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Nov 04, 2016 by [Ellen Huijgh](#)

Indonesia: “A Thousand Friends,” But No BFF ^[1]

I was delighted to read the CPD Blog written by [Anja Eifert](#) on [Indonesia as an Example of 21st Century Economic Statecraft](#). It fits well with my research, [The Public Diplomacy of Emerging Powers: Insights from Indonesia and Turkey for the USC Center on Public Diplomacy](#). Indonesia is as an emerging power in today’s regional and global political and business arenas and that the impressive developments made since the *Reformasi* (Reform) period in 1998 as well as its recovery from the Asian financial crisis cannot go unnoticed. While rising economic statecraft does not necessarily equal (increased) investments in public diplomacy at home and abroad, it’s definitely a country that has been watched and courted over the past years, and not just by the United States.

Given Indonesia’s rising economic position - despite recent dips – [Anja Eifert’s argument](#) that “in ‘America’s Pacific Century,’ Indonesia is constituting a ‘steam engine’ in the Asia-Pacific region, the country should be regarded as a centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy;” that “the U.S. could do more,” in the context of public diplomacy, and that “it must propagate deeper engagement with words and deeds.” Yet, I think in essence it is not so much a matter of more. Much of the success of U.S. public diplomacy is not dependent on “more words and deeds” from the U.S., but rather by how all this is perceived by the recipient country, Indonesia.

After all, Indonesia, envisions itself as having “a thousand friends and zero enemies” and no BFF (Best Friend Forever), whether from North or South, East or West. Indonesia’s goal of

being on good terms with all countries may entail tightening U.S.-Indonesian relations reflected in a growing number of bilateral public diplomacy projects. Yet it is unlikely that the 21st century will be the “American Century for Indonesia,” and ASEAN and other regional institutions rather than the U.S. remain the centrepiece of Indonesia’s foreign policy. Additionally, for every new initiative with the U.S., there are many others, which have been newly set up with other partners such as Australia, South Korea, Japan, as well as China. This attitude, relevant for the U.S.’s public diplomacy success rate and limitations today, can be explained by looking a bit back in time.

Over the past century, U.S.-Indonesian relations have been on and off, despite the United States’ expressed intentions and increased investments in Indonesia. Just as with the U.S., Indonesia’s public diplomacy is tightly wound into its foreign policy. The latter is affected by a combination of both continuity and perpetual flux. Various factors, such as history, geography, demographics, economics, security, and national interest have prompted Indonesia to adopt a foreign policy that is “*bebas dan aktif*,” or, “free and active.” The first element, ‘free,’ implies that Indonesia is trying to follow its own course in world affairs, away from the dictates of major powers and without external pressures or influence. The second element, ‘active,’ means that the country is dedicated to being involved in constructive activities geared towards bringing about and supporting world peace.

This basic foreign policy principle, which influences how Indonesia’s public diplomacy takes its present shape today and how that of other countries is perceived, was espoused in Vice President Mohammad Hatta’s address “*Mendajung Antara Dua Karang*,” or “Rowing Between Two Reefs,” at a session of the Central National Commission on 2 September 1948 at the height of the Indonesian War for Independence (1). After more than 65 years of existence Indonesia’s basic ‘free and active’ foreign policy doctrine has remained unchanged, though its articulation and implementation have evolved over the years, with crucial differences in attitude towards the United States.

Both presidents Sukarno (18 August, 1945-12 March, 1967) and Suharto (12 March 1967-21 May 1998) employed this principle on antipodal agendas. Under Sukarno, the free and active principle was seen as standing against colonialism and imperialism and as promoting post-colonial/socialist alliances to reshape the world. Indonesia became the founder and leading member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and showed little interest in economic development, which resulted in close relationships with China to the detriment of the United States. This led to allegations from Suharto that this close relationship with China was in fact, violating the free and active doctrine. Suharto’s military-dominated New Order regime pursued economic development, froze relations with the Soviet Union and China, joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), developed closer relations with the U.S., and upheld a merely symbolic political commitment to third world solidarity through the NAM (2).

In the post-Suharto period, while his three predecessors all gave the doctrine their own particular spin, Indonesia’s sixth president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY; 20 October 2004-present), introduced his own metaphor of “navigating in a turbulent sea” in response to the transformations in Indonesia’s strategic environment (3). He envisioned the implementation of the free and active principle through the creation of a ‘new dynamic equilibrium’ wherein foreign policy, of which public diplomacy is a part, was no longer

entangled in the East vs. West dialectic, particularly between the U.S. and China.

So, while Indonesia's relations with the U.S. may have deepened over the years, especially under the Obama presidency, this is not the only country with which Indonesia has developed greater ties, and given its historical context and its current implementation of the free and active principle, it is unlikely to see any country as its BFF or employ any country as the centerpiece of its foreign policy over the coming years.

U.S.-Indonesian engagement through public diplomacy is a fact today, however. To add a few concrete Indonesian examples to the U.S. Public Diplomacy Fund mentioned on Ms. Eifert's argument in the CPD Blog, Indonesia has excellent student exchanges which are financed by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, with which the MFA co-operates in the selection of participants and the gathering of input for the projects' set-up. These were expanded to the U.S. in 2011. Indonesia and the U.S. have also had a two-weeks-long exchange between Indonesian students selected from different programs' national competitions and peers in the U.S. to discuss several issues, such as the presidential system. U.S.-Indonesian working groups have also been launched. Civil society actors from both countries were invited to share knowhow and best practices on democratic principles, women's issues and education as well as on journalistic ethics.

However, this must be put into perspective. It does not really reflect an Indonesian preference for the U.S., but rather broader changes in the course of Indonesian foreign policy, namely, the tendency of moving towards a more bilateral execution in the expansion of its so-called foreign policy concentric circles in addition to the initial regional and multilateral implementation. Indonesia has expanded the countries it targets over the years, from its Pacific neighbors to Australia, Europe, and recently North America which has undoubtedly affected its public diplomacy activities (4).

It is also unlikely that Indonesia will be a fervent supporter of the propagation/promotion of U.S. values (as is partly intended by U.S. public diplomacy programs in Indonesia). A quick look at the approach of the Bali Democracy Forum, an annual, intergovernmental forum on the development of democracy in the Asia Pacific region, initiated and hosted by the Indonesian government, makes this even more evident. The Forum has deliberately avoided using a "club of democracies" model- such as is found in the U.S.-initiated Asia Pacific Democracy Partnership- and includes both democratic and less/non-democratic participants (5).

This has lead to criticism from established Western powers, including the U.S., but Indonesia has claimed that its approach to democracy is somewhat different from the American model in the sense that it aims to discuss democracy and share experiences rather than force a certain model onto participants. This is well-expressed by former Minister of Foreign Affairs Hassan Wirajuda: "I believe that democracy is a universal value, but universal as it is, we cannot impose it on others, because when we impose values on others they tend to reject those values..." (6). The way in which Indonesia aims to treat peers reflects the way in which it expects to be treated as well.

Furthermore, realistically, the absence of President Barack Obama at the 2013 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation leadership meeting and thus the continuous importance of summit diplomacy cannot be mitigated through a series of public diplomacy activities. Both are of

equal importance; as the U.S. has learned through experience over the years, public diplomacy is not simply a damage control tool. Also, any strengthening of high-level relations with the U.S. president will, given Indonesian poll numbers, no longer depend so much on current Indonesian president SBY as you suggested, but with whoever his replacement is.

While estimates are just estimates and we must wait for this year's electoral outcome, the Indonesian press, academic literature, and especially the general population see Joko Widodo (better known to all as Jokowi and referred to as the "Jokowi-effect"), the former mayor of Solo and now the governor of Jakarta, as a potential replacement. His popularity with the public partly stems from his civil-society and *Blusukan* (unannounced spot-check) approach. His presidential candidacy or election, while so far, far from guaranteed, is seen as a divestment from the old guard and elites or the passing of the torch to those emerging from Indonesia's democratic present. (7)

Moreover this could also potentially mean a new boost to Indonesian public diplomacy practice on a more transversal and presidential level. Indonesia's public diplomacy started strong (e.g. interfaith dialogues) but has somewhat stagnated in importance and support within the *Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia* (Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and at the higher levels. A boost from a 'new' presidential governing style and/or his support of a culture more open to public debate, as was the case in the years following the Reformasi, would be beneficial to Indonesia's public outreach at home and abroad.

The vice versa is true as well. Aside from a potential "Jokowi-effect," the current U.S. "Obama effect" and his special relationship with, and high popularity in, Indonesia is a possible boon to the U.S.' public diplomacy, which should not be disregarded and has been for the most part underexploited. With the U.S. presidential elections in 2016, the latter could indeed, as Ms. Eifert's argument on the CPD Blog states, run out of the time and opportunities, which these particular circumstances provide for improving U.S.-Indonesian relations.

Moreover, what Ms. Eifert's argument on the CPD Blog also puts to the forefront is that public diplomacy- especially its practice and therefore not necessarily the use of the terminology within governments-, whether in the U.S. or Indonesia, supersedes both countries' MFAs. In the conversations I had in Jakarta with prominent individuals it became increasingly clear that the practice of public diplomacy is an interdepartmental responsibility in need for support from the highest-levels. The need to bring in more transversal themes, such as its economic development, which not only give good news but also share experiences on stumbling blocks along the country's journey as an emerging power into its public diplomacy narrative is key to its future. This will also be elaborated throughout my USC research.

These are just a few out of many thoughts, and there's much more to discuss and open for research. I am very much looking forward to exchanging more thoughts with you and other interested readers over the course of our research!

Footnotes

(1) See e.g. Mohammad Hatta, "Indonesia between the Power Blocs," *Foreign Affairs*, (April issue, 1958); Ann Marie Murphy, "Democratization and Indonesian Foreign Policy," *Asia Policy*, no. 3, (2012), p. 87; Bantarto Bandoro, "Indonesian Foreign Policy in 2008 and Beyond," *The Indonesian Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 4, (2007), p. 327; Matthew Omolesky, "Indonesia Between the Reefs," *The American Spectator* (21/04/2010)

(2) For more information see e.g. Symasad Hadi, "Indonesian-China Relations in the Post

New Order Era," In: Lam Peng Er, Narayanan Ganesan and Colin Dürkop (eds.) *East Asia's Relations with a Rising China* (Konrad Adenauer Stifting, 2010), pp. 217-241; Ian James Storey, "Indonesia's China Policy in the New Order and Beyond: Problems and Prospects," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International & State*, vol. 22, no. 1, (April 2010), p. 145; Greta Nabbs-Keller, "Growing Convergence, Greater Consequence: The Strategic Implications of Closer Indonesia-China Relations," *Security Challenges*, vol. 7, no. 3, (Spring 2011), pp. 23-41; Franklin B. Weinstein. *Indonesian Foreign Policy and the Dilemma of Dependence: from Sukarno to Suharto* (Ithaca: NY Cornell University Press, 1976); Rizal Sukma, "The Evolution of Indonesia's Foreign Policy: An Indonesian View," *Asian Survey*, vol. 35, no. 3, (1995), pp. 304-315.

(3) See Marty M. Natalegawa, "Indonesia and the World 2010," *Jakarta Post Opinion* (annual policy statement on 8/01/2010); Irfa Puspitasari. *Indonesia's New Foreign Policy- 'Thousand friends-zero enemy*. IDSA Issue Brief (New Delhi: Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, August 10, 2010).

(4) See e.g. Wirajuda Hadiano. *Re-thinking the Republic of Indonesia's Foreign Policy Concentric Circle*. *The Jakarta Post* (4 November 2010).

(5) See e.g. <http://bdf.kemlu.go.id/>

(6) See Dr. Hassan Wirajuda, "Seeds of Democracy in Egypt: Sharing is Caring," *Strategic Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, (2011), pp. 150.

(7) For more on "The Jokowi effect", see e.g. Dave McRae, "Indonesian politics in 2013: the emergence of new leadership?" *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, vol. 49, no. 3, (2013), pp. 289-304
