

How Indonesia Should View Trump

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The inauguration of Mr. Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States on Friday opens a window of strategic opportunity for Indonesia in its relations with an enduring partner.

President Trump is not a wrecker, contrary to public perceptions that ran riot in the lead-up to his shock electoral victory, perhaps because of his charismatic outspokenness as a political outsider. Instead, he is a builder - literally in real estate, and metaphorically in the wider business world. To build requires a honed ability to plan carefully, negotiate hard, strike deals, and honor commitments made legally. These qualities, inherited from his business past, should continue to guide his instinctive responses to domestic and international developments as President.

What is particularly important is that President Trump is a pragmatist who is likely to adopt a non-ideological and non-confrontational approach to a diverse political world.

For example, he may view China as a threat to American jobs, this having been a prominent theme of his election campaign. However, he is unlikely to extrapolate from the threat narrative to argue that China's Leninist system should be dismantled so as to create a level playing field in which a democratic China would contend for international economic space with a democratic America.

Mr. Trump is too good a business survivor to judge competitors by the color of their political skin. What matters is what they bring to the table. What matters to the table is the deal.

He has shown this already in his dealings with Russia. Unlike the Obama administration, under which American relations with Russia touched a low approaching a new Cold War, Mr Trump displays not a trace of Western triumphalism over the course of Russia's post-Soviet history.

As with Beijing, he does not hector Moscow on the political trajectory it should adopt, or advise it on how to reward its economic warriors and treat its dissidents. Speaking as the leader of one great power to the leader of another, his message to Russian President Vladimir Putin (and to Chinese President Xi Jinping) is simple: We are in the same business, so let us play by its common rules together.

Certainly, Mr. Trump will stand up for America's economic interests against China and Russia if he feels compelled to do so - as their leaders will do, against even the might of the US, if necessary by coming together against it.

However, should the three powers manage to work together in the next four years of the Trump presidency, their overlapping global interests will outweigh differences that were

exacerbated by the practices of the Obama administration.

Under President Barack Obama, America's ideological desire to remold the world, including Europe, in America's image helped precipitate the crisis in Ukraine that ended with Russia annexing Crimea. Its pivot to the Asia-Pacific concluded with China ignoring international law in the South China Sea.

What Mr. Trump will not tolerate, as he has made amply clear, are the prospects of insurgent non-state actors holding the ordered world to anarchic ransom. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), whose terrorist reach expanded from the barbaric control of war-torn territory to the pretentious setting up of a self-declared global caliphate, has its days numbered under the new American dispensation. The anti-ISIS drive, which the Obama administration began in the last phase of its tenure, could arrive at a decisive conclusion in the opening months of the Trump administration. The beneficiary would be world peace.

I have described the global power structure at some length to show where Indonesia could fit into the parameters of the new US foreign policy that will be redrawn by the Trump administration.

The first issue is that of ideology. If Mr. Trump's America can strike deals with China and Russia, it can certainly do so with Indonesia. Indonesia is a functioning democracy where the sovereignty of power has long passed from a single autocratic ruler to a multitude of political players vying legitimately for power. This change has helped to strengthen and not subvert the Indonesian presidency because of the credibility that only a free, popular mandate can bring to the highest political office of a country.

President Joko Widodo embodies that transition. Like Mr. Trump, he is a product of maturing popular expectations of a leader who can bring about substantive change. It does not matter whether such a leader is called a "populist": That word is a loaded term used by the liberal intelligentsia to describe those who have had the audacity to rise to power outside its gilded, guarded gates. The point is that the two presidents can speak to each other as their peoples would - as democratic equals.

The difference between the Trump presidency and its predecessor would be that, while both had and have a special affinity with a fellow democracy, Mr Trump's aversion to ideology would make him recognize that no two countries follow the same road to democracy. The destination is the same, but the path is not.

Thus, the Republican Mr. Trump would be more likely than his Democratic predecessor to make allowances for the peculiarities of Indonesia's democratic journey, including the supportive role played by its armed forces. The military in Indonesia today does not keep the country safe from democracy but for democracy. That mandate is true of the American military as well.

The second issue is that of economics. Indonesia's growth does not threaten America. If

anything, it is complementary to American prospects. The liberalism of the Indonesian economy is creating new markets for American products and services. Top exports to Indonesia reflect the strengths of the American economy, including aircraft and machinery. Indonesian exports - in which knit apparel, rubber, woven apparel, electrical machinery and footwear loom large - hardly pose a challenge to the vanguard of the American economy. They do not come near to constituting a full-spectrum threat such as could be mounted by other Asian countries.

The third issue is the role of international Islam. Indonesia is home to the largest number of Muslims on earth. It has also been a target of terror attacks carried out by misguided individuals in the name of Islam. Combine these two facts, and the reality of the religious situation becomes clear.

While the historical center of Islam rests in the Middle East, its demographic center of gravity lies in Indonesia. Given that defeated ISIS insurgents are expected to return to their home countries, it is in America's interest to see to it that Indonesia does not become a new staging ground of attacks carried out by returning ISIS militants. We cannot be ignored. Indonesia, therefore, does belong crucially to the new geography of American power under the Trump administration.

Of course, it belongs as well to the cartography of an Asia reshaped by the rise of powers such as China and India. Indonesia believes that the world is large enough to hold these powers together. As South-east Asia's preponderant power by virtue of its geographical, demographic and economic size, Indonesia does not wish to choose sides with any country against another. What it desires earnestly is a world order in which other countries respect its free and independent foreign policy.

It is my sincere and personal hope that the Trump administration will see Indonesia in the same new light in which it wishes America to be seen.