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RI-S'pore ties: Opportunity lost
Opinion and Editorial - August 25, 2004
AM Hendropriyono, Jakarta

It was not that long ago, so the story goes, that a former Indonesian president pointed to a small star on a map of Southeast Asia. "That's Singapore," he sniffed with disdain. It's smaller than the island in the middle of Lake Toba".

A decent interval has passed since those caustic comments, and Indonesia-Singapore ties have rebounded strongly in many areas. Perhaps nowhere is this more true than in the war on terrorism. From my perspective as head of the State Intelligence Agency, Singapore's cooperation on this front can only be described as excellent. As one of our close partners in what promises to be a prolonged campaign, Singapore has responded positively to all intelligence requests made by Indonesia. This is a two-way street: Indonesia, in turn, has done its best to fulfill Singapore's intelligence needs.

On a more symbolic level, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong was one of the first foreign leaders to visit Indonesia after the October 2002 Bali bombings. While in Jakarta, he went out of his way to emphasize the sense of security he felt -- welcome comments not without influence among foreign businessmen and tourists.

Just as important have been the gains in bilateral economic ties. Out of all proportion to its size, Singapore has been the fourth-largest investor in Indonesia for five years running. Tourism in both directions is vibrant, with about a million Singaporeans visiting Indonesia last year.

On Batam and Bintan Islands, close cooperation extends back a decade; this stands to grow more deeply following implementation of the U.S.-Singapore Free Trade Agreement, with Indonesian exports, as a result, able to enter the U.S. market without paying duty through the Integrated Sourcing Initiative.

But despite all this, there is a lingering impression among many Singaporean leaders that the current administration of Megawati Soekarnoputri is often obstructive at best, and hostile at worst. This impression is not without justification. In particular, recent examples of economic friction have been all too common.

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Worse, one usually comes away with the feeling that much of this friction is due to a lack of willingness by some Indonesian officials to tackle hard reforms at home. Example: Rather than reigning in administrative corruption around Riau to correct customs shortfalls, one senior official recently pinned blame solely on alleged Singaporean smugglers.

Another point of contention is maritime security along the Malacca Strait. There is no understating the importance of this checkpoint. Some 800 kilometers long, it hosts about 5,000 ships a year. This includes some 72 percent of the supertankers and heavy vessels moving between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Obviously, were traffic to be seriously impeded along the strait, the negative impact rippling across the economies of East Asia would be enormous. This is, unfortunately, an all too real possibility. For one thing, piracy is on the increase. According to the International Maritime Bureau, there were 16 piratical attacks along the strait in 2002; that number rose to 28 during 2003.

Furthermore, there is the threat of maritime terrorism. Senior Jamaah Islamiyah terrorists now in detention have admitted that attacks on Malacca shipping traffic have been contemplated in the recent past. Should a supertanker along the strait be sabotaged, especially near territorial waters, the economic and ecological fallout would be enormous.

But despite such threats, security along the strait has been sorely lacking. This is partly for jurisdictional reasons: Three countries have territorial waters extending into the strait, complicating naval coordination. Part, too, is due to a lack of resources: Attrition since the 1997 economic crisis has hit regional navies rather hard, none more so than that of Indonesia.

Looking at the shortfall in maritime patrols along the length of the strait, Singapore earlier this year raised the possibility of inviting a third party to guarantee maritime security. This would have been done through the U.S. Regional Maritime Security Initiative, part of the Proliferation Security Initiative meant to combat global terrorism. To support the scheme, Singapore officially dedicated naval facilities at its Changi Naval Base in May; these were built to the specifications of U.S. warships.

Reacting to the concerns raised by Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia have attempted to shore up security measures by the three littoral states. A meeting of the Indonesia-Malaysia Joint Commission in May, for example, resulted in pledges to enhance bilateral naval cooperation. Malaysia, in particular, announced it would establish a coast guard over the coming year.

Most recently, in July, the Indonesian, Malaysian and Singaporean navies agreed to commence joint patrols along the strait. They also agreed to establish a naval hotline and to use common radio frequencies to ease communications.



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While these are all positive developments, the attitude of some Indonesian diplomats toward Singapore was found wanting. Rather than discretely voicing questions over Singaporean cooperation in the Regional Maritime Security Initiative, criticism of Singapore was very public and shrill. More suitable, perhaps, would have been a measured response that welcomed cooperation from any country wishing to help safeguard the strait, provided that there was agreement from the littoral states. This might include, for example, intelligence-sharing, the provision of weaponry and training exercises.

The attitude taken by some Indonesian authorities toward the Malacca initiative has only fueled the impression of hostility toward Singapore, despite the fact that, generally, the Megawati administration has been trying hard to foster bilateral goodwill. With the new administration having taken office in Singapore, perhaps the time is right for a fresh, more mature start.

Already, there have been calls for the establishment of a hotline between leaders of both nations to quickly resolve issues before they become a matter of public debate. Such a step, among others, could well result in the enhancement of cordial ties that are so obviously in the mutual interests of both Singapore and Jakarta.

The writer is director of the State Intelligence Agency (BIN).

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webmaster@thejakartapost.com