

U.S. Lifts Indonesia Arms Embargo

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Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns announced Nov. 22 that the United States would open the door to major arms sales to Indonesia. The announcement came just days after President George W. Bush met with Indonesian President Yudhoyono at an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) conference. In doing so, the administration sidestepped congressional human rights demands on the Indonesian military.

The Bush administration claims that ending the arms embargo and modernizing the Indonesian Defence Force will help Jakarta address mutual security concerns such as terrorism, maritime piracy, narcotics trafficking, pandemic disease, and disaster relief. According to Burns' statement, Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim state and its third-largest democracy, is "a voice of moderation in the Islamic world" and "plays a unique strategic role in Southeast Asia."

Lifting the embargo required the Department of State to waive for "national security interests" congressional requirements that the Indonesian military first fully account for human rights violations in East Timor, an island state occupied by Indonesia from 1975 to 1999.

U.S. arms restrictions were first levied on Jakarta in 1991 when Indonesian soldiers opened fire on a pro-independence demonstration, leaving more than 270 East Timorese dead. Indonesia later staged a military intervention in 1999 to prevent East Timor's secession, killing more than 1,500 civilians and razing 70 percent of its infrastructure. In response, the United States and the European Union both imposed arms embargoes. The European Union chose not to renew its ban in 2000. ([See ACT, January/February 2000.](#))

Recently, however, the United States has moved toward military re-engagement.

In February 2005, Washington reinstated Indonesia's eligibility for the International Military Education and Training program in order to upgrade the quality of its officer corps. In May 2005, the United States removed restrictions on nonlethal defense equipment such as communications and transport systems. The latest decision lifts the last remaining barrier, a ban on sale of lethal weaponry and related equipment. Still recovering from the Asian financial crisis, the Indonesian government lacks the funds to purchase new armaments but intends to take advantage of the new rules initially to purchase spare parts for its aging fleet of 10 U.S.-supplied F-16 fighters.

In November, in a fiscal year 2006 appropriations bill, Congress restated its preconditions for resumption of full military engagement with Indonesia: proportionate prosecution of military personnel responsible for atrocities, cooperation with civilian and international efforts to resolve human rights violations, and reforms to improve civilian control of the military. Yet, it also allowed the administration to claim a national security waiver. In doing so, Burns pledged that "U.S. assistance will continue to be guided by Indonesia's progress on human rights, democratic reform, and accountability."

Referring to internal developments since the 1999 intervention, Burns stated that "Indonesia has made significant progress in advancing its democratic institutions and practices in a relatively short time." Indonesia's armed forces, which historically played a very formal role in the political process, have been moving steadily toward civilian control. Reforms have included the establishment of a police force separate from the military, the appointment of Indonesia's first civilian defense minister, and passage of a law banning military officials from holding parliamentary seats.

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In September 2004, former General Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono became the first directly elected president of Indonesia, winning office with a 60 percent majority. Under his leadership, the Indonesian government coordinated an international relief effort in wake of the 2004 tsunami, negotiated a peaceful truce with separatists in the war-torn Aceh province, and initiated low-level legal proceedings to account for atrocities in East Timor.

Invoking these accomplishments at the APEC conference, Yudhoyono argued that Indonesia has proven itself worthy of resumed military engagement with the United States. While there, he also spoke with Russian President Vladimir Putin about further defense cooperation with Moscow following Indonesia's 2003 purchase of four Sukhoi warplanes and two MI-35 assault helicopters. In addition to its dealings with the United States and Russia, Yudhoyono is considering purchasing weapons from other potential suppliers, which might include several EU countries, South Korea, India, and China.

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