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**New treaty with Indonesia a smart move**  
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Days before the inauguration of Indonesia's new president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Alexander Downer has raised the prospect of Australia negotiating a security agreement with Indonesia. This is not the first we've heard of it. The Foreign Minister's remarks follow a series of public and private indications from the new president that he is in favour of reviving the Keating government's 1995 Agreement on Maintaining Security.

That earlier agreement was abrogated in a fit of pique by then President Habibie in the heat of the Timor crisis in 1999. The treaty was very much Paul Keating's work. (I have an interest to declare: with the former chief of the Defence Force, General Peter Gration, I was one of the agreement's negotiators.)

Keating drove it in cabinet and the bureaucracy. He believed the absence of an overarching agreement between Australia and Indonesia on the issues of regional security was a key gap in our regional defence relations. For Keating, the agreement was a declaration of strategic trust. But he wanted something that went beyond the bland words of a memorandum of understanding.

The agreement was short and direct - just over a page long. It had some initial provisions underlining its consistency with other commitments of the two parties (in Australia's case, ANZUS). There were just three operative paragraphs. They provided that Australia and Indonesia would:

- \* Consult at ministerial level on a regular basis about matters affecting their common security and develop such co-operation as would benefit their own security and that of the region.
- \* Consult each other in the case of adverse challenges to either party or to their common security interests, and, if appropriate, consider measures which might be taken either individually or jointly and in accordance with the processes of each party.
- \* Promote co-operative activities in the security field.

Neither side intended the agreement to deal with internal matters which then included East Timor. It provided a framework in which specific co-operative defence activities, whose form changes over time, would take place.

Much of the work was done by public servants who later became John Howard's close advisers. Michael Thawley, now the ambassador to the United States and Howard's first international policy adviser, led the bureaucratic work and was responsible for much of the preliminary drafting. Allan Taylor, later convener of Howard's Timor taskforce, was the ambassador to Indonesia and an important adviser.

The agreement represented a major step for the Indonesians, who had never before entered into such an agreement with a Western country. Non-alignment was (and still is) a central feature of the way Indonesians think about themselves.

The negotiators had begun by thinking about a traditional defence treaty - something that would respond to "external threats". But, largely because of Indonesian insistence, we ended with a broader and much more useful agreement dealing with "adverse challenges" to our security interests. It is "adverse challenges" in the form of terrorism which have been central to Asian security for most of the intervening period.

Howard and Downer welcomed the agreement. It was tabled in Parliament by the Howard Government in May 1996. Others, however, were less sure. Elements of the academic defence establishment were affronted.

For others, on the left and right, the treaty's words were irrelevant. Any agreement mentioning "defence co-operation" and "Indonesia" in the same sentence was to be opposed on principle. The other criticism was of secrecy, although I can attest that until about four weeks before the announcement there was no indication we would have anything at all to discuss or announce.

Downer is downplaying the earlier agreement, suggesting it was "fairly meaningless" and that if Australia went ahead we would be looking for a "broader" agreement. It is to be expected politicians want to put their mark on their activities, to deliver a product that is an all-new, super-improved variety, with a fresh miracle ingredient. In fact it is hard to see how any new agreement will be very different from the last one in its core aims.

The important thing is what is in it for Australia and our relationship with Indonesia. Treaties like this may only be symbolic, but symbolism is important in international relations. And never more so than now, as Indonesia begins a new phase of its democracy.

The Opposition has sensibly offered support for a security agreement with Indonesia. So should all Australians who are interested in the relationship with our largest neighbour.