

U.S.-Southeast Asian Relations: Aid Burnishes U.S. Image but Other Concerns Persist

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A massive U.S. relief effort led by the U.S. Navy for the tsunami-devastated north Sumatran coast has burnished America's image in Indonesia, which had sunk to a record low after Washington's invasion of Iraq. Even large Indonesian Muslim organizations that previously voiced anti-American views have praised U.S. humanitarian activities in Banda Aceh. The Bush administration has seized the new positive spirit of Indonesian-U.S. relations to press Congress for the restoration of training and education programs for the Indonesian military that had been suspended since 1992. On the anti-terrorist front, the U.S. expressed disappointment at an Indonesian court's acquittal of radical Jemaah Islamiyah cleric Abu Bakar Bashir on allegations of involvement in the 2002 Bali and 2003 Jakarta Marriott bombings. Bashir received a relatively light 30-month sentence – half of which has already been served – for knowing about the terrorists' plans. The U.S. State Department's annual Human Rights Report criticized the Thai government killings of southern Thai Muslims during efforts to suppress secession activities.

Tsunami Relief Provides Opportunities for Washington

Speaking at a March 8 press conference with former Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton at his side, the current President Bush enthused that the U.S. has shown “the good folks of Indonesia ... a different America now ... a country which, of course, will defend our security, but a country which also cares deeply about suffering people, regardless of their religion...” And, indeed, the U.S. military's huge tsunami relief effort has elicited praise from some of its harshest local critics. The thought of U.S. soldiers on Indonesian soil before the Dec. 26 tsunami would have been unimaginable. Throughout January and February, by contrast, they were featured on the front pages of Indonesian newspapers and on television – the commentary almost universally positive. The U.S. deployed more than 16,000 forces to the areas hardest hit – most to Aceh. Twenty-five U.S. Navy and Coast Guard ships, 42 cargo and surveillance planes, and 57 helicopters dominated the multinational relief operations. The carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln* was even used as a base by the World Health Organization to send experts to remote coastal areas to assess public health needs.

After the negative publicity in the Muslim world following the publicized abuses at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, the U.S. efforts in Aceh were seen by Indonesian leaders to improve America's standing. In fact, the military's swift response was due, in part, to the Pacific Command's large number of multinational exercises in Thailand that annually

incorporate disaster relief and humanitarian aid. The extensive U.S. presence in Southeast Asia was followed by a mid-February U.S. pledge of \$950 million for reconstruction that would focus on rebuilding infrastructure. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz emphasized the geopolitical importance of helping Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, rebuild.

Given the massive amount of aid heading for Indonesia and the country's reputation for corruption, a major concern is accountability. Andrew Natsios, the head of USAID, insisted in late February that the largest aid operation in U.S. history requires "very high levels of accountability." Instead of aid going directly to affected governments, most is scheduled for allocation through UN agencies, nonprofit organizations, and trust funds administered by the World Bank and the UN Development Programme. Indonesian President S.B. Yudhoyono has selected the accounting firm of Ernst and Young to advise his government on the use of reconstruction money. He also announced in January that a special accounting unit was being set up in Banda Aceh to monitor expenditures.

The U.S. presence in Aceh – and that of other foreign military and civilian aid workers – complicates the Indonesian military's efforts to suppress the rebel Free Aceh Movement (GAM) that has been battling for independence from Jakarta since the 1970s. Some members of the Indonesian political leadership, notably Vice President Jusuf Kalla, may have been concerned that GAM could regroup while foreign aid workers were present, preventing the military from reasserting control in the province. Nevertheless, the *USS Abraham Lincoln* departed the waters off Aceh Feb. 5 after flying more than 2,800 relief missions and treating 2,200 patients. In appreciation for these activities, the commander of the Indonesian armed forces, Gen. Endriartono Sutarto, attended a farewell ceremony on shipboard. The carrier has been replaced by the navy hospital ship *USS Mercy*, whose staff continues to treat the injured on ship and on shore. The hospital ship is scheduled to stay at least through the end of March.

Two prominent Indonesian Muslim organizations, the country's largest group Nahdlatul Ulama with 40 million members and the fundamentalist Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), both welcomed the U.S. aid effort. Only the extremist group Laskar Mujahidin has questioned the U.S. role and set up its own camp in Banda Aceh to guard against U.S. influence there. GAM representatives, on the other hand, welcome the presence of foreigners and would prefer they stay and "see for themselves what is happening." A GAM spokesman contradicted an Indonesian government warning that it was unsafe for aid workers to go unescorted to nearby jungle villages, saying all assistance would be welcome. GAM's prime concern is that once the aid workers leave, the government will reassert military control and once again resume a brutal crackdown.

Former Presidents Bush and Clinton, as U.S. emissaries, visited the tsunami-devastated areas in February. They noted that in addition to U.S. government aid, one-third of U.S. households have contributed to the relief effort for a total of \$400 million by mid-February. (Approximately \$7 billion has been raised worldwide, but an estimated \$11 billion is needed to restore the areas wiped out in Indonesia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka.) In contrast to Indonesia, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra insists that Thailand will be

responsible for its own reconstruction; he was the only ASEAN leader missing from the Jakarta special ASEAN leaders meeting in early January. That meeting endorsed the creation of a tsunami early warning system for the Indian Ocean for which the U.S. has pledged full assistance.

U.S. Military Collaboration with Regional Armed Forces

In its dealings with the Indonesian armed forces (TNI), the Bush administration took advantage of U.S. sympathy for Indonesia's tsunami travails by expressing the hope that International Military Education and Training (IMET) could be restored. This program was withdrawn in 1992 when the Indonesian military launched a bloody attack on proindependence protesters in East Timor. The sanctions were further tightened in 1999 when the Indonesian army was accused of directing the killing of some 1,500 people in East Timor in an unsuccessful effort to prevent the territory's independence. The IMET ban was written into law by Congress in 2002 when U.S. lawmakers insisted that Indonesian generals were blocking an investigation into the killing of two U.S. school teachers in Papua province.

Subsequently, Indonesian authorities have taken steps to improve cooperation with the FBI and brought charges against a member of a Papuan separatist group for the killings of the two Americans. This development coincides with President Bush's stress on the importance of strengthening counterterrorism cooperation with Indonesia. In a Jan. 16 Jakarta joint press conference with Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz, Indonesian Defense Minister Sudarsono announced that "my job now is to try to reconfigure the Indonesian defense force ... so that it will be more accountable to democracy.... [T]here's no excuse for some of their alleged human rights abuses that have been taking place over the past 25 years." Sudarsono went on to ask the U.S. to improve TNI training, "a very important part of consolidating our democracy...." Wolfowitz concurred: "I think we need to think about how we can strengthen this newly elected democratic government ... to help build the kinds of defense institutions that will ensure ... that the Indonesian military, like our military, is [a] loyal function of democratic government." Wolfowitz promised to raise the IMET issue again with Congress.

The U.S. Pacific Command had already reestablished some ties with the TNI by sponsoring a series of conferences on civil-military relations, democratic institutions, and nonlethal training – major components of IMET, which also includes combat training. The Pentagon argues that training in the United States can help create a more professional and disciplined force. However, the long hiatus in U.S.-Indonesian military relations has increased sentiment within the TNI to steer clear of the U.S. because Washington stopped providing much of what it gave during the Cold War. By mid-February, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had raised the restoration of IMET with Congress, though no decision had been made by the end of March.

On other fronts, the U.S. set up a command center for regional tsunami relief in Thailand and announced in late February prospects for an enhanced defense treaty with the Philippines that would add counterterrorism and transnational crime to current bilateral security arrangements.

Terrorist Concerns Vary Across the Region

In Jakarta on March 3, after a lengthy and contentious trial, the alleged spiritual leader of the jihadist terror organization Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), Abu Bakar Bashir, was acquitted of all terrorism charges stemming from the bombing of the Jakarta Marriott hotel in August 2003 and the Bali bombings in October 2002. The U.S. had pressured Indonesia over two years to prosecute Bashir whom it considered to be Osama bin Laden's lieutenant in Southeast Asia. In what Jakarta media believed to be a concession to U.S. pressure, Bashir was convicted by the five judges on one count of criminal conspiracy in connection with the Bali bombings because the judges said "he knew the perpetrators" and encouraged their actions. Both the U.S. and Australia – 88 of whose citizens died in the Bali explosions – expressed disappointment in the verdict.

The prosecution's case was hampered, however, by the unwillingness of the Bush administration to make available two important al-Qaeda witnesses in U.S. custody. Hambali, bin Laden's operations director for Southeast Asia, and Omar al-Faruq – captured in 2003 and 2002, respectively – apparently provided their U.S. interrogators with strong evidence directly linking Bashir and JI to terrorism. But, the U.S. would not allow Indonesian officials to interrogate either man. Their absence from the court diminished the use of their statements.

Bashir had been acquitted on earlier terrorism charges in 2003 but convicted at that trial on minor immigration violations. He was immediately rearrested in April 2004 upon completing his first sentence and jailed on the charges for which he was recently exonerated. In general, Indonesian authorities were reluctant to move against Bashir, fearing an Islamist backlash in the most populous Muslim country in the world. While both Washington and Canberra registered disappointment at Bashir's relatively light 30-month sentence, a U.S. Embassy spokesman stated: "We respect the independence of Indonesia's judiciary and welcome the conviction of this known terrorist leader." The spokesman went to "welcome the Indonesian court's recognition of the existence of the Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia and its involvement in violent terrorist attacks...." For his part, Bashir insisted that "this case has been fabricated by George W. Bush and his acolytes to undermine Islamic Sharia from inside [Indonesia]."

In January, at the annual World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Malaysia continued to criticize Washington's military emphasis on counterterrorism. Malaysian Defense Minister Najib Tun Razak told U.S. Sen. John McCain that "a doctrine based on military strength which had destroyed cities, villages, and ... many innocent lives will only fulfill the aims and goals of the terrorists that we are facing now." Najib also warned the U.S. against tarring all Muslims with a terrorist brush simply because of "their names, citizenship, or the way they dress."

On other fronts, U.S. insistence on biometric passports by late October 2005 if countries wished to retain visa-free access to the U.S. led Singapore to introduce them in March. The island state also has set up radiation detection devices at container ports and tightened scrutiny of air cargo. Washington is helping Thailand's Immigration Bureau to set up electronic links to Interpol's online terrorist database. After a series of Valentine's Day bombings throughout the Philippines, the State Department urged Americans to be on high alert. The State Department advisory noted that the bombings linked JI with the Philippine terrorist-kidnap gang Abu Sayyaf that heretofore had confined its actions to Mindanao.

Thai Human Rights Record Deteriorates

The State Department's annual Human Rights Report released Feb. 28 once again criticized the Thaksin government. Last year, the report noted that human rights violations had increased with Thailand's crackdown on the drug trade via arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial killings. Recent critical assessments of Bangkok's human rights practices contrast with earlier reports, prior to Thaksin's election, that had praised the country's human rights record, respect for democracy, and freedom of the press.

The report is prepared by the U.S. Embassy based on its political assessment of Thai developments and on interviews with concerned authorities and others. This year the report emphasized Thaksin's response to separatist violence in the south, focusing on the April 28 Krue Se mosque and the Oct. 26 confrontation at Tak Bai. At least 200 Thai Muslims were killed in these episodes. The report also repeats previous criticism of deprivation of freedom of speech and the mass media. In an angry response, the Thai Foreign Ministry said the United States should not impose its standards on other countries. The Foreign Ministry statement seemed to justify the killings at the Krue Se mosque and at Tak Bai by implying that innocent people had been killed in the south by the separatists, so those who died at the hands of government forces deserved their fate. As Bangkok's *The Nation* put it in a March 5 editorial: "If there has been any sense of regret on the government's part regarding these two incidents ... we have never seen it."

U.S. Forces Continue to Train Philippine Military

The Philippines continues to battle dual insurgencies – one led by the communists' 8,000-strong New People's Army and the other by Muslims on Mindanao organized by a breakaway Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) group, followers of the jailed Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) leader Nur Misuari, and the kidnap gang Abu Sayyaf. U.S. forces have been training Philippine troops in counterinsurgency for the past five years, though U.S. troops do not directly participate in combat. In February, Abu Sayyaf and the Misuari faction of the MNLF attacked Philippine troops on southern Jolo Island. The Philippine counterstrike is the largest such action in three years. U.S. Army Special Forces have trained special Philippine units in light reaction companies and battalions ranging from 150 to 600 men. They are better equipped than regular Philippine forces and schooled in jungle warfare. Both sides have taken heavy casualties in the

current fighting that also displaced thousands of villagers. Southern Command chief Lt. Gen. Alberto Braganza stated that U.S. forces had arrived in Jolo and were acting in an advisory capacity.

Implications

The impressive outpouring of U.S. government and private aid for Indonesia's tsunami victims has improved America's standing in Indonesia. If the Bush administration can convince Congress to restore military training and arms sales, Washington's relations with the TNI will also be rebuilt. From the U.S. viewpoint, these developments will enhance counterterror cooperation. Restoring ties with the TNI can be a two-edged sword, however. The Indonesian military still engages in brutalities in Aceh and Papua. It is also a major source of corruption, and elements within the armed forces have supported radical Islamist groups in the Moluccas and Sulawesi. Education in civil-military relations through a revitalized IMET may help create future generations of TNI leaders who respect the requirements of democracy. However, IMET by itself can do little to change the current practices of the Indonesian military. The government in Jakarta has that responsibility.

Chronology of U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations January-March 2005

Dec. 31, 2004-Jan. 1, 2005: President Bush announces that U.S. aid for tsunami relief will rise to \$350 million from an earlier pledge of \$35 million, with the prospect of additional aid as the scope of the "epic disaster" becomes clearer.

Jan. 1, 2005: The U.S. aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln* is offshore Sumatra, its helicopters carrying supplies to stricken towns in Aceh province. The U.S. Pacific Command described the overall U.S. relief effort as the "largest in the region in at least 50 years."

Jan. 2, 2005: Philippine President Gloria Magapagal-Arroyo offers to place air marshals on Philippine Air Line flights to the U.S. and wants the U.S. to reciprocate for all U.S. flights destined for the Philippines.

Jan. 3, 2005: Presidents Bush, Clinton, and Bush Sr. visit embassies in Washington of Asian states stricken by the tsunami to extend condolences and promise assistance.

Jan. 4, 2005: Commenting on television coverage of U.S. service personnel providing aid in Banda Aceh, Secretary of State Powell states that, "it does give the Muslim world ... an opportunity to see American generosity and American values in action."