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Indonesia's Role in India's Look East Policy

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Baladas Ghoshal, visiting senior fellow at the Centre for Policy Research and distinguished fellow at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies in New Delhi, explains that “As the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia has a key role to play in demonstrating the virtues of tolerance and mutual respect in a diverse, multi-ethnic polity.”

India views Indonesia, the largest country in Southeast Asia, as a strategic partner that can play an important role in its Look East Policy. The policy was designed in the early 1990s to deepen ties with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, using them as a springboard for integration with the global economy while helping to build a stable regional political and economic order in Southeast Asia. India and Indonesia are close geographic neighbors who share a maritime boundary and a mutual stake in each other's progress, prosperity, stability, and territorial integrity. As pluralistic democracies and developing societies, the two countries face similar challenges. Indonesia is not only the most populous country in the region with the largest Muslim population in the world, it also has immense natural resources and a strategic location: it controls all or part of the major waterways between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans.

Indonesia has recovered from the wreckage caused by the economic crisis of 1997-98 and has maintained relative political stability and economic progress at a time when many other countries are badly affected by the world recession. The United States under the Obama administration has decided to deepen its ties with Indonesia to form a “comprehensive partnership between two of the world's most important democracies.” In her first tour of Asia, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton included Indonesia on her itinerary, indicating Indonesia's importance in Southeast Asia for U.S. foreign policy. All of these factors indicate Indonesia's growing strategic and diplomatic importance in Southeast Asia, making the country of greater interest to India than ever before.

INDIA'S STAKE IN THE SUCCESS OF DEMOCRACY IN INDONESIA

The success of Indonesia as a pluralistic, democratic state is essential not only to the peace and prosperity of Southeast Asia, but also to the security of India. As the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia has a key role to play in demonstrating the virtues of tolerance and mutual respect in a diverse, multi-ethnic polity. The ability of so many Muslims to thrive economically and pursue a democratic, just society shows the way forward for Muslim and multi-religious societies like India. If democracy fails in Indonesia, it will not only lead to the revival of authoritarian forces, but also the rise of militant Islam in a country that has tried to preserve a secular society. The implications of this will not only have an effect on the security and stability of ASEAN, but will also have a bearing on India's own polity and security.

India, therefore, has a great stake in the success of Indonesia's democracy, and can attain positive gains in its relations with the latter if it can help in democratization efforts through training in capacity and institutional building. India may not yet be a beacon of



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democracy, but it has long years of experience in capacity and institutional building that can benefit Indonesia. Former President Wahid and many other Indonesian leaders have great respect for India's ability to practice democracy despite many shortcomings. In my conversations with the former president in July 2000, Wahid showed interest particularly in Panchayati Raj, a system of governance that empowers people at the grassroots level by transferring decision-making from the bureaucracy to elected local bodies, and decentralization mechanisms in India's Centre-State relations.

THE THREAT OF TERRORISM AS A COMMON CONCERN

Both India and Indonesia are facing growing threats from Islamic militancy and terrorism arising out of the changing nature of Islam. The rapid Arabization of Islamic beliefs and practices with greater emphasis on ritual rather than substance at the grassroots level in Southeast Asia could lead to fundamentalism and militancy in the region. This is a development that Indian policymakers and security experts need to watch. As yet, Islamic militancy in Indonesia is restricted to very small communities and the general orientation of most Indonesians is secular. But if the nascent democracy in Indonesia falters and the economy does not reduce growing economic inequalities, people may veer toward the millenarian expectations that Islam offers. The growing popularity of Islam makes it all the more imperative for India to help Indonesia in its democratization process, for pluralism and democracy can be a major bulwark against militancy and exclusive Islam. The curbing of terrorism, therefore, has emerged as a basis for cooperation between India and Indonesia.

GROWING EMPHASIS ON DEFENSE COOPERATION

In the context of the New Strategic Partnership (NSP), which was signed in 2005 during President Yudhoyono's visit to India, there is now growing cooperation between the two countries in the field of defense and security. At a time when Indonesia is engaged in diversifying its defense equipment, there are possibilities for military equipment purchases from India and the establishment of joint production facilities. Recognizing that both countries have large exclusive economic zones and maritime interests, India and Indonesia also agreed to work closely to enhance cooperation in capacity building, technical assistance, and information sharing between their respective relevant agencies. In response to the tsunami disaster in Aceh in 2005, India, which was also affected by the waves, deployed two naval ships carrying medical teams and US\$1 million in relief materials. In May 2006, India joined the international community in offering relief and assistance to Indonesia in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake that hit Java.

The NSP has marked the beginning of an extensive relationship between Asia's two largest democracies. The time seems right to reconnect and bolster relations, with China's power projection and the uncertainty of a new balance of power in Asia as a motivating force. Indonesian strategic thinkers have recently been inclined to look beyond ASEAN and are in favor of a regional security architecture in which major nations of the Asia Pacific region and beyond are represented. In such a grouping, Indonesia, being the fulcrum of Southeast Asia, could be a valuable interlocutor of India's interactions with Southeast and East Asia.