

Relaxed, Complacent and Risible:

A critical decline in Asian studies is widening the gulf between Australia and Asia

Tim Lindsey

It's a funny thing, the Australian-Indonesian relationship. On the one hand, Canberra likes to assure us that it is better than ever and that John Howard has a special relationship with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. On the other hand, the relationship is routinely described by commentators as volatile, fragile or troubled.

In 2005, the Lowey Institute's annual poll on foreign policy found that Indonesia was seen as dangerous: only towards the Middle East, Iran and Iraq did we have more negative feelings. The next year the poll confirmed that "Australia was right to worry about Indonesia as a military threat".

So which is correct? Both. Our relationship with our giant northern neighbour is essentially ambivalent.

Australians with an interest in the relationship see it as important, resilient and strong. This group mainly consists of members of government and the public service, businesses active in Indonesia, and people such as me, who have other professional or personal links to Indonesia. This group is not restricted by class, income, education, ethnicity or any other indicator.

For the remainder, the majority, the relationship is seen as difficult, tense and, ultimately, disposable. Those supportive of the relationship are arbitrarily dismissed as the Jakarta lobby, a mysterious and amorphous conspiracy straight out of Dan Brown.

Unsurprisingly, Indonesians are divided along similar lines in their perception of Australia. However, the economics of development mean that Indonesians with an interest in the relationship - and thereby likelier to have a positive view - are a smaller percentage of their population of 240 millions, although this minority is probably larger in overall terms than the equivalent group here.

After all, there are close to 17,000 Indonesian students in Australia, the foremost destination for Indonesians studying abroad.

The remainder of Indonesians - again, the majority - are usually indifferent, but can sometimes be hostile to Australia. This hostility usually happens when excited by cliques, many still smarting from the loss of East Timor, within the legislature, the armed forces, some government departments, and a few newspapers.

You don't need to be a postmodernist to understand that perceptions create realities, and so it is that in both countries the bilateral relationship is largely managed by its supporters, but judged by its skeptics and opponents.

This is why it seems so ambiguous, flipping back and forth between stability and collapse, between warm embrace and freezing hostility, although at its base it is, in fact, relatively stable.

The big question is therefore, why are attitudes so divided in both countries. History provides the answer.

In May 1998, Indonesia's financial crisis finally unraveled a Faustian bargain (economic growth at the cost of individual freedom) that had kept President Suharto in power for 32 years.

At the height of the crisis, with 80% of financial institutions and corporations technically insolvent, the armed forces and elite finally deserted him. He resigned on national television, amid rioting and looting in the capital.

Four years later, in August 2002, the MPR, Indonesia's popular assembly – against expectations – completed the fourth of a set of constitutional amendments begun in 1999. The result was a radical recreation of Suharto's repressive authoritarian bureaucratic New Order as a US-presidential democracy and a decentralized quasi-federation.

Power stripped from the presidency went in part to the national legislature and in part down to district municipalities, with elections at the national, provincial and local level.

This was against expectation because the issues decided went to the heart of the modern Indonesian state: Would it become an Islamic state? Would it become a democracy? Would the military retain a formal role in politics?

Few believed that Indonesia's politicians, famous for in-fighting and horse-trading, would resolve debates that had polarized their nation since independence in 1945. In fact, not only was a majority reached on these difficult issues but in the end the 695 members of the assembly decided most questions unanimously.

Since then, a new generation of Indonesian politicians (albeit with some New Order survivors) have had to address other old and hugely difficult issues. What will be the territorial limits of the republic? What will be the status of Aceh and Papua? How to create a consistent, competent and fair judicial system, which is crucial to the success of other reforms? How far can the military be stripped of privileges and its human rights abuses curtailed?

In short, how can the new politicians unravel the pervasive system of institutionalized corruption inherited from Suharto? And the fact of elections means they have been driven in much of this by civil society, which has blossomed since 1998. This is especially true of non-government organizations and a now voracious media.

The result is a much broader public understanding in Indonesia of the importance of political and legal change and institutional reform than at any time since the 1950s and the mid 60s. Political debate is open, sustained, diverse and often subtle.

But of course, Indonesia is not Switzerland or even the US. Reform has been slow, difficult and messy. Although Indonesia has been released from the huge International Monetary Fund program of assistance that Suharto signed up to, Western investment has never returned to pre-crisis levels because business knows that *reformasi* still has far to go.

Naturally. As Teten Masduki, a long-term anti-corruption campaigner says, it is easier to agitate than to organize. Rhetorically at least, the broad principles of a more just and democratic system are now agreed on, but much of the essential detail for implementing these principles instrumentally and institutionally is still missing.

What is remarkable about the post-Suharto transformation of Indonesia is not so much the morass of problems it still faces, but how far it has come despite such adverse circumstances: an economic collapse that is arguably the worst suffered by any country in the previous century and the dismantling not only of Suharto's New Order, but also much of the elaborate system of centralized and repressive administration.

The task of reinventing any state system so it works better is always extraordinarily difficult; and in Indonesia it is slow and painful. That is hardly surprising.

But few Australians are aware that any of this has happened. For most of us, the old tropes that applied for so long under Suharto still hold. Indonesia is still imagined as a military dictatorship, where a brutal repressive regime bent upon territorial expansion and

eager to eradicate minority ethnic groups rules by force over a cowed and compliant population. Woven in are images of fanatical Islamist terrorists who, with covert state approval, seek to drive Westerners and Christians from their nation.

In regions such as Papua where the military still acts with significant autonomy, some of these images may still hold some truth. Generally, however, they are so far from it as to be worse than useless as the basis for understanding events in the immensely complex archipelago to our north.

Does it matter that most Australians know next to nothing about Indonesia? It should. Indonesia matters enormously to Australia. It is the world's third largest democracy and its fourth most populous state. It probably contains more Muslims than the Middle East; and more Christians than Australia.

Australia will host the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation Forum later this year and is at the ASEAN table as a member of the East Asia Summit, in large part because Indonesia backed us. Despite its enormous economic problems, Indonesia's market of 240 million people and its rich resources mean it is still among South-East Asia's most likeliest and the rising tide of mainland Chinese investment acknowledges this.

Indonesia straddles important sea lanes and air routes that allow Australians access to the world. Surrounded by an assortment of smaller states, it is still the key to regional security and within its contested borders it embraces diverse nations and ethnic groups – up to 300 on some accounts – and their long-standing quarrels.

Indonesia must always matter internationally, but it should matter in particular for Australia. It is a joy-ride from Darwin and only six hours even from the southern states (if you can still find a direct flight).

In a world where distance matters less, Australia can no longer take the easy option of turning its back to wait it out when things get difficult or even dangerous across the Arafura Sea. It cannot adopt a need-to-know policy, noticing Indonesia only when Australians such as Schapelle Corby or the Bali Nine are in trouble, or when Australian interests such as offshore seabed resources are at stake. We need the full infrastructure of close diplomatic relations between neighbour states, including prisoner exchange agreements and the like, before these predictable crises arise.

So the cliché most beloved of the Australia-Indonesia relationship, that our nations are inextricably entwined by geography, expresses a basic fact of Australia's foreign policy. The Howard government belatedly came to accept this once the ghost of Paul Keating's ascendancy on Asia policy faded and Howard felt relaxed and comfortable enough to look north again.

Realising institutional engagement had been neglected by both countries in the Coalition's first term, Howard and Alexander Downer have since done much to turn this around, hence the billion-dollar special relationship that emerged after the 2005 Boxing Day tsunami.

The reality is, however, that the imperatives of geography are such that any elected government will come to the same conclusion eventually. Little wonder that our Jakarta embassy has long been one of our biggest diplomatic posts.

But rewarming Indonesia will always take time for a new government in Australia because the opposition can easily score points by kicking Jakarta. Labor out of government, for example, has held diametrically opposed policies to those it has held in office. Kim Beazley, Mark Latham and Kevin Rudd (con) versus Gough Whitlam, Bob Hawke and Keating (pro).

This creates a pattern: those who in opposition sledge Jakarta, cosy up once in office. As Howard was to Keating on Indonesia, so Rudd is to Howard, and for the same reasons, Rudd will likely reverse his views if he wins office, just as Howard did.

So why do oppositions like Jakarta bashing? As the Lowy polls remind us, because the electorate likes it. The popular Australian attitudes about Indonesia are of fear and loathing, sentiments that are the unfortunate children of ignorance.

Typically, Indonesia and Indonesians are perceived only through a set of distorting lenses and these mostly are about violence. They create an image of Indonesia as a huge restless monster, perpetually poised to invade.

An Indonesian military officer with whom I once discussed this expressed amazement. "What about the threat from the south," he said. "You've got planes that fly and equipment that works. We haven't".

He had a point. Indonesian troops have never fought on Australian soil but Australians have four times fought (for justifiable reasons) in the archipelago: against the Japanese in World War II; with the British immediately following the Japanese surrender in 1945; against Indonesia during Confrontation in Kalimantan in the early '60s; and in East Timor from 1999 while it was recognized by Australia as Indonesian territory.

To add to our deeply rooted anxiety concerning looming, gravity-driven invasion down the map from north to south, we have the added horror of jihad, of terrorist Islam.

The impact of the Bali, Marriott Hotel and Australian embassy bombings on the Australian psyche has been considerable. Popular consciousness, encouraged by the media, has exaggerated the threat of militant extremists to the stability of Indonesia and created a deeply misleading conflation of Islam with terrorist factions, and in some minds even a conflation of the Indonesian state with the very militant groups that seek to dismantle it.

But not all the lenses are to do with a threatened violence, a masculine attacker. There are also tropes of passivity, where Indonesia is perceived as weak, passive, dependent, vulnerable, often feminised, sexualized. This is Indonesia as victim, as in Aceh after the tsunami, or as in Bali, Australia's playground, the site of leisure and lust, a destination for parties and girls and drugs. The targeting of Bali by Jemaah Islamiah, occurring close in time to the other Bali bombs (as locals describe the SARS and avian flu scares) has devastated Bali's tourist image and economy, but the trope is remarkably resilient. There are still Australian tourists who are unaware that Bali is part of Indonesia.

Whether passive or aggressive, however, the common denominator in all these popular images of Indonesia is ignorance, a form of contempt, fear, pity or exploitation. They draw on fact but exaggerate and overstate. Either way, Indonesia is seen as inferior, threatening, weak and morally underdeveloped: cowardly bully or corrupting seductress. These attitudes are mostly invisible to us, because they are either unknown or deeply buried, usually unconscious, but they seem a lot more obvious when you stand in Southeast Asia and look homeward.

Many Australians are proud of their country as an open, multicultural and democratic nation. They see it as possessing a record of racial tolerance, inclusiveness, human rights and the rule of law. They point to Australia's record as one of the earliest democracies to grant women the vote, the fact that our political system has functioned remarkably well in its first century, the relative absence of inter-racial violence and a continuing, of sometimes shaky, commitment to multiculturalism.

Most Australians therefore have considerable difficulty accepting that their country's reputation in Southeast Asia is quite different and that it is often portrayed as a racist state.

The White Australia Policy, which only formally ended in the 1970s, is still within the memory of living Indonesians, many of them senior government figures. White women may have voted for most of Federation, but Aboriginal people had to wait until 1967 to be enfranchised, as Indonesian intellectuals sometimes politely remind me.

Indonesian attitudes to Australia also remain influenced by remnants of hostility to Dutch colonialism, whose social and legal systems in some ways resembled South African apartheid. Indonesia's war for independence from colonial forces was the source of its formerly authoritarian political system and of the central role which the military long claimed in politics and business.

The powerful rhetoric of nationalism, unsurprisingly, embraces a long suspicion of Western colonial ambitions. The revolution against colonialism is still a fundamental part of school curriculums and national imagery. The generation of soldiers who fought in 1945 (which included Suharto) has only recently left the political stage. Ingrained distrust of whites as neocolonialists remains.

Most Indonesians often find these ideas hard to resist, which is why most believe Australia wants an independent Papua as a client state.

Yet their mutual misunderstandings mask the fact that most Indonesians and Australians have more in common than they realize. Most Indonesians and Australians share an enthusiasm for democracy and enjoy open, vigorous political debate. They aspire to a middle class life, or better. Most Indonesians fear extremist Islam as much as most Australians do, and not surprisingly, given that over the past ten years Islamist militants have killed more Indonesians than Westerners.

A gap of popular misunderstanding lies between our two countries, among the people, in the streets, between the majority in each country who have no connections with the other country. Why, and what can be done, in Australia at least?

Greater understanding and global goodwill exists between elites, between governments (most of the time) and between people who have links across the Arafura Sea.

One reason why Australians are getting their northern neighbours wrong is undoubtedly the dramatic decline in Asian studies nationwide, with perhaps a net 70 teaching places lost at the tertiary level during the past decade. The average age of Asian studies teachers is over 50 and many high-profile research institutions, such as the Asia Australia Institute at the University of NSW, are under threat of closing or becoming moribund.

The problem has reached disastrous proportions. Only 2.9 percent of tertiary students study Asia-related subjects at university. Their teachers do little better. The result is that a year ago there were only 400 students enrolled nationally to study Indonesian.

And the crisis is not just in our universities. Australia's school students spend the least time on second languages of students in all OECD countries. Language studies have collapsed from 40 percent of Year 12 students studying a second language in the '60s to fewer than 15 percent today; and only 1 percent of them study Indonesian. In 2001 there were only 400 Asia specialists in Australia, down from an estimated 620 in 1992, and we can be confident the numbers have continued to fall.

Robert Elson of the University of Queensland put it well late last year when he said, "I've been teaching Asian studies for 30 years and it's hard to think of a time when it was less evident in the curriculum than now... 10 years ago Asian studies was quite a rigorous activity, now it's in decline everywhere."

Is it any wonder that the majority of school students in one recent survey viewed all Muslims as terrorists?

This should be seen as a national scandal but rates no mention in several federal budgets. Yes, Asia research is doing well; there are valuable government-funded schemes that often support individual Asian research projects, especially through the Australian Research Council and AusAID – but what is required is a systematic, sector-wide response to the problem across schools and universities, focused on teaching.

I hope I am wrong, but I suspect there may be now fewer than 15 full-time academics working exclusively on Indonesia in Australian universities, at a time when the strategic need to understand Indonesia and Islam has never been higher in public rhetoric.

And no politician, Government or Opposition, offers a real solution. Do they even see the problem?

Things need to change in Australian attitudes to Asia, if only for the most selfish of reasons: security and prosperity.

A strategic need to deal with terrorism, people smuggling, drug trafficking and piracy in our region dominates our media. The key to this is Indonesia. There is little serious prospect of military attack from the north, but the more than 17,000 islands that form the archipelago create a permeable network embracing Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines that for centuries has been a haven for criminal activity.

No one state will ever be able to control this region on its own. Australia's security therefore depends on our ASEAN neighbours and especially Indonesia, yet we are dumbing-down our Indonesia skills. If we are to double the size of our intelligence agencies, for example, where will we find Asia-literate spies?

As for wealth, Australia's export boom is based on increased exports to Asia: we have two-way trade with Asia of more than \$100 billion, but only \$40.3 billion with the USA and \$20.3 billion with Britain – East Asia is bankrolling our high standard of living.

Indonesia ranks comparatively lowly as a trading partner, but Koreans, Japanese and especially the Chinese see potentially where we do not. And don't forget that Indonesia's troubled economy always has an impact on more developed markets nearby, such as Malaysia and Singapore.

The point was recently made clearly by expatriate Australian James Wolfensohn, former head of the World Bank, when he called for a recalibration of our attitudes" "Too many of my friends in Australia and their kids still think in terms of a European or American connection but the reality is that it is the developing world and in particular Asia that will have a hugely more significant impact on Australia, and Australia needs to understand it and adapt."

Australia, he continued, was not prepared for a geopolitical shift of power away from the US towards Asia.

So, what to do?

Perhaps there is little prospect of changing the views of most Australians about Indonesia but policy-makers at least must have access to a broad range of expertise.

We need to get serious again about investing in Asian studies in schools. When we did this in the mid 1990s it had real results, doubling in eight years the number of Asian-language learners. But this strategy was abandoned by the Howard government without being completed and numbers have since plummeted.

Individual Asianists can still compete successfully for ARC and other research funds, but what is needed is broad institutional support such as that formerly provided by the axed National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS) strategy. This funded support for Asian languages and area studies in schools and so put bums on seats

in universities, attracting tertiary level funding to courses and departments that are now extinct or endangered.

We also need approaches to public analysis that do better in avoiding reductionism and stereotypes, approaches that drill down deeply into the immense complexity of Indonesian societies and start to explain their mysteries to Australians more carefully and accurately. This is needed as much in the media as in the academy, so better links are forged between scholars and public perception.

Put bluntly, we also need more Asia-literate journalists – urgently, too, to judge from the ill-informed and sometimes dishonest nonsense printed and broadcast about the Corby, Michelle Lesley, Bali Nine and Bali bomber trials.

There is, of course, much more that we need in a hurry, but even these basic reforms in education and the media are unlikely to happen. Beyond the odd burst of sympathetic rhetoric, no Australian government, state or federal, seems much concerned about what is fast becoming the vanishing of Southeast Asian literacy and Southeast Asian studies. And business, which mainly sees Asia as a market rather than as an investment, seems equally unperturbed. Comfortable, relaxed, complacent and risible.

Small wonder that in Southeast Asia, Australia is still in the company of strangers.

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