

A Tribute to Indonesia's Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on its 50th Anniversary

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I had the privilege of being Australia's Foreign Minister during one of the most productive periods ever in Indonesia-Australia relations, from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. That it was so owed a huge amount to the CSIS, with its enormously intelligent and creative analysis, advice and advocacy – qualities for which the Centre was renowned from its establishment, fifty years ago, and for which it continues to be admired and respected, both at home and abroad, to this day.

I first came to know the great founding leadership team of Harry Tjan Silalahi, Jusuf Wanandi and Clara Joewono – who I am delighted to see, though having handed over their executive roles to Philips Vermonte and the younger brigade, are still firing on all cylinders – after Ali Alatas and I became Foreign Ministers at around the same time in 1988. We began then a really productive partnership, not only in restoring Indonesia-Australia bilateral relations, particularly in the context of East Timor, which had been through one of their periodic bumpy periods, but also in working to bring peace to Cambodia, and to help build in the region significant new multilateral security and economic dialogue mechanisms. In and out of Jakarta quite often, and always keen to meet the CSIS team whenever I could, I found its take on all the issues with which Pak Ali and I were wrestling invariably refreshing and constructive – even if some of my exchanges with Benny Moerdani on East Timor were not among the most comfortable I can remember!

A recurring theme in our discussions was the need for effective region-wide economic and security policy-making machinery – APEC, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and now the East Asia Summit. We were united in believing that these needed to be well-prepared and properly conducted occasions for serious and substantive policy debate, and not just expensive photo-opportunities for set piece speeches endorsing pre-cooked lowest common denominator communiqués. CSIS has done as much as anyone in the region to advance this cause – particularly as a leading light from the beginning in founding and driving the second-track Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP).

It was common ground between us that ASEAN, with Indonesia's role crucial, must continue to be a central player if Asia-Pacific regional security was to be preserved. Maybe 'driving seat' was a bridge too far, but ASEAN's 'centrality' should continue to be recognised in terms of its geographical status at the hub of the entire region, the stabilising role it has played in its own traditionally volatile area, and the historic role it has played in encouraging wider regional cooperation. I know the Centre has shared my own frustration at the slower than hoped for progress we have made, in particular in

getting the ARF to move beyond generalised confidence-building to more hands-on conflict prevention, management and resolution. And tensions and divisions within ASEAN about how to respond to China's rise, and increasing assertiveness, are obviously raising new concerns about its effectiveness. CSIS's advice as to how to maintain the cooperative-security culture and dynamic of the region has never been more necessary.

One of the things for which CSIS has been most renowned, and which has most added to my own understanding over the years, has been its acute and sharp-eyed take on the national Indonesian political scene. CSIS relations with President Suharto, previously close, seriously cooled in the late 1980s with ever more serious concern being felt about the prevalence of corruption, and shortfalls in democracy, the rule of law, social justice and regional autonomy. The critical but constructive spirit honed in that period has very much continued since, with critical analyses of the strengths and weaknesses not only of President Suharto's reign, but those subsequently of Gus Dur, Habibie, Megawati, SBY and Jokowi. Hard-headed analysis and advice is not always welcome to political leaders. But the responsibility, as always, of great think tanks and research institutes, is to tell government policymakers not what they want to hear, but what they need to hear.

Policymakers, analysts and activists both in Indonesia and abroad have been listening to CSIS's informed, balanced and constructive voice on strategic issues with profit and pleasure for five long decades, and its 50th Anniversary is an occasion for both congratulation and celebration. In the present volatile and global and regional environment, the Centre's voice has never been more important. May it go on being heard for a long time yet.

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