



# Asia Pacific Bulletin

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## Rebuilding the U.S.-Indonesian Security Relationship

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**John B. Haseman and Eduardo Lachica**, authors of *The U.S.-Indonesian Security Relationship: The Next Steps* published in February 2009 by the United States-Indonesia Society, explain that “The reduction of piracy and armed robbery incidents in the Malacca Strait is due largely to the efforts of the littoral states themselves. Indonesia reduced the number of sea robberies in its jurisdiction from 121 in 2003 to just 28 last year, in sharp contrast to the alarming rise in piracy off the coast of Somalia.”

Although little noticed outside the Asia Pacific, the United States is measurably improving security cooperation with Indonesia. However, full normalization of the relationship is constrained by continuing U.S. congressional restrictions protesting human rights abuses committed in East Timor and elsewhere. The Obama administration should work with Congress to remove those restrictions and to preserve advances made in U.S.-Indonesian relations and build on them in order to advance mutual national security interests.

The importance of a strong American security relationship with Indonesia is obvious. Indonesia lies astride the sea lanes between the Pacific and Indian oceans and is a key U.S. partner in combating terrorism, trafficking of persons and drugs, and other transnational crimes. Indonesia is a leader in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and has become a voice for moderation in the Middle East.

Since 2005, when some congressional restrictions limiting security cooperation with Indonesia were relaxed, the United States has resumed joint exercises, intelligence exchanges, educational programs, and other activities with Indonesia that constitute a normal military-to-military relationship, while breaking new ground for cooperation in disaster relief, international peacekeeping, and maritime security. Indonesia’s new security environment offers opportunities for new forms of U.S.-Indonesian engagement. Indonesia has survived the threat of separatism but is in the grip of a global recession and now worries about non-traditional threats such as economic and humanitarian challenges.

The Armed Forces of Indonesia (TNI) has adapted to this shift in priorities, and to its chronic under-funding by the government, by deferring expensive weapons purchases and raising its capacity to help the government prevent the loss of natural resources and mitigate the effects of natural calamities. The Obama administration should examine the possibility of repackaging some of its assistance programs to better support these non-combat military missions.

The Southeast Asian Tri-Border Initiative focusing on maritime security, among other Bush administration initiatives, should be sustained and completed. The reduction of piracy and armed robbery incidents in the Malacca Strait is due largely to the efforts of the littoral states themselves. Indonesia reduced the number of sea robberies in its jurisdiction from 121 in 2003 to just 28 last year, in sharp contrast to the alarming rise in piracy off the coast of Somalia. But the United States initiated these efforts by pressing the Asian littoral states to act, and by offering radar equipment and other technology as an incentive to Indonesia and Malaysia. The need to complete a surveillance system in the equally critical waterways of the Makassar Strait awaits the attention of the new U.S. team.



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The security of these waters is of vital interest for both the United States and Indonesia. For Indonesia, the priorities are to combat illegal fishing, illegal beach mining, piracy, and smuggling while the United States prioritizes counterterrorism and counternarcotics operations. Japan, Australia, Germany, and other donor countries have joined the United States in strengthening the capabilities of the Indonesian navy, the marine police, and the Indonesian Maritime Security Coordinating Board, which works with other agencies that have maritime responsibilities.

In addition to maritime efforts, the United States has an interest in helping Indonesia curb illegal logging, which contributes to the ecologically destructive loss of forest cover. U.S. assistance can come in the form of training both TNI and police personnel to support civilian agencies in enforcing customs and forestry regulations.

Another initiative that should be sustained is support for the TNI’s return to international peacekeeping. With the rotation (in 2008) of a second mechanized infantry battalion to southern Lebanon and a smaller contingent serving in the Congo as well as a national police contingent serving in Darfur, Indonesia has once again become Southeast Asia’s leading contributor to United Nations peace operations. The United States dipped into its Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI) fund to deliver the TNI’s armor to Lebanon. More assistance will be needed to train Indonesian troops for the more challenging Chapter VII (“peace-making”) deployments in store for U.N. peacekeepers.

Finally, both the United States and Indonesia must effectively and quickly address the irritants in their security relationship. One particularly irksome irritant is the rejection of TNI candidates for International Military Education and Training Program (IMET) grants and other U.S.-sponsored training programs because of their association with a unit that was alleged to have committed human rights abuses in the past. An individual’s service in such a unit, if the service occurs subsequent to those abuses, should not alone be a cause for rejection. The legislation could be revised to focus on individuals accused of violations rather than on blanket sanctions against units accused of violations a decade and more in the past. The United States should seriously consider the negative consequences of retrospective sanctions, which imply lack of trust and confidence in reforms implemented by Indonesia’s flourishing democratic government.

To be sure, some fundamental military reforms are yet to be completed. The TNI has yet to be held fully accountable for past misdeeds, including human rights abuses, and to shed its reputation for violence with impunity and immunity from prosecution. These remain the major reasons for congressional criticism and continuing restrictions on the U.S. security relationship with Indonesia. Further, Indonesia would do well to broaden the international awareness of its military and police leadership as well as its legislative membership and staff. A deep suspicion of foreign interests still threads its way through Indonesia’s political, business, and security communities.

The United States and Indonesia are the world’s third and fourth most populous nations and its second and third largest democracies. As multi-ethnic societies whose histories include a struggle for independence from colonial powers and strong pride in national development, the two countries have much in common, including many common national security interests. A more comprehensive bilateral security relationship will assist both countries in achieving their respective national goals and objectives through cooperation, harmony, and mutual trust.

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