Our relationship with Indonesia is sometimes like a rollercoaster.

Aid cooperation after a tsunami and an earthquake put the relationship on an up. The Corby case and Abu Bakar Bashir's release sent it down.

Prime Minister John Howard and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono enjoy a warm relationship, but Indonesia recalled its ambassador when we gave visas to 42 Papuans.

Our security forces work closely to catch terrorists, but were close to armed conflict over East Timor.

But is the ride really so wild? Take the meeting on Batam between Howard and Yudhoyono that led to the announcement that the rift caused by the Papuans and the Bashir release had been resolved.

The latest crisis in Indonesian-Australia relations was over, we were told.

Except there never was a crisis. The reconciliation required nothing: no agreement was signed, no land ceded, compensation paid or prisoners swapped because there was never any real split between the two governments.

The letters exchanged between the leaders before Batam make this clear. They agree Bashir is a threat, but also that his release was a matter for Indonesia's legal process.

Indonesia's sovereignty over Papua is supported by Australia but the granting of visas to 42 Papuans was a matter for Australian legal process.

So where was the bilateral crisis that hogged headlines for weeks and resulted in the recall of the Indonesian ambassador?

The answer is that it was a largely symbolic exercise for the benefit of politicians in both countries.

Politicians from both countries sometimes can't help playing the nationalist card.

Spats between Australia and Indonesia have been common since overt political repression ended in Indonesia in 1998 and they will continue in the future.

This shouldn't surprise us or concern us too much.

Indonesia's democratisation and the diverse political debate it created make more opportunities for differences of opinion, but also make it easier to solve them.

Most links between the two countries, whether in education, security, business or culture are left largely undisturbed and that is good for both.

Australian Federal Police have been criticised in Australia for co-operating with Indonesian police because of the Bali Nine arrests in Indonesia.

But that same co-operation has been highly effective in helping Indonesian police catch hundreds of terrorists who have attacked Australians in Bali and Jakarta.

And as East Timor is becoming Australia's problem rather than a flashpoint between us, the government-to-government relationship has rarely been as strong.
This is because the bilateral relationship now has the "ballast" former foreign minister Gareth Evans always said it needed.

THIS is made up mainly of a relatively small group of public servants and private citizens on both sides who have a professional or personal reason to value the relationship between our “odd couple” countries.

This includes institutional links and person-to-person relationships in business, education, aid or the arts.

These are resilient enough to survive bilateral tiffs because they are based on the understanding and, often, sympathy and affection that direct contact delivers.

So why do we have any problems at all?

The reason is most Indonesians and Australians have no personal or professional connection with the other country.

Many are, at best, ambivalent, even confused, about each other.

Above all, they are deeply suspicious. Their perceptions are often dominated by anger, hostility, contempt and fear, are malicious in expression and are often wildly inaccurate in content.

And they are easily inflamed by lazy and uninformed journalists and by irresponsible politicians looking for a populist can to kick.

So, buckle up and brace yourself for continued bilateral crises for the foreseeable future. But don't worry too much about it.

Most will not lead to real conflict and many will be healthy signs of a relationship slowly developing the sort of depth and complexity that it should have had decades ago.

The truth is, we are not on a rollercoaster, it's just that the road forward has a lot of speed humps.

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