



Religious Freedom and a Free and Open Indo-Pacific

Indonesian and U.S. Statesmen agree that “shared civilizational values” are essential building blocks of a rules-based international order

Former Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo:

“The places where we can build peace, the places where we can identify overlapping interests will always revolve around shared values.”

NU General Secretary Yahya Cholil Staquf:

“We need to mobilize civil society actors and mass-based organizations to foster societal consensus regarding fundamental values, if a rules-based international order is to endure.”

WASHINGTON, DC: On July 14, 2021, Hudson Institute Distinguished Fellow Kenneth Weinstein moderated a discussion between Yahya Cholil Staquf, General Secretary of Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama, and Hudson Distinguished Fellow and former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency/U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo. It was the first time the Indonesian and U.S. statesmen had met face-to-face since Secretary Pompeo [addressed](#) leaders of the Humanitarian Islam movement in Jakarta on October 29, 2020, days before the U.S. presidential election.

Their wide-ranging discussion covered a variety of topics including: Indonesia’s and America’s founding values; mobilizing public support for a sustainable rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific that is resilient and adaptable to the great power realities of the 21st century; the future of the post-World War II human rights project; the persecution of ethnic and religious minorities; threats posed by the political weaponization of identity; genocide; the role of sovereign nation states, and civil society, in preserving and strengthening the rules-based international order; and the need to maintain a stable balance of power within the Indo-Pacific region.

Towards the end of their conversation, Kenneth Weinstein said: “I’d like to ask you, Pak Yahya, to go into a little more detail about the security threats you see in Indonesia and the Indo-Pacific more broadly, and how you think they can be addressed.”

Mr. Staquf replied: “We have a reality within the region, that many countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and others are relatively weak, economically and militarily. On the other hand, China is growing so fast into a huge power in the region. I don’t want to be prejudiced and say that China is an evil power, but an imbalance is emerging that potentially threatens the stability of the entire region, and certainly disturbs the peace of mind of surrounding countries like Indonesia. This is especially the case since China announced its One Belt One Road agenda, which traverses Indonesia’s maritime waters.

“Indonesia requires substantial power to negotiate with China, to allow them to pass through our territory. And if the bargaining power is imbalanced, this represents a potential threat to Indonesia’s sovereignty. This is not just happening with Indonesia. It has happened to nearly every country in the region. This means that potentially, we will have a very serious problem in

the future, if we cannot soon enough ensure a balance of power within the region. That is why we need the United States to be strong, to keep strong.”

Secretary Pompeo responded: “I think that’s a perfect analysis. Not only strong but to work alongside you. To build up partnerships and relationships that matter. I’m confident we can do that. You talked about the sovereignty of those nations. I think that’s exactly what the issue is. People often ask the question: ‘Do you think the Chinese will invade country x or y?’ That’s not their model. Xi Jinping’s model is to use coercive influence tools. So whether that’s information and media in these countries; whether it’s their capacity to say, ‘No, you can’t develop resources in your own estuaries, in your own waterways, which are clearly within your lawful EEZ, or exclusive economic zone.’ These are the kinds of things [that impinge on national sovereignty].

“I remember, Ken, back to my days as a young cadet [studying at West Point]. There are two things we need to evaluate: capability and intent. You [Pak Yahya] talked about the Chinese capability growing. It’s a big country. They are determined to be the leaders in AI, the leaders in blockchain, the leaders in the fastest and best missile systems. They’re putting nuclear silos in at a rate of one a week. This is a country with true capacity built up. Then you look at intention. You can see what they’re doing with One Belt, One Road. The work they’re doing to exercise economic coercion in these places. And so we know we have a threat.

“This is going to require collective action from what I think of as ‘the West.’ This is not a location, it’s not even a direction. It’s an idea: an idea about sovereignty and the rule of law and the capacity of like-minded nations who share those civilizational values to work together to push back against the threats to those very values. If we don’t, if we all decide ‘You know what? We’ll let them do Southeast Asia first. It won’t hit Hawaii for a little while.’ This is bad for America and it’s certainly bad for the region and the world.”

When Kenneth Weinstein asked for his response, the NU General Secretary replied: “I could not agree more with what Secretary Pompeo just said. It is time for us to have a substantial conversation about this issue. Various significant actors, necessary actors, tend to hold themselves back from the issue and try to avoid it. This is not the right attitude. We need to have a serious, open discussion about this and try to find a path towards a solution.”

[View the entire conversation.](#)