

Bipolar policy on Indonesia harms our ties

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George Kennan, the architect of America's containment strategy during the Cold War, famously compared the US to "one of those prehistoric monsters with a body as long as this room and a brain the size of a pea.

He lies there in his comfortable primeval mud and pays little attention to his environment; he is slow to wrath - in fact, you practically have to whack his tail off to make him aware that his interests are being disturbed; but once he grasps this, he lays about him with such blind determination that he not only destroys his adversaries but largely wrecks his native habitat."

Australian policies announced by the government and opposition over the past six months towards Indonesia suggest a different metaphor for describing the country's foreign policy. Indonesians, and other outside observers, must think Australia has a form of bipolar disorder, which makes it usually oblivious to its external circumstances and socially passive, but prone to unpredictable mood swings, leading to sudden bouts of extreme asocial behaviour. Once the episode is finished, it expects everyone else to carry on as if nothing has happened.

In June, in a panicked response to the domestic backlash following a documentary about cruelty in abattoirs, the government announced an end to all shipments of live cattle to Indonesia. Then, last week, the opposition announced it would turn back all asylum-seeker boats to Indonesia. In neither case was Indonesia or even Australian diplomats in Jakarta consulted. In both cases the presumption was that Indonesia is endlessly patient with Canberra's tantrums and braggadocio.

Both policies betray assumptions and motivations that suggest an alarming bipartisan culture of treating Australia's relationship with Indonesia with casual abandon. Both government and opposition have signalled they're prepared to play fast and loose with this most crucial of bilateral relationships in pursuit of marginal domestic advantage.

Both sides of politics in Australia need to realise that a stable relationship between Canberra and Jakarta, and an understanding attitude on the part of Indonesia, is the product of luck, not foreign policy design. Even more important, they need to realise this could change very quickly, to the great detriment of Australia. It's time both sides of politics realised that promising more aid won't smooth things over - Australian aid constitutes only about 2 per cent of Indonesia's gross national income.

Indonesia is due to vote for a new president and parliament the year after next. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that in a close-run election, one or more candidates may play the nationalist card. While Singapore and Malaysia are familiar scapegoats, Australia would be a very attractive target. It would not take much to remind Indonesians of Australia's role in East Timor's independence, some of our rhetoric and actions during the War on Terror, around asylum-seekers or on live cattle exports.

It would be a useful exercise to think about the consequences of an Indonesian government as prone to domestic politics-driven bipolar mood swings as we are. Such a government could choose to become difficult and unpredictable about the maritime routes through, and air corridors over, the Indonesian archipelago, upon which depend a huge volume of Australia's trade and travel. Such a government could decide to designate Australia a dangerous location for Asian students. It could decide to raise concerns over Australian agricultural produce. It could choose to support ASEAN Plus Three, a regional association promoted by China that excludes Australia, over the East Asia Summit of which we are a part.

How short our memory is. When Indonesia decides to become adversarial towards Australia, as it did in the early 1960s and late 90s, it constitutes a serious problem for this country. There are few elements of our external relations that are not impacted. And don't think the Americans will come riding in to help us out. During both of those problem periods, they fell far short of the help we asked for.

Kennan made a crucial contribution to the ultimate triumph of democracies against communism. What he worried about - and hence the dinosaur image - was that democracies are so self-absorbed they will lose sight of the big picture in the world around them. He was right to worry, and we should be listening. Australia is fortunate to have its robust democracy and should nurture and protect it with all its strength. But it must never allow the short-term electoral interests of its political parties to trump the enduring interests of the country. Both sides of politics need to come together and agree that interests as important and perpetual as Australia-Indonesia relations must never become chips to be tossed and bartered for short-term electoral advantage.

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