

***Condemned to Crisis?* By Ken Ward. Sydney: Penguin Books and Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2015. Hardcover: 152pp.**

Condemned to Crisis? could not have come at a better time. While Indonesia–Australia bilateral relations have often been subject to ups and downs, the roller coaster ride seems to have grown more erratic in recent years. Indeed, lunging from crisis to crisis has seemingly become “the new normal” in how Jakarta and Canberra deal with one another, even as Australian observers maintain that a warm relationship with Indonesia is invaluable.

Ken Ward, however, provides a sobering and lucidly written assessment of why this is mistaken. His message is clear: Australia needs to be “more realistic” about its bilateral relationship and should not adopt “wildly ambitious goals vis-à-vis Indonesia” (p. 24). Ward claims that describing Australia’s relationship with Indonesia as the “most important regional strategic relationship” (p. 47) neither enhances Canberra’s negotiating strength nor elicits appreciation from Indonesia. Instead, Ward calls on the Australian political elite to adopt a more measured approach, improve political communication and avoid using Indonesia as a domestic partisan political football.

The book examines how Indonesia’s history has shaped its foreign policy, how the Indonesia–Australia relationship has been entangled by the domestic politics of both countries, and the role of political communication and culture. Throughout, Ward provides thought-provoking analyses as he debunks a few prevailing myths in the bilateral relationship. He correctly debunks, for example, a long-held myth that bilateral relations are difficult due to cultural differences (pp. 56–61). He claims that such a view conflates a certain variant of Javanese culture with Indonesian culture as a whole, and that cultural accounts fail to offer a reliable guide on how Indonesian leaders may react in crisis situations with Australia.

Overall, the book is a refreshing and important addition to the ongoing debate over the management of this bilateral relationship. Written for the Australian public in mind, it has rightfully fostered numerous debates in the Australian media and elsewhere. However, rather than rehashing these debates, I will closely examine the book’s analyses of Indonesia, which underpin its policy recommendations. Here, unfortunately, it falls short of providing a thorough, balanced and nuanced understanding of Indonesia. At times, the analyses are

crowded out by cherry-picked quotes, contradictions and unnecessary innuendos.

Ward's thesis — Canberra should avoid big dreams and focus on building a stable relationship “capable of weathering storms” — contradicts his own claim that past crises that engulfed the relationship only had a limited impact on investment and trade, educational exchanges or tourism (pp. 26–27). If the status quo is already capable of weathering bilateral storms, why aim for something better? This confusion may be due to an absence of a clear framework to assess the evolution in this bilateral relationship. Ward suggests that we compare Indonesia–Australia relations with Indonesia–Singapore and Indonesia–Malaysia relations (pp. 34–50), but he does not persuasively explain why those comparisons are pertinent. Singling out distance as a variable seems like an odd choice since Indonesia has eight neighbors — and a cursory citing of Stephen Walt's *Origins of Alliances* to justify this focus on neighbourly threats is not a substitute for case selection analysis.

Furthermore, the lack of substantive evidence for some of his claims exacerbates such analytical concerns. He points out, for example, that Sukarno's view of the world — that it is dominated by exploitative forces — has “endured in one form or another ... [and] underlies the continuing suspicion of foreign investment and the striving for self-sufficiency” (pp. 31–32). But he offers no evidence to show whether and how it endures. Are we then to conclude that an “inferiority complex” underpins Jakarta's “sensitivities” when dealing with Canberra? Ward also claims that Indonesia's parliamentary foreign affairs committee (*Komisi 1*) “has adopted a highly nationalistic approach in every parliament since 1999” (p. 52). This ignores studies (see, for example, Iis Gindarsah, “Democracy and Foreign-Policy Making in Indonesia: A Case Study of the Iranian Nuclear Issue, 2007–08” in the December 2012 issue of *Contemporary Southeast Asia*) which argue that the committee's foreign policy stance is often employed as a tool by the opposition, and occasionally as a lever to jockey for cabinet positions. Since the opposition often controls *Komisi 1*, we should rethink Ward's view that, unlike Canberra, Jakarta does not have an opposition to blame for damaging the bilateral relationship (p. 54).

Meanwhile, Ward's factual interpretation is occasionally perplexing. He claims that multilateral diplomacy has been “a constant of Indonesian foreign policy” over bilateral diplomacy (p. 74), despite the fact that Jakarta has signed 86 bilateral strategic partnerships with 31 countries since 1999. Or when he implies

that it was under Soeharto that Indonesia adhered to a “free and active” foreign policy (p. 36), despite the doctrine having been in effect since the 1950s.

Perhaps more disconcerting is Ward’s sarcastic undertones when discussing policy debates (e.g. Indonesia’s approach to the South China Sea dispute [pp. 74–75]) and his lack of tact when articulating controversial positions. Some of these are perhaps unintentional, such as when he uses “tied to the crosses” (p. 1) to describe the Australian citizens Indonesia convicted and executed for drug smuggling earlier this year, or his chapter on President Joko Widodo entitled, “defending Indonesia, executing Australians” (p. 94).

But in some instances, Ward’s characterization of issues is counter-productive. When discussing challenges in the bilateral relationship, he singles out Muslims a few times: “Muslim opinion” demands input in Indonesia’s foreign policy (p. 16); “Muslim radicalism” as the next irritant after East Timor (p. 18); the large “non-Muslim populations” in the area closest to Australia (the Malukus, Timor and Papua) that Jakarta has felt most vulnerable to separatist pressures (p. 46); and that Australia’s participation in wars in “Muslim countries in South Asia and the Middle East” raises suspicions in Indonesia (p. 46). In all these instances, it is unclear why the Muslim identity is salient in the bilateral relationship or why other policy problems take a backseat. Ward also offers no proof that Jakarta only cared about Israel’s war in Gaza and not the Malaysian airliner that was shot down over Ukraine in 2014 (p. 46). Similarly, he claims that the problems between Indonesia and Singapore are emotionally intense “because of lingering anti-Chinese *racist* sentiment among Indonesians” (p. 42, emphasis mine) without providing evidence for such strong accusations other than cherry-picked innuendos from Jakarta’s political elites using brash rhetoric against Singapore.

Finally, Ward might be correct that Indonesia’s lack of cultural presence in Australia contributes to the country’s public “negative vibes” (p. 61), but his reasoning — Australian-based Indonesians are “very different from that of Indonesian society as a whole” because the Chinese, Catholics and Buddhists are not “native” (p. 64) — is tactless and erroneous. To claim some groups, based on ethnicity or religion, are more “legitimately” representative, not only ignores Indonesia’s social and political history, but also perpetuates prejudices clouding level-headed policy assessments.

The book is a good wake-up call for Australian policymakers and the Australian public, though arguably more provocative than

convincing, and its analysis of Indonesian politics and society should be taken with a grain of salt. Ward concludes by cautioning Australian politicians to choose their words carefully. Perhaps he would do well to heed his own advice.

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