

Reinforcing links with Jakarta

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Effort will be required to avoid further upheaval in ties with Indonesia, writes Michelle Grattan.

Allan Gyngell these days is director of the prestigious Lowy Institute for International Policy. A decade ago, he was Paul Keating's foreign policy adviser during a high point in Australian-Indonesian relations - the forging of a security agreement, a pact Indonesia later tore up during the tense days of the East Timor crisis.

From his think tank, Gyngell is tracking John Howard's strong efforts to cement the relationship; he observed Keating's drive to the same end from the inside. So what difference does he see?

Initially Gyngell struggles to answer, wondering whether it's that Keating was more emotional about his relationship with President Soeharto than Howard is about his with Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. But no - Gyngell concludes Howard is emotional, too: he just shows it differently.

Finally Gyngell encapsulates it this way: "Howard expresses the relationship in more cautious terms than Keating did. Even in (Monday's) speech he was expressing the caveats and reservations, where Keating was an evangelist. But Howard is equally committed to using his personal relationship with a president to broaden and institutionalise the (country to country) relationship."

Here is the big recurring uncertainty. Can the Australian-Indonesian relationship be fireproofed?

Up to now, it has been extraordinarily at the whim of events and individuals.

The 1975 invasion of East Timor and the 1991 Dili massacre imposed huge strains. Boat people caused difficulties; President Megawati Soekarnoputri did not return Howard's phone call during the Tampa affair.

On the other hand, tragedy has acted as a latter-day glue: Bali; the tsunami and Australia's generous response; now the helicopter crash.

Just as Tampa drove a wedge, so the fight against terrorism has brought the nations together.

Howard didn't have much regard for Megawati but showed his belief that Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono presented a great opportunity by going out of his way to attend the President's October inauguration. A dividend came this week when the two signed a declaration for a comprehensive partnership embracing political, economic and security relations. Work is under way on a security agreement.

This raises two questions. Will geography and mutual importance always push the two countries back towards each other after events put them asunder? Or should we be remembering that, however firm present ties, this vital connection is always hostage to changing fortunes?

A review of polling for the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, released last year, showed Australians becoming steadily more fearful of Indonesia since the 1960s (with the exception of the late 1980s). The Australian National University 2004 Election Study Survey confirmed about three in 10 Australians see Indonesia as very likely to be a potential security threat. On both sides, closeness is driven from top down rather than ground up.

For Australia there's an extra dimension: Indonesia is our most vital portal into Asia. Right now, Australia is trying to get to this year's East Asia summit. Indonesia is supporting this while Malaysia,

whose Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi, is also visiting this week, is opposed. Some Malaysians argue that Howard needs to reject "pre-emption" and support Australia signing a treaty of amity and co-operation with ASEAN, but Government sources maintain this wouldn't change Malaysian attitudes.

Gyngell believes Howard has a better chance than Keating of establishing a long-term positive relationship because of the recent democratisation of Indonesia. "It will be harder to work on the relationship because there will be more players, including the Indonesian Parliament and the regional governments. But if we can manage it, it will be more sustainable," he says.

The way to fireproof the relationship lies in a greater commitment to people-to-people links, according to Jenny McGregor, executive director of Melbourne University's Asialink Centre, "because you can't protect against the high-level political and terrorism events that do get in the way of it".

Yet one problem for these links is the travel advisory, designed to protect Australians. "I understand why the Government is cautious but travel advisories inhibit things, for example students being placed in Indonesia. Of course, a main long-term solution is also more emphasis on Asian studies in Australia's education system."

Philip Flood, former ambassador to Indonesia, believes cultural differences will always be a complicating factor.

"But at least for the next five years we have a bulwark against a downturn in relations. For the first time in 60 years we have an Indonesian President who likes Australia, understands Australia, who's come to office with a good knowledge of and personal relationship with the Australian political elite, and who speaks English. We haven't had all these qualities in one president before. It's a unique opportunity."

Flood's remarks reinforce the point that if two such different countries are to maintain a close rapport, individuals will continue to be central. So, too, will be events and reactions to them. Just as Tampa drove a wedge, so the fight against terrorism has brought the nations together. Just as East Timor was a running sore for a generation so, over the next generation, how Indonesia handles separatist pushes in Aceh and West Papua will be critical.

We can't assume anything is forever in the Australian-Indonesian relationship, which makes it all the more important to take advantage of the good times to get as much capital as possible in the joint bank account.

Michelle Grattan is political editor.

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