Australia and Indonesia's Military Mafia

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There is now an urgent need for careful scrutiny of the half truths, lies and wishful thinking involved in calls to restore ties with Indonesia's military. Consider, for example, this statement by defence minister, Robert Hill (2002:6), about why Australia should rebuild the defence relationship:

Like Indonesia's other institutions, the role of the Indonesian military forces — TNI — is evolving in a fluid and difficult environment as they move away from the 'dual function' they had under the New Order [the regime of the departed long-time president, Soeharto]. But TNI will remain a fundamentally important institution in Indonesia. Its handling of difficult internal security problems across the archipelago will have a crucial bearing on stability. As a secular organisation it will remain key to the government's efforts to promote tolerance and harmony between Indonesia's many different faiths. This is particularly important in the context of current concerns about the potential attractiveness of radical forms of Islam in the region.

This is a view of the Indonesian National Military (TNI, Tentara Nasional Indonesia) shaped not so much by lies as by half truths that hide as much as they reveal. The key claims put for engaging closely with TNI are that it is a force for stability and a secular institution, but neither claim stands up to careful scrutiny. Let's construct another version of the Hill statement that is equally true, and which should strongly influence any debate about a return to the military ties of the 1990s. It would read:

The TNI is the most dangerous major institution in Indonesia. It is a corrupt, unaccountable body that acts beyond the power of its own government. TNI has created and directed terrorist militias (seen in East Timor and the militant Islamic group Laskar Jihad) and profits from communal unrest. The military has a history of abusing its own people. TNI proclaims itself a secular institution, but its own economic and power concerns mean that, in the extreme, the Army would adopt Islamic colours to suppress a middle class/student/parliamentary challenge. TNI is the institution that could most quickly and directly threaten Indonesia's democracy.

Australia should be helping to push the TNI's troops back into the barracks and keep them there because they are a long-term threat to stability. Australia's fundamental interest is in the unity of Indonesia. The Canberra nightmare is a Yugoslav-style collapse. The fear was most vividly expressed in a briefing to the National Security Committee of Federal Cabinet: 'Look at the map of the region and instead of Indonesia, imagine that geographic space occupied by three new versions of Bangladesh and two new versions of Brunei'.

Australia's diplomatic, strategic and economic purposes are fundamentally served by Indonesia's democratic experiment. It is an extraordinary failure of imagination, and failure to understand what is at stake, for Australia to seek ties with TNI as some form of fall-back insurance against the collapse of Indonesia's democracy.

The alternative to Indonesia's democracy is not some comfortable return to a Soeharto-style regime. And it does not serve Australia's interests for our defence establishment to seek to restore the relationship it had with Indonesia's military during the final phase of the Soeharto era — a relationship, of course, that crumbled at its first test in East Timor.

The argument against Australia's armed forces attempting to restore close ties with the Indonesian military can be made on the purely pragmatic grounds that this strategy will not work. It will not deliver what Australia wants or needs in Indonesia. The argument does not have to be based on issues of principle or human rights; the realist or cost-benefit judgement must be that Australia will get little return from increased cooperation with the Indonesian military. Money would be much better spent on the new Indonesian police force, created in 1999 when the police were separated from the military command structure previously known as ABRI (Armed Force of the Republic of Indonesia, Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia). Australia's security interests are in strengthening the legal system and helping reform Indonesia's legislative process.

Australia should restrict its military contacts to discussions between senior officers and to officer education. Any money Australia wants to spend on security training in Indonesia should go to police or judges. And to underline the point we should be making, only Australian civilians should be involved in intelligence exchanges with Indonesia. The Indonesian generals would certainly understand the symbolism of that civilian message (and would dislike it almost as much as Australia's military).

The Cracked Mirror

The Australian Defence Force's efforts at 'military diplomacy' with Indonesia should have died with the experience of the lies and deceit of East Timor. Yet the Defence Department is now trying to return to the previous formula. The approach ignores both the Timor experience and the extraordinary changes in Indonesia in the last few years.

The Australian military's dealings with Indonesia seem to be afflicted by the tendency when we look at others to see a reflection of our own characteristics.

Beyond merely seeking common ground, the mirroring effect means that in dealing with others we seek — and sometimes mistakenly see reflected back to us — our own habits, thought processes, histories and assumptions. The Australian military approach to the Indonesian military has contained a large dose of mirroring. Australian officers believe they can find common purposes with Indonesian commanders based on assumed similarities of military culture and conduct.

In the 1990s, Australia's defence leaders liked the idea of 'military diplomacy'. The shared practice of arms would be the common bond that helped Australia's soldiers do things with the Soeharto regime that were beyond civilian diplomats and politicians. Soeharto is gone but the habits of mirroring and defence diplomacy seem to persist in Canberra.

Before Australian generals or bureaucrats go to Jakarta, one sentence should be typed across the front page of their briefing document: 'Remember you are dealing with an Army that is part military, part mafia.' On the top of the second page should be typed: 'The historic role of the Indonesian military is to play politics and distribute the spoils.' Bob Lowry charted the military's role as a cohesive political force during Indonesia's previous three political regimes (Lowry, 1996:chapter 7). During the Constitutional Democracy period (1950-57) the military played a spoiling role; in Sukarno's Guided Democracy (1957-65) it was a major partner; and in Soeharto's New Order (1965-98) it was a significant actor and the dominant instrument. Under Soeharto, the Army had a physical presence at almost every administrative level. Thousands of active and retired officers served in the cabinet, parliament, courts, Golkar (the government's political party under Soeharto regime), provincial government and state enterprises.

Australia's military now needs to look beyond the mirror image to see an Indonesian military force with a vastly different history and a radically different culture. The 'mafia' dimension deserves emphasis. TNI gets only about 30% of its budget from the government (ICG, 2002:4). This key fact should act as a reality check for Australian officers and bureaucrats, coming as they do from a world where 100% of the military budget comes from the national parliament, via the cabinet, as an historic expression of civilian control of the military. In Indonesia the old jest was that the military did not have merely a dual function (defence and political responsibilities), but rather a triple role — and the third function was making money.

Moreover, although some of TNI's extra-budgetary funding comes from legitimate commercial enterprises, a great deal is derived from a wide range of illegal activity. According to Crouch (forthcoming):

Another vital source for both TNI and police is money derived from activities that are best described as 'extortion'. Private corporations have little choice but to pay 'protection' money to the military, especially in the case of foreign investments in such industries as mining, petroleum refining, and plantations where military personnel are

often employed as security guards. Manufacturing and commercial enterprises in cities and towns are also 'taxed' by the military and police, while illegal taxes are routinely extracted at ports and from land transport enterprises. Security personnel are deeply involved in illegal logging, mining, fishing, cattle rustling and smuggling. And at the lowest level, military and police officers either control or provide 'backing' for illegal gambling, narcotics and prostitution.

Crouch argues that a tacit agreement with the government means there are no genuine prosecutions of military officers for human rights crimes. And officers use their relative legal immunity to keep Indonesia's regional conflicts simmering, to serve their financial interests.

This is not to say that the military wants an all-out war in these regions, but a continuing atmosphere of tension and uncertainty makes it much easier to extract contributions. ... [W]hen military officers call for the introduction of a military emergency, they are not unaware of the economic benefits that an emergency can bring.

Democracy Does Not Equal Chaos

The hardhead argument is that Canberra should ignore the issue of whether elements of the Indonesian military are obnoxious abusers of human rights, and focus purely on Australia's interests. Harries (2002) argues that Australia must set clear priorities and make hard choices to deal with Islamic extremism, based on an overriding national interest in Indonesia achieving 'stability and order as soon as possible'. In Harries' view, the only instrument capable of doing this is the Indonesian military, even though he concedes it is 'a brutal and deeply tarnished institution'.

The problem with this line is that the Indonesian military is most unlikely to deliver stability, however it is defined. The choice is a false one: democracy and chaos on one side, the military and stability on the other. TNI's past means it would have little legitimacy if it grabbed for power in the future. The instability we see at present in Indonesia would seem mild compared to the resistance that would meet an attempted return to military rule.

Even the Australian leader who became close enough to Soeharto to create the 1995 Security Treaty, Paul Keating, understands there is no simple turning back to that previous military-based regime. Keating (2002:5) argues that it is a mistake to imagine that TNI offers an easy alternative to Indonesian democracy:

I think the likelihood is the TNI is as much part of the problem as the solution; and therefore the moderate Muslim political parties and the moderate Muslim political personalities have got to be backed. And we shouldn't fall back into some simplistic notion that secularism in

Indonesia is just like opening a can and it pops out. We just open the can, the TNI put it together, and out it pops.

Equating the military with secular stability is wishful thinking, not analysis. A proper analysis of the TNI's role as a force for instability would include these observations on the military, drawn from the International Crisis Group (ICG, 2002:4):

- TNI is a highly politicised organisation that 'leaks information ... like a sieve'.
- Rebel movements still get the bulk of their arms from corrupt soldiers and police.
- Some 70 percent of TNI's operational funding comes from non-budgetary sources, many illegal.
- It is a major understatement to say that TNI 'discipline is weak'. A recent attack by soldiers on a police post in North Sumatra, in which 1.5 tons of marijuana went missing, is merely one example.
- Trials of army officers for crimes against humanity in East Timor have been a 'farce' that undermine, not strengthen, accountability.
- Looking to the Army 'as the lead institution to combat terrorism would be a mistake that could as easily compromise security as strengthen it'.

Neither Secular nor Stable

In post-Soeharto Indonesia, the military and other conservative elements exploit religion to keep their opponents at bay. But this is a tactic, not a core principle. O'Rourke's analysis of the new struggle for power in Jakarta concludes that TNI will happily abandon its so-called secular principles and exploit religion as a political vehicle to preserve or enhance its power (O'Rourke, 2002:403):

If the military's leaders grow dissatisfied with a Megawati administration, they would willingly back a government led by Islamic parties. An alliance with Islamic parties would help the military stave off resistance from its most formidable foe: student demonstrators. Indonesia's student movement is only effective when it is galvanised, but a large portion of the country's student population is partial to Islamic politics — and might therefore be co-opted into supporting a military-Islamic alliance in the future.

The Indonesian military has given ample evidence of its willingness to exploit violence to serve its economic and political ends. The creation and direction of militia groups in East Timor in 1999 had echoes of the tactics the Army used to massacre communists after the failed coup in 1965 (Cribb, 1990). The Army's creation of the Islamic militia Laskar Jihad is a rerun of its tactics in East Timor.

The TNI in a democratising Indonesia is not the same beast as the ABRI of the Soeharto era. In particular, TNI is not the secular institution it once was. It is not as rigid as before in screening out more devout Muslims when recruiting troops. The turn towards Islam began in the 1990s as Soeharto embraced elements of religion to reinforce his power. He stripped away the disproportionately Christian leadership of ABRI so as to reduce the influence of the Christian general, Benny Murdani, who had confronted Soeharto about the burgeoning business activities of Soeharto's children, and had also discussed the need for some presidential succession planning.

The former Labor deputy prime minister and defence minister, Kim Beazley, argues that the swing towards Islamicist sentiment began under Soeharto (Beazley, 2002:10):

The Pancasila ideology of the military and society was being actively undermined before Soeharto fell, as he sought to shore up his position. After he purged General Benny Murdani for criticism of his family, a purge began of Christian officers at senior levels of the military. Their numbers among major-generals and above stood at 25% in the late 1980s. By the time Soeharto fell, this had fallen to very few. TNI was thoroughly philosophically confused.

The Indonesia military is no longer, if it ever was, exclusively a secular-nationalist force. TNI's role in the creation and direction of the violent Islamic militia, Laskar Jihad, is standing proof of the erosion of the secular principle. The military would have to be a key element in a turn towards Islamic government. O'Rourke's judgement in early 2002 was that the likelihood of Islamic rule in Indonesia is stronger than ever before, precisely because of the military (O'Rourke, 2002:404):

It matters little that Islamic political parties attracted relatively weak support in the June, 1999, election: Indonesia's power struggles take place at the elite level. Rather than a grassroots movement, an Islamic government would be a construction imposed from above, with the help of the military and, probably, Golkar.

Australian Military Relationships as an Instrument of Influence

The base claim of the engagement orthodoxy in the 1990s was that Australia could build some levels of influence over the professionalism and direction of Indonesia's military. The 1994 Defence White Paper spoke of 'shared strategic interests and perceptions' and the way combined exercises would 'enhance the capabilities and professional standards of each country's forces' (DOD, 1994:67). By 1997 Defence was boasting about how 'close cooperation on a range of issues provides us with broad influence, including on human rights' (DOD, 1997:22).

The example of the lies and deceit of East Timor has not, apparently, dismantled the hopes for influence.

A useful reality check on what can and can't be achieved by defence links in Southeast Asia is to examine the history of the Five Power Defence Arrangements. FPDA, entered into in November 1971, is a promise by Australia, New Zealand and Britain to defend Malaysia and Singapore. It is a one-way defence commitment — Australia gives security guarantees that are not reciprocated. If the influence argument is to have any weight, then presumably there should be some evidence of it in Australia's dealings with Singapore and Malaysia. And, surely, the military heritage Australia shares with Malaysia and Singapore should enhance this process. Alas for the advocates of military diplomacy, there is little evidence of any convergence of shared perceptions or of broad influence.

During the 30 year history of the FPDA, Australia has had little ability to shape the perceptions or policies of its de facto allies. Australia has poured considerable cash and resources into the Arrangements, basing Mirage aircraft in Malaysia until 1988 and providing, to this day, a RAAF officer to head the Integrated Air Defence System for Singapore and Malaysia. The Australian officer at the head of IADS is the essential trans-national 'cover' to enable Singapore and Malaysia to operate a shared radar system that is clearly to their mutual benefit. The key benefit Australia derives is use of the Butterworth air base in Penang, but it is a benefit it has well and truly paid for through provision of people and expertise.

In terms of influence and shared perceptions, FPDA has had almost no impact on the central reality of strategic competition and military apprehension between Singapore and Malaysia. In 1999, for instance, Australia noted how

Malaysia has argued for limitations to be placed on some elements of the [FPDA] exercise program, which would reduce the benefits for the Australian Defence Force. Strained relations between Malaysia and Singapore are also impacting on the arrangements (DOD, 1999:8).

Australia's real defence relationship with Singapore is built largely on a foundation outside FPDA — Singapore's use of the Australian continent as a training base for its fighter and helicopter pilots, tank crews and for infantry exercises. When it comes to influence, in fact, Singapore seems to have some success in persuading Australia to share its views. Certainly, the Australian defence line on the central importance of the TNI as a stabilising and secular force is an exact echo of views long expressed by former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew.

When looking at Malaysia, FPDA cautions Australia to set severely limited aims for what a defence relationship can achieve. The lesson Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad has administered on many occasions is that Canberra gets no gratitude or diplomatic pay-off for the one-way security guarantee Australia gives Malaysia. Except for the 'recalcitrant' row between Mahathir and Keating in 1993, military ties have been strictly quarantined from all other parts of

the relationship. This is a recipe for preserving defence cooperation, but it does not deliver much in terms of Australia's broader regional interests.

Australia needs to learn from its FPDA experience when ranking its hierarchy of interests in the new, democratic Indonesia. Economists are now arguing that institutions are more important than geography or policy in delivering economic growth (*The Economist*, 2002:74). This reinforces the view that Australia should not be adding any legitimacy to the tarnished TNI name. It should focus on the institutions that will help build a new Indonesia, not drag it back to a dark past.

The aftermath of the Bali bombings indicates the security institutions in Indonesia that merit support — and which Australian security institutions should be the lead players. The Australian Defence Force should be at the end of the queue; at the front should be the Australian Federal Police, the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation, judges and lawyers.

By separating the Indonesian police force from military control in 1999, the Wahid government made the policy choices much easier for Australia. The security institution that should get the vast share of Australia's attention should be Indonesia's police. The police cooperation that worked so well in tracking down the Bali bombers should be the spark for intensive and extensive Australian engagement with the national police. An almost equal allocation of aid should go to helping Indonesia's Parliament to define its central role in a diverse democracy. Australia can offer real expertise in modernising the legal code, which rests on the shaky foundations of Dutch colonial law and Soeharto misrule. Strengthening and modernising the police, remaking the laws and reforming the judiciary are huge, expensive tasks. The benefits of such an investment are obvious for a democracy such as Australia and, even in pure cost-benefit terms, the returns will be far more obvious than re-engaging with TNI.

The Indonesian Army has made few of the changes necessary to merit anything more than a limited relationship with the ADF. The Australian Senate report on East Timor, in December, 2000, identified markers that TNI would have to reach before Australia could, in all conscience, resume defence cooperation. One such was clear evidence that the TNI was dismantling the territorial command structure, so the military could become a professional defence force rather than an internal security force that uses its power to meddle in domestic politics all the way down to the village level. 'As Indonesia now has a democratic system, albeit in a fragile state, it would be anathema for Australia to support the TNI or any other element in Indonesia not working to strengthen democracy' (Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, 2000:207).

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute struck the right balance with its 2002 annual assessment:

We must do whatever we can to support and strengthen the development of democratic government in Indonesia. A return of authoritarian, military-backed government in Indonesia would be a bad outcome for Australia. That means we need to work with institutions such as the Indonesian police and judiciary in combating terrorism rather than

primarily focussing on relations with the Indonesian armed forces (ASPI, 2002:4).

It is well to recall the words of one of the most articulate advocates of the military engagement policy of the Hawke and Keating Governments. Former foreign minister Gareth Evans's rueful reflection on the failure of that policy was that all it delivered was 'better trained human rights abusers.' The idea, surely, is for policymakers to learn from history, not repeat it.

Australia's national security interests centre on building the democratic institutions and hopes of Indonesia. The Indonesia military leadership and corrupt elites in Jakarta pose far more of a threat to this democracy than a small number of radical Muslims. Australia cannot take out 'insurance' with the Indonesian military against some failure of Indonesian democracy. The consequences of such a democratic failure would be disastrous for Indonesia, dire for Southeast Asia, and profoundly unsettling for Australia. And the sort of military regime that would emerge from such a disaster would look very different from Soeharto's New Order. The main aim in dealing with TNI should be to help strengthen the other Indonesian institutions that will ensure the soldiers stay in their barracks.

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