

Toward a U.S. – Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership: The Road Ahead

Speakers:

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Arifin Siregar, Co-Chair of USINDO, began the discussion by providing a brief overview of USINDO's April 16th conference in Washington DC.

Mr. Bunyan Saptomo, who just returned from Washington DC, provided updates on the development of the draft US-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership. He also highlighted several programs sponsored by Indonesia's Department of Foreign Affairs (DELPU) as outreach efforts at broadcasting the possibility of a US-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership.

Mr. Saptomo noted that this forum presents another opportunity to disseminate information and collect input from community. Similar events include meetings at the University of Paramadina – Jakarta and an event organized by the Vice President's office in Bukit Tinggi, West Sumatra.

DEPLU recently provided the US State Department with Indonesia's draft partnership document. Indonesia's version focuses on four sectors:

1. Political and Security

2. Economic and Development Cooperation
3. Social, Cultural and Education
4. Follow-up mechanisms

He reported that the Government of Indonesia agreed to establish joint ministerial-level meetings every two years and a senior officers meeting every year to ensure the Partnership stays on track.

Pak Bunyan explained the rationale for developing a Comprehensive Partnership:

- To expand, deepen and coordinate existing cooperation between the US and Indonesia
- To cover a comprehensive range of emerging issues.
- To consolidate and put in context some 300 agreements and MOUs with the United States

Indonesia believes that now is the right time for a partnership, since such an agreement commemorates over sixty years of diplomatic relations, builds upon Indonesia's emerging democratic legacy as a moderate, tolerant Muslim-majority country, and

signifies Indonesia's increasingly pivotal role as an international power through its role in G20 and other forums.

From a U.S. perspective, he pointed out the role of an "Obama Factor": the US President's personal connection to Indonesia, his switch to a more multilateral foreign policy and his emphasis on dialogue over hard power have provided a unique opening for improved diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Similarly, the US and Indonesia both face common problems in dealing with the global financial and economic crisis, and on issues of regional security.

In the coming months, Minister of Foreign Affairs Hassan Wirajuda will visit the United States in June to discuss Indonesia's draft partnership with US officials. Senior officials will subsequently work on a final draft in preparation for a visit by President Obama to Southeast Asia. Mr. Saptomo suggested that the partnership would be launched during the expected Obama visit. If so, senior officials would then develop a plan of action for implementing the partnership

Dr. Rizal Sukma emphasized that although 2009 presents a great opportunity to lay the foundation for future bilateral cooperation, he also underlined that it is very important to remember that the Partnership is an Indonesian initiative.

Dr. Sukma outlined the reasons why the US responded very quickly and positively to the idea of a Partnership: 1) the new administration is eager to restore the United States' global image and credibility as a major power; 2) the US' reengagement in East Asia; 3) the Obama factor.

One issue with the current draft is that nobody outside of the government has actually seen it, so we can only speculate about its real contents. He encouraged both governments to be more open and less secretive about its continued development.

Another issue that has been raised is that if the partnership will include everything it will become nothing. A concrete plan of action should be immediately prepared in order to guarantee success. Education, among other issues, will certainly be a core area of the partnership.

In preparing for a future Partnership, it is necessary to manage the current gap in expectations, such as: on the U.S. side many mistakenly assume that Indonesia- as the world's most populous Muslim country- can play a constructive role as a bridge to the Arab Muslim World and as well as being a champion of democracy. In truth, Indonesia's influence among Muslims in the Middle East is minimal, peripheral. It could be argued that the U.S. has more influence in the Middle East than does Indonesia. Indonesia can do little to resolve the political-economic problems in the Middle East. In terms of democracy, it will be difficult for Indonesia to promote democracy in Myanmar, given the democratic stagnation occurring throughout Southeast Asia.

Finally, USINDO and other organizations should be involved in crafting a plan of action that sets priorities and assists in creating a sense of ownership in the US and in Indonesia.

Q&A

Question 1:

How can we, as members of the larger community submit our ideas for the Partnership? We should find ways to encourage greater participation across sectors, since many people have many valuable ideas. I think more Americans should be sent to Indonesia by way of the Peace Corps and more young Indonesians should be sent to US; this will create more mature "people to people" understanding.

Answered by Mr. Saptomo:

Some in the Indonesian government are suspicious of US intentions- especially regarding US intelligence interests in Indonesia. Some in the US believe that most Indonesians are radical Muslims. These misunderstandings should be resolved by promoting people-to-people relations at the grassroots level. That's why during my visit to Washington we also discussed about renewing the Peace Corps in Indonesia.

Question 2:

Don't you think that Indonesia should interpret international trade relations as a strategic partnership? Will international trade play a role in the Partnership?

Answered by Mr. Saptomo:

Both sides have agreed that a US-Indonesia partnership should be "comprehensive", because the use of "strategic" often refers solely to military or defense issues. International trade is an important component of the partnership because it coincides with one of Indonesia's four pillars- in this case, a focus on economic and development cooperation.

Question 3:

Since Indonesia initiated the partnership, should not Indonesia also be in the driving seat?

Answered by Pak Saptomo:

The agreement involves both countries. We produced a draft that we submitted to the US in order to encourage their opinion and their views. We understand that because the comprehensive partnership document will be in the form of joint statement between the two presidents, it should be not too detailed and should only contain the general ideas and principles. The details will be included in the plans of action which will be developed later. We have specific ideas about our cooperation, but of course the final agreements are subject to ratification by both sides.

Question 4:

How do we encourage increased participation by the citizens of both countries?

Answered by Mr. Saptomo:

The problem is that bilateral cooperation largely happens behind closed doors, and not through public negotiation. However, both governments welcome inputs from citizens.

Answered by Dr. Sukma:

The current umbrella agreement is quite broad. The real work begins with the plan of action. Indonesia's Foreign Ministry is currently working together with USINDO and others in order to understand the key priorities in the partnership. A suggestion to the Foreign Ministry is it needs a plan that can cover as many as possible stakeholders in Indonesia- such as the business community and academia