



The Ashoka Approach

“The ‘Ashoka Approach’ and Indonesian Leadership in the Movement for Pluralist Re-Awakening in South and Southeast Asia”

JAKARTA, Indonesia and NEW DELHI, India — Leaders of Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama, the world’s largest Muslim organization, are working to consolidate South and Southeast Asia as an alternate pillar of support for a rules-based international order founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being. Integral to this effort is a regional strategy called the “Ashoka Approach,” which seeks to reawaken the ancient spiritual, cultural, and socio-political heritage of the Indianized cultural sphere, or “Indosphere” — a civilizational zone that pioneered, long before the West, key concepts and practices of religious pluralism and tolerance.

Roughly co-extensive with South and Southeast Asia, the Indosphere is a vast geographic and cultural zone stretching from Pakistan to Indonesia, which was formatively and permanently shaped by the great spiritual traditions — particularly Hinduism and Buddhism — that originated in the Indian subcontinent.

On Friday, April 1, 2022, India’s ambassador to the Republic of Indonesia [met with](#) Nahdlatul Ulama Chairman KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf to discuss cooperation intended to foster peace and security within the region, as well as collaboration between civil society organizations in the world’s largest and third largest democracies. Their meeting followed a series of extensive back-channel discussions held in India and Indonesia regarding Nahdlatul Ulama’s [Humanitarian Islam](#) movement and the Ashoka Approach.

“With closer cooperation between NU and religious communities in India,” Mr. Staquf remarked, “we can make a significant contribution to resolving problems throughout the region — not only between nation states, but also problems that arise between different elements within their respective societies.”

Mr. Staquf added that cooperation between Nahdlatul Ulama and India’s religious communities would be beneficial not only for Indonesia and India, but could also be expanded to neighboring countries — such as Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia and others — via deliberate strategies capable of engaging and inspiring the deeply religious inhabitants of these nations.

Following their meeting at Nahdlatul Ulama headquarters, Indian Ambassador Manoj Kumar Bharti described Mr. Staquf’s vision for the Indo-Pacific region as “a very wise approach — employing a unique strategy to unite all of us on the basis of the culture and traditions associated with any given religion. I understand that this strategy is called the ‘Ashoka Approach.’”

Ambassador Bharti told journalists covering the [meeting](#) that he regards Mr. Staquf’s and Nahdlatul Ulama’s achievements as extraordinary. India, the ambassador continued, will cooperate in realizing the concept and vision outlined by Mr. Staquf and the NU Central Board.

The civilizational heritage and strategy underlying the “Ashoka Approach” is described at length in an article authored by Timothy Samuel Shah and C. Holland Taylor, published in *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* in June 2021. The 9,000-word essay is titled, “The ‘Ashoka Approach’ and Indonesian Leadership in the Movement for Pluralist Re-Awakening in South and Southeast Asia.”

As the article states:

This strategy seeks to reawaken the ancient spiritual, cultural, and socio-political heritage associated with Ashoka, Emperor of the Maurya Dynasty on the Indian subcontinent from 268 to 232 BCE. During the course of his reign the Buddhist Ashoka came to renounce armed conquest and thereafter championed compassion, extensive dialogue and interchange among followers of diverse spiritual paths, inter-faith tolerance, mutual understanding, and respect for the dignity inherent in others. These ideas contributed to the emergence of a civilizational worldview that came to be shared by peoples and cultures throughout much of South and Southeast Asia, thereby fostering an “Indianized” civilizational sphere that overlaps with a geographical region that some scholars have referred to as the “Indosphere.” An alternative label for this region (one less conventional but perhaps also less likely to be misinterpreted) might be the “Ashoka-sphere.” This region is a civilizational zone that pioneered, long before the West, key concepts and practices of religious pluralism.

Today the “Ashoka-sphere” contains over 2.5 billion people, or more than one-third of the earth’s population. It is home to two emerging global powers, India and Indonesia, which are also two of the world’s most remarkable experiments in multicultural, multi-religious democracy. It boasts the world’s greatest religious diversity, with far more Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists than any other region. In fact, all the world’s Hindu-majority countries and Buddhist-majority countries (save one, Mongolia), and the four nations with the world’s largest Muslim populations (Indonesia, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) are located within this region....

Humanitarian Islam leaders — including NU General [Chairman] KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf and Indonesia’s Minister of Religious Affairs, H. Yaqut Cholil Qoumas — maintain that in order to engage in political, economic, and civilizational dialogue on the basis of equality, the nations of South and Southeast Asia must rediscover their shared civilizational legacy, whose cultural and spiritual heritage is equal to those of the “Sinosphere,” Europe, and the Middle East. By re-enlivening the region’s own spiritually informed and benevolent narratives regarding the nature of religious and cultural identity and inter-faith respect — as enshrined in Ashoka’s Major Rock Edicts and the teachings of Islam Nusantara — Humanitarian Islam and the Ashoka Approach seek to strengthen the region and enable it to resist both internal and external disruptive influences.

Building on their transformative work in support of religious pluralism in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama spiritual leaders are seeking to mobilize like-minded religious and political figures throughout South and Southeast Asia to foster a renewed appreciation for the spirituality and respect for pluralism that were once defining features of the Indianized (or perhaps, “Ashoka-ized”) cultural sphere, and forge concrete avenues of cooperation between profoundly spiritual and humanitarian expressions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Their explicit goal is for South and Southeast Asia to re-emerge as a cohesive, vital, and proactive civilizational sphere, which functions as a powerful, independent pillar of support for a rules-based international order founded upon shared civilizational values.

Historical Antecedents: The Indianized Cultural Sphere

Just as a complex mix of spiritual and philosophical currents in the West, unfolding over a period of centuries, yielded a robust vision of human dignity, equality and liberty — which, in turn, gave birth to constitutional democracy, religious freedom and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights — a parallel but much less known phenomenon occurred over a period of two millennia in South and Southeast Asia.

In the West, these historical developments are inseparable from major currents within Christianity, Judaism and Graeco-Roman civilization. During the first millennium BCE, a profound spiritual awakening occurred at the geographical center of ancient Brahmanism in northern India and gradually spread throughout neighboring regions — through a process of socio-economic, spiritual and cultural diffusion, rather than military conquest — to create what scholars describe as “the Indianized cultural sphere.”

As the preeminent French expert on Southeast Asian archaeology and history, George Coedès (1886 – 1969), wrote in his seminal work, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*:

We are struck by the fundamental difference of the results obtained in the countries of the Far East by the civilizing activity of China and India.

The reason for this lies in the radical difference in the methods of colonization employed by the Chinese and the Indians. The Chinese proceeded by conquest and annexation; soldiers occupied the country, and officials spread Chinese civilization. Indian penetration or infiltration seems almost always to have been peaceful; nowhere was it accompanied by the destruction that brought dishonor to the Mongol expansion or the Spanish conquest of America. Far from being destroyed by the conquerors, the native peoples of Southeast Asia found in Indian society, transplanted and modified, a framework within which their own society could be integrated and developed.

The Indians nowhere engaged in military conquest and annexation in the name of a state or mother country. And the Indian kingdoms that were set up in Farther India during the first centuries of the Christian Era had only ties of tradition with the dynasties reigning in India proper; there was no political dependence. The exchanges of embassies between the two shores of the Bay of Bengal were made on the basis of equality, while the Chinese always demanded that the “southern barbarians” acknowledge suzerainty by the regular sending of tribute.

The Chinese commanderies of Vietnam were administered by Chinese governors, while the Indian kingdoms of Farther India were governed by independent sovereigns of native origin or of mixed blood advised by Indian or Indianized counselors whose activity was chiefly cultural.

Thus, although China exercised a more or less successful political guardianship over these countries for centuries, her civilization did not spread beyond the area of her military conquests. The peaceful penetration of the Indians, on the other hand, from the beginning extended to the limits of their commercial navigations.

The countries conquered militarily by China had to adopt or copy her institutions, her customs, her religions, her language, and her writing. By contrast, those which India conquered peacefully preserved the essentials of their individual cultures and developed them, each

according to its own genius. It is this that explains the differentiation, and in a certain measure the originality, of the Khmer, Cham, and Javanese civilizations, in spite of their common Indian origin.

[Read the complete essay](#)