

Abbott's failure to listen escalates spying row

By Dave McRae



PHOTO: Tony Abbott could have offered Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono an apology, a review, or some other compromise. (Reuters: Ahim Rani)

Tony Abbott's failure to proactively defuse the spying row with Indonesia has escalated it, writes Dave McRae. To restore ties he will need to change tack.

After suspending various aspects of Australia-Indonesia cooperation, Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono last night wrote to Tony Abbott demanding an explanation for Australia's wiretapping.

The Prime Minister told the parliament he will respond fully to the letter, suggesting he may go beyond Australia's pro forma public response to date. If he does, the question will be why the Prime Minister did not publicly signal any compromise sooner, particularly if reports that Australia has agreed to discontinue such wiretapping are true.

Abbott's failure to proactively defuse this situation epitomises his approach to relations with Indonesia. On both asylum seekers and in this spying row, he has refused to listen when Indonesia has made clear what course of action it hopes for from Australia. The result in both cases has been the same: the row has escalated to involve emotive nationalism and Indonesia has consequently had no choice but to take a hard line.

On asylum seekers, Abbott and the Coalition have consistently refused to heed Indonesia's objections to turning back boats. Even in opposition, the Coalition's policy spurred objections from both Indonesia's foreign minister and vice president, with the latter describing refusal of turnbacks as Jakarta's "basic position". Objections within Indonesia to the Coalition's asylum seeker policies then escalated during the election campaign, when the Coalition added buying boats and paying for information to its policy menu. Conservative commentators in Indonesia weighed in, with one describing the policies as demeaning.

Despite Indonesia's objections, the Coalition pressed ahead with these policies in their rhetoric after winning office. The Indonesian response was immediate and scathing. In particular, the Coalition's insistence that they did not need Indonesia's permission to turn back boats made asylum seekers a point of emotive nationalism, where previously they had rarely been discussed within Indonesia.

The Coalition's stance saw foreign minister Marty Natalegawa reported as [telling the Indonesian parliament that Indonesia would reject the Coalition's policy](#). In another statement soon after, Natalegawa also told reporters that Indonesia [could not accept any policy that would "violate Indonesia's sovereignty"](#).

The ultimate result was that the Coalition did not achieve their goal of turning back boats, and in pressing for this outcome they made other forms of cooperation on asylum seekers much harder. For instance, Indonesia could not be seen to be bowing to Australia's will on this issue, contributing to their refusal to take back asylum seekers rescued within Indonesia's search and rescue zone.

The spying row has escalated along the same path. From the outset, it should have been obvious that Indonesia needed something that it could take back to its public. Indonesia's defence minister Purnomo Yusgiantoro in fact said precisely that following the first round of revelations of Australian spying. Anticipating his counterpart's visit to Jakarta, he told journalists that David Johnston's trip [would allow him to explain things directly to the Indonesian public](#). It was an opportunity that Johnston [did not take up](#).

When reports subsequently emerged that Australia had tried to wiretap the mobile phones of Yudhoyono, his wife and many of Indonesia's top leaders, Yudhoyono himself tweeted:

Indonesia also demands Australia for an official response, one that can be understood by the public, on the tapping on Indonesia. *SBY*

— S. B. Yudhoyono (@SBYudhoyono) [November 19, 2013](#)

He further characterised Abbott's refusal to provide anything more than a bare response to be belittling the issue, without showing any remorse. Had he listened to Indonesia's signals, Abbott could have moved in both cases to defuse the situation earlier. Turning back boats was not a crucial plank of Australia's response to asylum seekers, and could have been dropped quietly before it became a sticking point.

In the spying row, Abbott could have provided something publicly even if he had no intention of changing Australia's practice, be it an apology, a review, or some other compromise. In the absence even of the appearance of a concession, Yudhoyono's only available option was to demonstrate his firmness to the Indonesian public.

Abbott's lack of appreciation of Indonesia's politics is a curious failing for a prime minister who often allows domestic politicking to colour his foreign policy rhetoric. To put ties with Indonesia back on track, it is a failing he will need to correct.

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