

The prospect of a Biden presidency has been publicly welcomed by Indonesian leaders, as was only to be expected, and there are several substantive underpinnings to these sentiments.

A quick illustration of this would be to compare the Indonesian reactions to Secretary of State Pompeo's recent visit to Jakarta and their expectations of the sort of administration which President-elect Biden could be expected to put in place. Pompeo's attempts to enlist Indonesia as part of a concerted grouping to counter China, and his exhortation proposing Indonesian action in making representations to China about the "fellow-Muslim" Uighurs, received short shrift. These comments reflected a USA-centric view of the world and a lack of nuance and subtlety which otherwise might have allowed Pompeo to capitalise on the many positives which the United States brings to its relations with Indonesia.

By contrast, the prospect of a more traditional, competent and professional Biden administration, headed by a leader ready to accept advice and deal with other leaders in a respectful manner, resonates positively in Indonesia, as it is doing in many other countries. Indonesian insiders have welcomed the prospect of an end to policies and approaches which they regard as having created a deficit of trust and leadership in the region.

At a broad strategic level, Indonesia does not wish to be categorised as leaning more to the United States or China, and it is well practised, not least through its years of leadership among non-aligned nations, in the art of dealing with a range of disparate countries, including major powers engaged in global and regional rivalry.

An ongoing Indonesian interest is the [occasionally threadbare] mantra of ASEAN centrality in the Asian, and certainly the South East Asian region, and this argues against too close an identification with any one of the major powers. Instead, Indonesia sees itself as able to benefit from its economic and other dealings with quite different regimes. This leads to occasional official statements which are bland in the extreme [though Pompeo got some sharp edges out of them], but there is a fundamental calculation in all this: Indonesia, particularly at this time, needs economic assistance and other engagement from both the United States and China, as well as other regional countries.

This does not overlook the fact of sensitivities and disagreements in its dealings with the two major powers, for example its differences with China over the Natuna Islands and illegal fishing, or with the United States over Palestinian and multilateral issues. Indonesian actions on such issues can go well beyond the bland.

Although it does not say so in so many words, Indonesia has a strong interest in active American participation in the region, not least through its alliance relationships, because of the potential check on growing Chinese ambitions and assertiveness. The Biden presidency offers the prospect of a more predictable American approach, albeit in an environment where there seems little sign of a lessening of Chinese intentions. Indonesia would therefore welcome moves by the new Administration to lower regional tensions, while maintaining a strong and active American presence and role.

Like other countries, Indonesia will be closely following the course of Sino-American relations, especially the extent to which Biden sets out on a new process of engagement with China and, perhaps more questionable, the extent to which China responds. Broadening American attitudes to place more weight on regional as distinct from purely bilateral approaches to issues, including perhaps through ASEAN, would be attractive to the extent that they lowered major power tensions. Indonesia would respond positively to American approaches which demonstrate seeing value in bilateral relations in themselves, as distinct from being seen

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predominantly through the prism of Sino-American rivalry. Indonesia, in line with its emerging interests, will not be a passive observer of these potential developments, and will pursue advantageous openings with both countries as its interests suggest.

Another particular Indonesian international interest over the decades has been in supporting the United Nations and other international cooperative bodies. Indonesia would respond positively to signs that the new Administration will discontinue at least some of the Trump retreat from multilateralism in dealings with the World Health Organisation, WTO and other international processes and bodies. With other regional countries, Indonesia will follow closely the development of the new Administration's approach to issues like the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

The change of American administration comes at a time of severe difficulties at home for Indonesia. The pandemic has taken a serious toll on life and economic activity, inducing a recession in a country which needs Tiger-like growth rates to absorb new and existing job-seekers. President Jokowi needs outside involvement as he implements a range of measures designed to promote investment, renewed economic activity and growth.

Indonesia has substantial economic interests with the United States, which is its second-largest export market for non-oil and gas products, a source of major investment interest, a useful donor in areas including those relating to the pandemic and has only recently granted exemptions on duties imposed on many Indonesian exports to the United States.

A greater American bilateral involvement could yield dividends in areas like advanced technologies, investment and infrastructure. The same Indonesian interests are served by its dealings with China, which is among other things providing major investment inflows and much-needed involvement in helping Indonesia through the pandemic, for example through the provision of vaccines.

And of course, there are other major economic players which serve Indonesia's interests at a time when it is reeling, including Japan, Korea, India and Australia. Indonesia will approach its dealings with these countries with an eye both to its economic interest and to its broader concern to keep avenues open to a range of partners so as to avoid over-dependence on any one player.



Bill Farmer AO

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