



# Asia Pacific Bulletin

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## India and Indonesia: Renewing Asia's *Collective Destiny* BY SOURABH GUPTA

Civilizational, cultural, and geographic neighbors, India and Indonesia share striking commonalities in their modern historical trajectories. In both societies, European powers, the Dutch and the British, benefited from the decline of tired Islamic land empires to graft colonial modes of exploitation that progressed fitfully from coast to hinterland to interior. Following proto-nationalist revolts, the Indian Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 and the Java War of 1825-30, both the Dutch and the British skillfully engineered a buffer of indigenous elite collaborators. This strategy succeeded to such an extent that their faraway possessions were governed by less than two hundred and a thousand expatriate administrators, respectively.

**Sourabh Gupta**, Senior Research Associate at Samuels International Associates, argues that, despite past missteps and future hurdles, India and Indonesia's parallel histories, similar policy preferences, and opportune international circumstances are drawing both countries closer to revitalize bilateral relations and potentially reconfigure Asian geopolitics.

As young, independent-minded nations imbued with a deep tradition of internationalism, India and Indonesia were at the forefront of conceptualizing a non-military defense system for Asia where peace would be assured by the major powers through the United Nations. Intended to shield themselves from the vagaries of the Cold War's emerging bipolar structure, their foundational doctrines of diplomacy—non-alignment and a “free and active” foreign policy—were in part as much an expression of their domestic pluralist characters as it was an attempt to establish a shared basis for peaceful coexistence in a post-colonial Asia riven by dissidence and subversion at its peripheries. To this day, both India and Indonesia hold strong preferences for multilateral and UN-centered cooperation and an unfavorable view of close-ended, collective security arrangements.

That said, both countries are not beyond deviating from these principles at moments of strategic opportunity or exigencies. India signed the Treaty of Peace, Cooperation and Friendship in 1971 with the Soviet Union, while Indonesia entered into the Agreement on Maintaining Security with Australia in 1995 that provides for consultation mechanisms in case of an adverse challenge or threat of attack to its signatory parties. Parenthetically, both India and Indonesia today share framework defense cooperation agreements with Western partners—the United States and Australia, respectively. This is so even as both countries delicately go about distributing their geopolitical equities among a selectively diverse set of “strategic” and “comprehensive” partners.

With a view to renewing their *collective destiny* in a post-Cold War Asian geopolitical canvas that once again bears both the flux and promise reminiscent of the early post-independence period, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono paid a three-day visit to India in late-January 2011. In New Delhi, the two countries institutionalized their defense ministers' dialogue and announced the start of negotiations toward a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA). As the recently signed ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (AIFTA)'s import liberalization regimes are expected to facilitate New Delhi's integration into the



region's production-sharing chains, the additional liberalizations under CECA should reinforce India's geoeconomic thrusts eastward.

For all their shared experiences and receptivity to independent-minded partners in Asia, however, it is dispiriting to observe a seemingly unenthusiastic interaction between New Delhi and Jakarta. Five years after their inauguration of a New Strategic Partnership, both Singh and Yudhoyono remain culpable of the failure to inject content to their bilateral relationship. Opportunities to tether bilateral ties to a set of altogether more ambitious goals are nevertheless available.

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With South Africa poised to join the politically influential BRIC grouping of major emerging economies in 2011, New Delhi's championing of Jakarta's subsequent entry would be politically astute and economically shrewd. Indeed, Indonesia (Population: 238 million; GDP: \$700 billion) rather than South Africa (Population: 50 million; GDP: \$350 billion) appears to be a more natural fit within this grouping of Brazil (Population: 93 million; GDP: \$1.8 trillion), Russia (Population: 141 million; GDP: \$1.5 trillion), India (Population: 1.2 billion; GDP: \$1.4 trillion) and China (Population: 1.3 billion; GDP: \$5.8 trillion). Reciprocally, Jakarta, given its shared maritime border and increasing familiarity with the Indian Navy, could invite New Delhi to join MALSINDO, the Trilateral Coordinated Patrols for the Malacca Straits initiative. This cooperation has significantly arrested acts of piracy and crime in and around the straits. Down the line, both countries could consider innovative new formats for maritime cooperation, including the exchange of actionable intelligence, with trusted subregional partners such as Australia.

Furthermore, both Indonesia and India could usefully take advantage of the nascent ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM+) expert working group machinery, which pairs an ASEAN member state and a non-member state as co-chairs, to initiate a discussion on norms related to regional maritime security and jurisdictional issues. On increasingly sensitive issues such as “innocent passage” of foreign-flagged ships in territorial waters and the distinction between marine scientific research and military hydrographic survey in foreign exclusive economic zones (EEZs), both countries encounter similar dilemmas and hold overlapping views. Along the way, the two countries could also set the tone on how leadership can be collaboratively exercised around the Indian Ocean, progressively an arena of great power contestation.

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As India and Indonesia renew their collective destiny, the cautionary lessons of their earlier fallout in ties bear remembering. Then, as now, China was a common denominator as both India and Indonesia tied themselves in rhetorical knots over conflicting interpretations of non-alignment, “peaceful coexistence,” and how subversive communist activities could be best contained. Going forward, attempts to cast the relationship on a China *constraintment* pillar are equally likely to founder on their differing margins of security vis-à-vis Beijing—India's eyeball-to-eyeball proximity along its undefined boundary line with China overshadows the overlapping Chinese claim to a gas-rich corner of Indonesia's EEZ. Proactive efforts to co-opt Beijing, be they bilateral, military-to-military dialogue or attempts to forge a diplomatic code of conduct in the South China Seas, are also more advanced in Jakarta than in New Delhi. Moreover, attempting to skirt over gaps in India-Indonesia relations is inadvisable. In their recently issued Joint Statement, neither country overtly supports the other's permanent Security Council membership aspirations. Furthermore, Jakarta did not expressly identify Pakistan for condemnation of its role in the 11/26 Mumbai attack—a recurrent demand placed on visiting dignitaries by New Delhi. That said, a bilateral road map interspersed in equal parts with ambition and pragmatism, and cognizant of their differences in security perspective, holds the potential to unlock the immense promise of this *natural partnership*.