

People count in the Indonesia equation

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Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's visit to Australia for the second annual leaders' meeting comes as headlines in Australia are dominated by asylum-seekers and the recent boat tragedies.

Asylum-seekers and people-smuggling will be an important focus of talks. These are ongoing issues for Australia and Indonesia, though, and won't be the only things discussed.

Beyond current issues, identifying avenues to strengthen people-to-people ties should also be a priority. Government-to-government relations are as healthy as they have been in recent times, but people-to-people ties lag behind. Without steps to promote more contact, this gap could threaten the long-term resilience of the relationship.

One sign of the health of the intergovernmental relationship is the very annual leaders' meeting that brings Yudhoyono to Darwin, the second to take place after the inaugural meeting in Bali last November. This follows on from the inaugural defence and foreign ministers meeting in March, which gave new Foreign Minister Bob Carr an early opportunity to swap phone numbers with his counterpart.

Moreover, recent months have seen each government demonstrate their desire for strong relations through their willingness to take political risks. Whatever the motives for each step, Yudhoyono's move to grant clemency to Schapelle Corby and the Australian government's decision to lower the level of the travel advisory each granted something that the other government had raised.

Neither step carried any domestic political benefit for the government making the decision. In Yudhoyono's case, the decision to grant clemency actually generated a significant backlash.

But although government-to-government relations are strong at present, the Australia-Indonesia relationship has been one in which controversies always seem to be just around the corner. One can readily think of scenarios that would see intergovernmental ties deteriorate rapidly.

A shift in Australia's policy on asylum-seekers and people-smuggling that genuinely irked Indonesia would be one scenario. Continued escalation of the Papua conflict could be another. The execution of an Australian in Indonesia could cause serious disruption. A change in leadership might complicate relations. Or something as unexpected as live-cattle exports might emerge.

If government-to-government ties did worsen, it would bring the relatively narrow people-to-people links between our two countries into clearer view.

Admittedly, there is a core of Indonesians and Australians who are savvy about their neighbours. In-country study in particular has contributed to the size of this group. Cultural exchanges and some movement of people to live and work in the other's countries provide further links.

But this nucleus cannot be taken for granted. In Australia, the number of students studying Indonesian is decreasing, meaning the cadre of Indonesia-skilled individuals could diminish over time. And although current rapid growth in Indonesia had generated renewed interest in expanding business ties, the economic relationship remains underdone.

Beyond this core, the appetite for engagement is constricted by public opinion, and is unlikely to grow without some government leadership. Annual Lowy Institute polling indicates public opinion in Australia towards Indonesia to be consistently lukewarm, barely having shifted over the past five years.

The government has not been blameless in this regard. The travel advisory for years has failed to set out Indonesia's law-enforcement successes against terrorism and, until May, advised Australians to reconsider their need to visit our neighbour.

Equivalent polling in Indonesia conducted last year by the Lowy Institute reveals warmer attitudes, albeit with a minority of extreme anti-Australian attitudes.

Measures to stimulate more people-to-people contact and thereby erode pervasive stereotypes over time are important to realise the full potential of relations with our key northern neighbour.

Only when sound intergovernmental relations are matched with broad people-to-people ties can the relationship be truly robust.

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