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Thinking beyond *Kopassus*: Why US Security Assistance to Indonesia Needs Recalibrating

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Foreign security assistance, in particular the International Military Education and Training (IMET), Foreign Military Sales, and other programs under the auspices of the US Pacific Command's Theater Security Cooperation, is a keystone in America's engagement strategy with Asia. Primarily administered by the US Departments of State and Defense, these assistance programs have funneled several billions of dollars worth of equipment, education, and training, along with other forms of "local capacity building," to partner militaries across the region. Indeed, given the growing strains on the American economy as well as US commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, the need for burden sharing among American allies and partners in Asia is becoming more critical. As such, the United States is increasing its reliance on foreign security assistance to help regional partners tackle their own security challenges. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates argues in the May/June 2010 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, "the effectiveness and credibility of the United States will only be as good as the effectiveness, credibility, and sustainability of its local partners."

Evan A. Laksmana,
Researcher with the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Jakarta, argues that as the need for burden sharing with Asian allies and partners grows more critical, the United States needs to pay more attention to the major challenges that surround its foreign security assistance in Asia.

Such a rationale informs the recent effort to rehabilitate military ties between the United States and Indonesia. During his visit to Indonesia in July 2010, Secretary Gates stated that the United States will begin "a gradual, limited program of security cooperation activities" with the Indonesian army's Special Forces, commonly known as *Kopassus* in Indonesian. This development is significant when one considers the spotty human rights record of *Kopassus* that precipitated the ban on US security assistance to the country from 1992 to 2005. However, the hope that reestablishing ties with *Kopassus*, and thereby affording the group the opportunity to internalize human rights-abiding professional norms, may be misplaced if the United States does not consider and anticipate how structural constraints can dull the effects of US security assistance programs.

Merits underpinning US foreign security assistance notwithstanding, the problems that frustrate American partners in Asia involve more than just bureaucratic hurdles, a lack of common strategy, or wavering commitment on the part of the United States, as Secretary Gates suggests in his *Foreign Affairs* article. While these issues do pose a great challenge, limitations on and by partner countries receiving US security assistance often play a more significant role in determining whether such aid succeeds in helping build their military's capacity.

Firstly, while US security assistance mainly comes in the form of professional military education, American policymakers often overlook the incompatibilities between the value system and practices of the US military and those of its partner militaries. As a result, while the United States has hosted and trained less than three hundred Indonesian officers annually since 1950 at American military schools and civilian



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universities, except for the ban between 1992 and 2005, the education and training process has not translated into a sharing of similar outlooks that encourage military professionalism and effectiveness.

For much of its history, the Indonesian military has been a highly politicized and ineffective organization. Geared towards mass guerilla warfare, its doctrine and structure have yet to be fundamentally reviewed to address mounting traditional security challenges, for example border disputes, and nontraditional ones, such as disaster relief and maritime piracy. Indeed, despite a long history of US security assistance to Indonesia, the expected transformation of the Indonesian military into one that is professional, fully subordinated to civilian supremacy, and effective in dealing with its security challenges has failed to occur. In stark contrast to those of the US military, the norms inculcated in Indonesian military academies for the past few decades predispose officers to play a greater role in Indonesian society and have tended to entangle the military in the nation’s development. As US security assistance does not target military academies—IMET focuses on advanced military schooling—it is unlikely that foreign security assistance programs can supplant the Indonesian military’s norms and practices.

Secondly, domestic politics in Washington has traditionally conditioned US security assistance programs. Consequently, this often means that the predictability and sustainability of those programs remain a constant question for their recipients. While Indonesian policymakers are aware that Congressional pressure occasioned the ban from 1992 to 2005, the enduring mistrust that the ban generated in Jakarta leads to wariness to fully embrace current US reengagement efforts. Naturally, this lingering anxiety is an important reason behind Indonesia’s drive to find alternative weapons suppliers, including China, Russia, the Netherlands, and South Korea.

Thirdly, US security assistance programs focus on education and training, but pay less attention to key organizational issues of the partner militaries, such as their personnel and promotion policies. While understandable, this policy may undermine the expected benefits of bringing Indonesian officers to the United States for advanced training. Upon their return to Indonesia, US-trained officers—whose newly acquired skills go underutilized—are often shunned by their peers and left out of the promotional fast track. A glut of officers produced under the Suharto regime further complicates the personnel politics of a burgeoning officer corps. As a result, the pressure from increased competition for attractive billets and promotional logjams within the officer corps has often favored officers with good political connections and those who excel in domestic postings. To be away from Indonesia for a year or two may thus not be an attractive scenario for bright officers with ambitions to become Indonesia’s future military leaders.

Finally, the content of US security assistance is often neither what partner militaries want nor what they objectively need. From the 1960s to the 1990s, for example, Indonesian officers, including those from *Kopassus*, enrolled in US military and civilian schools and took classes that focused on counterinsurgency and developmental subjects. Instruction in those subjects provided the Indonesian military with an ideational framework that helped perpetuate its internal dominance and its dual-function doctrine predicating a military role in nonmilitary affairs. Such perspectives today clearly do not encourage democratic civil-military relations or a professional outlook orienting the Indonesian military to a strictly external defense role.

As these considerations of US security assistance to Indonesia suggest, ensuring that the assistance programs meet their goals requires a major recalibration in their approach and implementation. If the US wants to increase the capacity of its partner militaries, it would do well to understand the major challenges that surround its security assistance programs in Asia.

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