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Australia and Indonesia 'like two porcupines'

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Jakarta: Australia's relationship with Indonesia is like that of two porcupines in the middle of a cold night, according to a senior adviser to the government of Indonesian President Joko Widodo.

Hasjim Djalal, a senior adviser to the Minister for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, said the two countries hug when the night is cold, move away when they hurt each other and then try to get close again.

Mr Hasjim named two recurring problems in the relationship: Papua and the Maritime Boundary Treaty in the oil and gas-rich Timor Gap, which was meant to finalise the maritime border between Indonesia and Australia.

"I think Indonesia has given a lot to Australia . . . we reached agreement on maritime boundaries in the Arafura Sea, we cooperate a lot on the management of Arafura Sea and Timor Sea and so forth, but there are two problems that continue to come to the picture," Mr Hasjim told a forum on foreign policy.

"One is Indonesian territorial unity in the sense that ... the Papua issue always comes and goes, comes and goes, comes and goes."

Australia recognises Indonesian sovereignty over West Papua but the separatist movement there is an extremely sensitive topic in Indonesia, with many seeing parallels between West Papua and East Timor, which won independence with the support of Australia in 2002.

In 2006 Indonesia recalled its ambassador to Australia after 42 West Papuan asylum seekers who claimed they were threatened by the military were granted temporary protection visas in Australia.

And Mr Hasjim said Indonesia had still not ratified the Maritime Boundary Agreement, even though it was signed in 1997.

"Indonesia apparently has difficulty in ratifying the agreement because some of them feel they have been outsmarted by Australia and given too much to Australia beyond what they feel should have been the agreement. The agreement has been signed in 1997 but no one is willing to submit it to parliament and parliamentarians are likely to raise some kind of difficulties with it."

Mr Hasjim said better relationships would have to be developed so "that it will not be again like two porcupines in the middle of a cold night".

Dino Djalal, a former Indonesian ambassador to the US and founder of the Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia, said the two countries had just gone through a difficult phase in their relationship following the executions of Bali nine pair Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran.

"I know it's a very emotional issue in Australia and Indonesia also," he said.

However Dr Dino said the countries had proven that bilateral relations could withstand this shock.

"If you ask me what is key, the driver of contoured relationships would always have to be the personal relationships between the two leaders," Dr Dino said.

"I think the closeness between [then president] SBY [Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono] and John Howard and the closeness between SBY and Kevin Rudd made all the difference in redefining the relationship and guiding it through difficult times."

Prime Minister Tony Abbott's comments linking the \$1 billion in aid Indonesia was given after the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami and the Bali nine executions inflamed tensions between the two countries.

"It's absolutely necessary for President Jokowi and Prime Minister Tony Abbott to have close relations, I

would say close personal relations," Dr Dino said.

"If we can achieve that I think it would make a lot of difference in how we take our relations forward."

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/world/australia-and-indonesia-like-two-porcupines-20150819-gj300o.html>