

**Thumbnail Image:**



May 07, 2024 by [Suzie Sri Suparin S. Sudarman](#)

## Rowing Between Rocks: Indonesian-American Diplomatic Relations Since the Cold War <sup>[1]</sup>

In 1948, on the heels of Indonesia's independence with the Cold War underway, Mohammad Hatta, Indonesia's first vice president and fourth foreign minister, delivered a speech titled "Rowing Between Two Rocks [or Reefs]." As a newborn country, Indonesia at that time had to navigate the hostile environment of the Cold War, when the two blocs of the US and Soviet Union vied for influence in the region. It is logical to think that a country that had just gained independence wanted a free and peaceful world.

To achieve that, Hatta believed that Indonesia had to actively row between the two reefs, i.e. the U.S. and Soviet Union, and "not to drop its anchor into water equidistant from Washington and Moscow and stay there," as Donald K. Emmerson puts it in contrast. By that, it means "the policy of the Republic of Indonesia is not one of neutrality, because it is not constructed in

reference to belligerent states but for the purpose of strengthening and upholding peace,” wrote Hatta in *Foreign Affairs*. In other words, Indonesia could support one big power or the other only and only if the purpose is to strengthen and uphold peace and is in line with Indonesia’s interest. Another thing, it also comes “with only the loosest caveat imaginable: that it not back the same single side forever.” In addition, embedded in Hatta’s view was a vision of an archipelagic outlook, which is clearly implied from the word usage in the title such as “row,” “boat,” and “reefs,” highlighting the prominence of Indonesia as a sovereign maritime country. The speech thus gave birth to the doctrine of Bebas-Aktif (Independent and Active) that became the core tenet of Indonesia’s foreign policy, to which the succeeding presidents and foreign ministers based on their interpretations and ideas when formulating their own foreign policy agenda.

Timo Kivimaki has explored the ability of some weak nations to outmaneuver superpowers in international negotiations and concluded that: in the context of an integral hegemonic leadership, the hegemon’s need to stabilize its position by providing benefits or by acting in accordance with some acceptable normative system can easily be a source of leverage available only to subordinates. In the context of hegemonic decline, the weaker power still manages to apply strategies to gain bargaining power. Although these accomplishments were rational within the logic of bargaining, they were deemed irrational from the perspective of the international welfare of Indonesia’s long-term interests.

Due to the half-hearted and lukewarm support during the revolution, the first Indonesian elite’s impression of America could be characterized as ambivalent. There was an increase in Indonesian leaders’ negative attitude over the course of the 1950s. Three events had substantial bearing on this development; first, the U.S. attempted to bring Indonesia into a quasi-formal alliance with the West in the early 1950s. Second, there was the U.S. intervention in the Outer Island rebellions. The third was the United States’ official neutralism and behind-the-scenes backing of the Dutch in these attempts to deny West Irian to Indonesia.

---

***Indonesian elite’s perceptions have historically varied, shaped by a combination of the leaders’ personal idiosyncrasies and the domestic political situation in Indonesia. Indonesian sentiments tended to be unstable and in constant flux.***

American-Indonesian relations improved again after the political changes in the 1960s but the elite’s perceptions of the West in general and the US in particular were characterized by ambivalence inherent in the “dilemma of dependence.”

Indonesian elite opinions about the U.S. are somewhat contradictory as America’s global influence is simultaneously embraced and rejected. The “love” aspect in the Indonesian elite’s attitude towards the US arises from the combination of the U.S. image as a benign superpower and the leaders’ (admission) of aspects of America’s political system, culture and society. The benign character of America has increasingly been eclipsed by the U.S. unilateralist policies and aggressive actions in the post-Cold War world period and particularly in the post-9/11 tragedy. In the context of American strategic priorities, Indonesia’s

relationship with the US throughout the 1990s became increasingly complex. The U.S. promotion of democracy generated a great deal of ambivalence among the elites include (i) U.S. global preponderance and its unilateralism; (ii) the U.S. launched-War on Terrorism; (iii) U.S. power stemming from its prominent norm-building position; (iv) U.S. power over information, and manipulation of international media; (v) and NGOs operating around Indonesia functioning as Washington's agents serving U.S. interests.

Daniel Novotny's thesis points to the reality that Indonesia's attitude towards its relationship with the United States in the post-Cold War period could be characterized as ambivalent and full of contradictions. It is to a large degree a reflection of both the elite's ambivalent attitude toward the United States and its views that America is ultimately a friendly power and a main guarantee for peace and stability in the region.

The United States is considered an ultimate check on the growing power and influence of China, whose future hegemonic intentions are a source of considerable concern among Indonesian leadership. Indonesian elite's perceptions have historically varied, shaped by a combination of the leaders' personal idiosyncrasies and the domestic political situation in Indonesia. Indonesian sentiments tended to be unstable and in constant flux.

It is too early to dismiss the importance of official nationalism as it has served a purpose in wrapping around the crony capitalist state's shoulders its "antique finery" to keep its conflict of interests hidden from view. Nationalism also served a more important function as nations were established for reasons beyond their economic objectives because they gave groups of people a cultural identity and a sense of political independence. Permeability of territorial borders has been replaced by invisible or conceptual borders held in place by cultural particularity. Indonesia's many administrations have resisted homogenization—the dilution of national identity.

In response to the unveiling of the new tone of U.S. diplomacy, also known as transformational diplomacy, Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski said:

If transformational diplomacy refers merely to democratization, then that formulation runs the risk of being either a slogan or an excuse for something else. If it is a slogan, then it fails to take into account the fact that pursuing democracy without addressing some other issues could produce highly radical populist regimes quite hostile to the United States. And if the notion of transformation is an excuse for delaying the solution of some issues, the result could be equally negative (Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski, former National Security Adviser, trustee and counselor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and a professor of American foreign policy at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, by *The Middle East Policy* editor Anne Joice on April 20, 2005.).

---