



Indonesia's Big Brother Ambitions?

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Essay: Indonesia's Big Brother Ambitions?

What's up with Indonesia these days?

While courting friendship with powers like the US and China as well as buying Russian-made weapons, the country also seems to be playing an active role in the nuclear issues that is preoccupying the US Bush administration.

The recent decision by the Indonesian government to abstain during a vote in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) meeting was seen as a reversal of Indonesia's willingness to be part of the US network of friendship. House Speaker Agung Laksono visited Iran to assess the situation on the ground. Aside from Iran, Indonesia has also reached out to Syria with bilateral ties at a good upturn. Just as sensitive as Syria or Iran, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is planning to visit Pyongyang. Indonesia has historical relations with North Korea since Sukarno. Indonesia has had some successes. As a start, Indonesia's envoy Nana Sutresna visited Pyongyang to be the middleman for linking up the North and South Korea's defense chiefs.

This week, Indonesia's intentions seemed clearer. It wants to play a bigger role in the United Nations, specifically its aim to be a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council.

What are some of the ingredients in Indonesia's favor? It is a budding a democratic country, the world's largest Muslim-dominated country and the world's fourth most populous country. The country also believes in the mandate of the United Nations to solve global issues.

Not so fast, say some commentators. Indonesia's global ambitions should first be balanced with its efforts to solve its domestic problems. Quoted by Antara: "Certainly, we need to be more involved in UN policy-making. We don't just want to be the object of an international decision but we should also actively be involved in the decision-making process," said the international political observer from the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI).

Of course Indonesia has its own agenda in nuclear diplomacy besides global prominence. Back in the 1990s, Suharto gave his approval to build 12 nuclear plants along the north coast of earthquake-prone Java island - one of the world's most densely populated regions that is studded with active volcanoes. The idea of nuclear plants was revived under the Megawati administration in 2003. Indonesia wants its own nuclear plant in Gunung Murai Central Java with 1000 megawatts capacity. In an alternative option, back in 2003, the Russians offered Indonesia a 40 megawatts floating nuclear plant as an alternative. The target date set was 2015. Indonesia's plans were back in the media in Nov 2005 when Vietnam announced that it was going ahead with nuclear plant construction.

However, Indonesia's domestic problems may prove to be obstacles in its path to global prominence. It faces a whole host of human security issues from environmental degradation to infectious diseases. Economically, Indonesia still grapples with high unemployment, a fragile banking sector, endemic corruption, inadequate infrastructure, a poor investment climate, and unequal resource distribution among regions. Indonesia became a net oil importer in 2004 because of declining production and lack of new exploration investment. The cost of subsidizing domestic fuel placed increasing strain on the budget in 2005, and combined with indecisive monetary policy, contributed to a run on the currency in August, prompting the government to enact a 126% average fuel price hike in October. Terrorist incidents in 2005 have slowed tourist arrivals. Unemployment rate runs at 10% in 2005. Its public debt is 52.6% of GDP (2005 est.).

Politically, Indonesia also has a host of separatist problems to deal with. European Union foreign ministers agreed to lengthen an EU-led monitoring mission in Aceh. The 200-member EU mission is in Aceh since August 2005 to verify and supervise a peace treaty between Free Aceh Movement rebels (GAM) and the government after nearly 30 years of bloodshed that killed 15,000 people (including civilians). Other lingering problems include the separatist movements in Papua and repairing relations with East Timor. The US is watching Papua very closely.

Ultimately, some welcome Indonesia's more prominent role in the UN. "As the only legitimate organization, the United Nations has the authority to deal with issues related to international security. However, we reject any kind of unilateral intervention without a decision from the UN Security Council," Dewi Fortuna said, as reported in Antara. Fortuna told Antara that 'the UN would pass through an important phase of reform this year such as the establishment of a Human Rights Council and Peace Development Commission. Indonesia should probably actively seek membership in those bodies'.

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