



U.S.-Indonesia and U.S.-Malaysia Relations in the Trump Era

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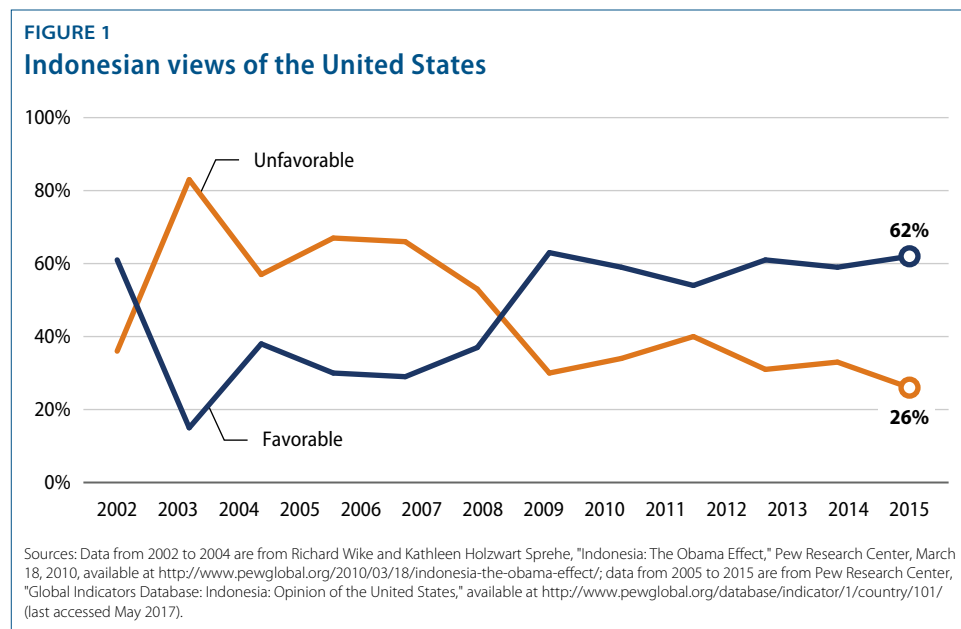
Since President Donald Trump took office, East Asia has rapidly emerged as one of both his and his foreign policy advisers' key geographic focuses. To date, most of Trump's attention has been on Northeast Asia—particularly China and North Korea. By contrast, the White House has offered little in the way of a policy vision for Southeast Asia, where engagement so far has largely focused on gaining Southeast Asian support for policy regarding North Korea's nuclear program.

Yet even with Washington on autopilot with the region, U.S. ties with some Southeast Asian states are already changing. Specifically, the Islamophobic rhetoric and policies of Trump's campaign and the early days of his administration have already caused significant damage to perceptions of the United States and its government among the region's more than 230 million Muslims, the vast majority of whom live in its two Muslim-majority nations—Indonesia and Malaysia.¹

In April, the authors visited Jakarta, Indonesia, and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and met with leading political analysts, public opinion experts, businesspeople, and government officials to get on-the-ground insight into how the general public and elites in Indonesia and Malaysia view the Trump administration and what those views might mean for U.S. bilateral relations. While it is too early for substantial polling data to be available, it is clear that opinions of the United States are declining among the general public in both countries.² However, based on the authors' conversations with officials and leading nongovernment analysts, it also appears that U.S.-Indonesian and U.S.-Malaysian government to government relations are unlikely to deteriorate significantly in the immediate future. But the reasons why bilateral relations are likely to remain stable may also damage U.S. interests in the long run.

Background: Public opinion and U.S. bilateral relations with Indonesia and Malaysia

Indonesian and Malaysian perceptions of the United States have undergone sharp swings over the past 15 years, driven mainly by two events: the Iraq War and Barack Obama's first presidential election. These fluctuations have been particularly pronounced in Indonesia, where former President Obama spent part of his childhood. In 2002, for example, nearly two-thirds of Indonesians held a positive view of the United States.³ In 2003, after the launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom, that figure plummeted to 15 percent, only to rebound six years later when Obama succeeded former President George W. Bush as leader of the free world.⁴



Malaysia has followed a similar trajectory. In 2007, the earliest date for which polling is available, only a quarter of Malaysians—and only 10 percent of Malaysian Muslims—had a favorable view of the United States.⁵ By 2013, the percentage of Malaysians who viewed the United States in a positive light had increased to more than 50 percent.⁶ As in Indonesia, the personal popularity of Obama—the first U.S. president to visit Malaysia since Lyndon Johnson—likely accounts for much of this turnaround.⁷

Compared with public opinion, relations at the governmental level between the United States and Indonesia and the United States and Malaysia have been comparatively stable over the past 15 years. Mutual interest in regional stability, bilateral trade, and countering violent extremism—along with a shared wariness at the prospect of Chinese hegemony in East Asia—have provided a durable basis for economic, military, and

diplomatic cooperation across a range of domains. This cooperation has endured despite occasional rhetorical flare-ups between leaders, such as when then-Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad criticized the Iraq War as a racist attack on a Muslim state.⁸ During the Obama years, these strong relations came out of the shadows, with then-Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and current Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak publicly touting the importance of ties with the United States.⁹

One reason for this stability is the relative insularity of domestic politics in both countries—particularly in Indonesia, where national elections rarely involve questions of external relations. While Malaysians are comparatively more focused on the outside world, the dominance of the National Front coalition in Parliament since Malaysia’s independence in 1957, has allowed successive governments to pursue a foreign policy more predicated on elite interests than on the views of the general public.¹⁰

Consequences of Trump’s presidency

The election of Trump opens a new chapter in U.S. relations with Indonesia and Malaysia. To date, there has not been any national-level polling on attitudes toward the United States since Trump’s election in either country. However, Trump’s open embrace of Islamophobic rhetoric and his attempt to implement his campaign promise of a ban on Muslim immigration to the United States have made him widely unpopular across the Muslim world.¹¹ History offers little reason to believe that Muslims in Southeast Asia will break ranks in this respect. The substantial, protracted decline in attitudes toward the United States in both Indonesia and Malaysia in the wake of the Iraq War demonstrated that the general public in both countries is sensitive to perceived attacks on Muslims and the Islamic faith. In addition, Trump does not possess anything remotely approximating the personal popularity of Obama in either nation. A poll taken on the eve of the 2016 U.S. election, for example, found that 90 percent of Indonesians would have voted for Hillary Clinton instead of Trump and that only 9 percent of Indonesians thought a Trump presidency would be in their national interest.¹²

Therefore, the odds that ordinary Indonesians and Malaysians will sour on the United States over the next four years are quite high. During our visit to the region, we heard repeatedly that Indonesians and Malaysians intending to study abroad are reluctant to enroll at U.S. institutions on account of concerns that Muslims are not welcome in the country. Nina Hachigian, our colleague and the former ambassador to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, has written eloquently about the poignant case of a prominent Indonesian civil society leader choosing to cancel a planned visit to the United States because of the perception that Muslims face barriers to travel.¹³ Each time an individual makes such a decision, we lose the opportunity to build bridges between the United States and this critical segment of the Muslim world.

But whether such a spike in public disapproval will significantly affect bilateral relations is less clear. Based on conversations with Indonesian and Malaysian elites in government, business, and media, our assessment is that many key decision-makers in both countries are privately pleased with Trump's ascendance for three key reasons: First, elite Indonesians and Malaysians perceive Trump and his Cabinet as less likely than prior administrations to press them on human rights, corruption, and environmental issues. In fact, many of our interlocutors remarked that political elites in both countries related favorably to Trump's blatant embrace of conflicts of interest and hoped it was a sign that the U.S. president was amenable to a more transactional, less values-driven bilateral relationship.¹⁴ Second, the political establishments in both Indonesia and Malaysia welcomed Trump's focus on bilateral dealmaking and firm rejection of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which leaders in both countries would prefer to disappear. Finally, in conversations with the authors, government and nongovernment experts said that many elites continue to look to the United States as a counterweight to Chinese influence in Southeast Asia and view Trump as potentially more likely than his predecessor to deter aggressive Chinese behavior in the region.¹⁵

Of course, political and business elites in Malaysia and Indonesia are not monolithic in their views, and there are undoubtedly many aspects of Trump's presidency that are unnerving to many in the upper echelons of power in both countries, such as Trump's protectionist rhetoric and his inclusion of both Indonesia and Malaysia on a list of top contributors to the global U.S. trade deficit.¹⁶ Even so, the fact remains that the next four years will likely see a widening divide between the attitudes of elites and the general public toward the Trump administration.

Implications for U.S. interests

Elite and public attitudes regarding the United States in the Trump era raise two key questions for the future of U.S.-Indonesia and U.S.-Malaysia relations.

The first question is whether deteriorating public perceptions of the United States will constrain bilateral relations during the Trump presidency. Although Indonesian and Malaysian foreign policy traditionally has not been overly sensitive to public opinion, recent trends in the domestic politics of both countries may make public animosity toward the policies and actions of the U.S. government harder to ignore. In Indonesia, the ouster of Jakarta's Christian governor—Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, popularly known as "Ahok"—following an election campaign fraught with sectarian controversy may presage a new style of politics in the country, in which Muslim identity issues feature more prominently.¹⁷ In Malaysia, where leaders have long been fond of exploiting religious sentiment to further their political ambitions, Najib may seek to use Trump as a foil to distract from the continuing fallout of a massive corruption scandal that broke two years ago.¹⁸ At present, both Najib and Indonesian President Joko Widodo have

refrained from public criticism of Trump, but it is not inconceivable that a combination of domestic political headwinds and additional Islamophobic provocation from Washington could force them to tack in a more adversarial direction, especially as they approach national elections in 2018 and 2019, respectively. At present, the United States' risk of a diplomatic breakdown is greater with Malaysia than with Indonesia, but neither relationship should be taken for granted.

The second question is whether the policies of Trump's presidency will engender such strong anti-American sentiment among ordinary Indonesians and Malaysians that fringe beliefs about a clash of Islamic and Western civilizations in both countries acquire more mainstream credibility. The potential consequences of such radicalization run the gamut from the comparatively benign—a reduction in the number of Indonesians and Malaysians visiting the United States as tourists or students—to the more sinister—a spike in terrorist recruitment or the rise of expressly Islamist political movements. Although none of these outcomes is especially likely in the short term, the risks of U.S. policies that give fodder to extremists should not be ignored at a time when the publics in both countries are increasingly frustrated with the corruption and broken promises of mainstream political parties.

Conclusion

The rehabilitation of the United States' image in Indonesia and Malaysia was a remarkable and underappreciated development in U.S. relations with the Muslim world under Obama. That accomplishment is now in jeopardy because of Trump's gratuitously Islamophobic rhetoric and actions. Although the consequences of a spike in anti-American sentiment in either country are hard to predict, the risks to U.S. interests are potentially grave—and deserve greater attention than they have received to date.

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Endnotes

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