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The Quiet Deficit: Time to Revisit America's Public Diplomacy in Indonesia ^[1]

As a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow in Indonesia, I had the rare privilege of engaging in meaningful conversations with government officials, university leaders, researchers, professors, and students. Repeatedly, I heard a remarkably consistent observation about the United States: "Americans don't come here to listen. They come to talk."

This observation was often followed by another: Americans frequently arrive with answers before they have fully understood the questions. Although anecdotal, this sentiment surfaced repeatedly in my conversations and points to a broader challenge for U.S. public diplomacy. The United States possesses many of the assets traditionally associated with international influence, world-class universities, leading research institutions, technological innovation, and decades of diplomatic experience. Yet these strengths do not automatically translate into trust or persuasion.

In much of Southeast Asia, the challenge is not one of capability but of perception. Many interlocutors viewed the United States as eager to promote its own solutions while investing less time in understanding local priorities, historical contexts, and lived experiences. Whether entirely accurate or not, perceptions shape diplomatic outcomes. In the competition for influence, credibility is built not only through what a country says or offers, but through its willingness to listen, learn, and demonstrate genuine respect for local perspectives. People are far more likely to trust partners who make them feel understood before attempting to be understood.

During my conversation with Prof. Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto, a faculty member in the Department of International Relations at Universitas Indonesia's Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, reflected on a striking asymmetry in the U.S.–Indonesia relationship. He pointed to an often-overlooked gap in the U.S.–Indonesia relationship. While bilateral ties are typically measured through trade, security cooperation, and defense partnerships, far less attention has been paid to the asymmetry of societal and cultural influence. Indonesia remains relatively unfamiliar to many Americans, whereas Indonesians navigate an environment in which Chinese economic, technological, and cultural presence has become increasingly visible in everyday life. This imbalance extends beyond questions of visibility; it reflects a broader public diplomacy challenge.

His observation also challenged a common assumption underlying American public diplomacy that greater influence can be achieved simply by expanding exchange programs, cultural initiatives, or strategic messaging. Indonesia is not a country lacking exposure to foreign powers. On the contrary, Indonesians encounter international influence in their daily lives through consumer products, digital platforms, infrastructure projects, media, and technology. As Dr. Atriandi noted, Chinese electric vehicles, e-commerce platforms, consumer goods, and infrastructure investments have become highly visible features of Indonesia's social and economic landscape. Their influence is experienced not only through government agreements

but through everyday interactions. By comparison, many American contributions including educational partnerships, scientific collaboration, university exchanges, entrepreneurship, and research cooperation, are less immediately visible despite their long-term significance.

Indonesia is one of the most strategically important countries in the Indo-Pacific. As the world's fourth most populous nation, Southeast Asia's largest economy, and ASEAN's informal leader, it has become an increasingly important partner for every major power. Yet despite this strategic significance, Indonesia remains surprisingly absent from the American public imagination.

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Prof. Ristian also challenged conventional thinking about how the United States engages Indonesia. In a country carefully balancing relationships among competing global powers, overtly American-branded initiatives can sometimes generate hesitation rather than trust. He suggested that the most effective public diplomacy is often embedded within local institutions and partnerships rather than prominently carrying a U.S. label. Programs developed with Indonesian universities, scholars, civil society organizations, and local communities are more likely to be viewed as collaborative rather than strategic, allowing ideas and relationships to travel further and resonate more deeply. His insight highlights an important lesson for U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia: influence is not always strengthened by visibility. Often, it is strengthened by credibility, local ownership, and genuine partnership.

His observation also exposes a deeper structural dilemma for American public diplomacy. Governments understandably seek recognition for the initiatives they fund, and elected administrations often expect visible returns on those investments. Yet in countries pursuing non-aligned or hedging foreign policies, the initiatives that build the greatest trust may be precisely those whose American origins remain in the background. Washington therefore confronts a persistent paradox: the forms of engagement most likely to generate long-term influence are often the least visible politically. Reconciling this tension between demonstrating American leadership and cultivating locally rooted partnerships, may be one of the central challenges facing U.S. public diplomacy in Southeast Asia. In an increasingly competitive Indo-Pacific, influence will depend not simply on being seen, but on being regarded as a trusted and credible partner.

Underlying our conversation about Indonesia's strategy of balancing relationships among competing powers was a distinction between transactional partnerships and what Prof. Ristian described as people-to-people engagement. Unlike trade agreements or security cooperation, these relationships cultivate the deeper, less tangible trust that shapes how countries perceive one another over time. They create confidence not only in a partner's capabilities, but also in

its intentions. In this view, Indonesia's willingness to deepen cooperation with the United States depends as much on accumulated familiarity and mutual understanding as it does on formal diplomatic commitments.

These conversations left me with a broader reflection about the future of American public diplomacy in Southeast Asia. At a time of intensifying strategic competition, perhaps the United States should revisit one of diplomacy's oldest, yet most overlooked, principles: listening to understand before seeking to persuade.

As I reflect on my CFR fellowship in Indonesia, I find myself returning to the lessons I learned during graduate school at the Institute of World Politics, where the study of diplomacy, national security, intelligence, and statecraft shaped the way I think about international affairs. The most enduring lesson my professors taught me was not simply about diplomacy, deterrence, grand strategy, or geopolitical competition. It was about listening, not to respond, but to genuinely understand another country's history, aspirations, concerns, and worldview. At the time, it felt like a philosophical exercise. Indonesia showed me it is a strategic one.

The United States has every ingredient needed to be a trusted and enduring partner in Southeast Asia: world-class universities, innovative businesses, vibrant civil society, and a long tradition of educational and cultural exchange. What is needed is not a reinvention of American values, but a renewed commitment to engaging with humility, curiosity, and patience. Public diplomacy is strongest when it is built on authentic relationships rather than transactions, on sustained partnerships rather than one-time initiatives, and on listening before leading.

In an era of strategic competition, influence is not measured only by investments, infrastructure projects, or military partnerships. It is measured by trust. And trust begins with a simple but often overlooked principle: people want to be heard before they are persuaded. Perhaps the future of America's public diplomacy in Indonesia and across Southeast Asia, does not begin with speaking more loudly. Perhaps it begins with doing what my professors taught me years ago: listening to understand.
