassus brush, which is like characterizing the U.S. military with Abu Ghraib.

As a result, U.S. military aid to Indonesia is more than 200 times less than military aid to Israel and Egypt. While President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono recently proposed an increase in the 2010 defense budget, and funding from Washington is expected to climb \$10 million by 2011, it's still a pittance. What to do?

First, the United States should increase military financing to Indonesia to levels equivalent to Israel and Egypt. To get beyond the Kopassus conundrum, aid should be specifically directed to the Indonesian Navy and Air Force, to improve security in the Strait of Malacca and other sea lanes on which U.S. interests depend.

Second, the primary goal of U.S. aid should be to build the "coast guard" capabilities of the Indonesian Navy and Air Force, not its weapons systems. As Indonesian Minister of Defense Juwono Sudarsono told me, the focus needs to be "on transport vehicles, transport planes and transport ships rather than spending on 'strike force capabilities'—because these are key for capacity building throughout the country and for preparing for the next disaster, which will happen because we are living on this ring of fire."

Third, the U.S. should increase by tenfold the number of Indonesian military personnel participating in the State Department's International Military and Training Program. Prior to 1991, dozens participated. Only six do so now.

Finally, the U.S. should enter into a formal strategic partnership with Indonesia when President Obama visits in November. Mr. Yudhoyono opened the door to such a partnership in a Washington speech last November, as did Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in her visit here last February.

When Obama lived in Jakarta as a boy, the U.S. didn't appreciate Indonesia's problems. As Mr. Obama prepares to return as president, it doesn't understand its progress. The United States should begin to see Indonesia for what it really is—America's Israel and Egypt on the Strait of Malacca.