

Ukraine Crisis: Implications for ASEAN's Maritime Security

Apila Sangtam

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine has impacted the maritime security environment in distant geographic regions such as Southeast Asia. The geopolitical anxieties generated amongst member States of ASEAN from this conflict have exacerbated extant levels of concern over Beijing's expansive maritime territorial claims in the South China Sea (SCS), with other claimant States becoming significantly more worried about the possibility of similar Chinese maritime aggression. The succeeding paragraphs offer an analysis of the challenges that could confront maritime Southeast Asia as a result of a potential change in world order wrought by the Russia-Ukraine armed conflict.

ASEAN's response to this armed conflict has typically been a divided one, with Vietnam and Laos abstaining, and the remaining nations voting for the UNGA resolution condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine. This is not the first time that the ASEAN has been unable to take a clear position on a global dispute or conflict. ASEAN's inability to take a clear stand throughout the Cold War¹ between the United States and Soviet Union is a case in point. ASEAN's fractured approach to China's claims in South China Sea, too, is telling. In the South China Sea case, only a few of the member States of ASEAN — such as Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei, and the Philippines — have a territorial dispute with China, while others such as Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, are neither a party to the dispute nor have had any direct confrontation with China. This has resulted in ASEAN as a collective being unable to address China with a united and uniform voice.

ASEAN's history of being unable to take a firm position is repeating itself in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This article will critically analyse maritime Southeast Asia's response to the conflict in Ukraine and the challenges it might face with a potential change in world order.

Southeast Asia's Response to the Ukraine Crisis

In the recent UN General Assembly resolution against the Ukraine invasion, a total of 141 countries voted in favour of the resolution. Five countries — Belarus, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (commonly referred-to as North Korea), Eritrea, Russia, and Syria — voted against it, while

¹ Aristyo Rizka Darmawan, "ASEAN's Dilemma in the South China Sea", Asia & The Pacific Policy Society, (2021). <https://www.policyforum.net/aseans-dilemma-in-the-south-china-sea/>

35 abstained. Among the countries of Southeast Asia, Vietnam, and Laos, which have historically been aligned to Russia, abstained, while the rest voted in favour of the resolution.²

Vietnam. Vietnam abstained from voting against the Ukraine invasion primarily because of its close security ties with Moscow. Among Southeast Asian nations, Vietnam is the largest buyer of arms from Russia, spending about \$1.7 billion, which, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, 2016-2020), accounts for 5.9% of Russia's 20% share of global weapons sales.³ Further, Vietnam is overwhelmingly dependent on Russia's legacy weapons and technology. With an anticipated GDP increase of 7% in 2022, Vietnam is expected to continue to procure more arms — a trend that is reinforced by Vietnam's declared objective of building a formidable military by 2025.⁴ In the same vein, it is also theorised that Vietnam is interested in acquiring the Brahmos Missile — a joint venture between India and Russia — Russian wariness against upsetting China notwithstanding.⁵ However, Vietnam's reasons for abstention extend beyond solely military considerations. Russia is Comprehensive Strategic Partner of Vietnam. Moscow's trade with Hanoi has increased 7% from 2019, reaching US\$ 4.05 billion in 2020. In addition, Russia plans to increase its energy business in Vietnam. *“Russian state-owned oil and gas producer, Zarubezhneft, has reportedly agreed to buy out shareholdings in two offshore exploration and development projects in Vietnam from its compatriot Rosneft, along with offshore gas and condensate pipeline via Vietsovpetro, its joint venture with PetroVietnam. It is estimated that Vietsovpetro produces one-third of Vietnam's oil.”*⁶ The two countries are also planning to launch the *“Azov-Haiphong Sea line by 2024 and develop port terminals that would facilitate civilian cargo transport.”*⁷ At the level of grand strategy, too, it is crucial for Vietnam that Russia continues to act as a buffer against China in the South China Sea. China invaded Vietnam in 1979 on behalf of the Khmer Rouge⁸ and Hanoi most certainly does not want to see history repeating itself. All this makes Russian goodwill indispensable to Hanoi. Overall, the military balance in the South China Sea is a delicate matter for all concerned and the underlying cause for many a maritime strategic decision or abstention, as the case may be.

² The United Nations, “General Assembly Resolution Demands End to Russian offensive in Ukraine”, 02 March 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113152>

³ “Infographic: Which Countries Buy the Most Russian Weapons?”, Aljazeera, 09 March 2022.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/9/infographic-which-countries-buy-the-most-russian-weapons>

⁴ The Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the Kingdom of Norway, “Press Briefing on the Outcomes of the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam”. <https://vnembassy-oslo.mofa.gov.vn/en-us/News/EmbassyNews/Pages/Press-briefing-on-the-outcomes-of-the-13th-National-Congress-of-the-Communist-Party-of-Viet-Nam.aspx>

⁵ Carlyle A Thayer, “Russia: A Military Base at Cam Ranh Bay?”, Chennai Centre for China Studies, 27 February 2017. <https://www.c3sindia.org/geopolitics-strategy/russia-a-military-base-at-cam-ranh-bay-by-carlyle-a-thayer/>

⁶ Nikola Mikovic, “Russia and Vietnam: An Alliance of Convenience”, Lowy Institute, 02 August 2021.

<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/russia-and-vietnam-alliance-convenience>

⁷ Mikovic, *ibid*

⁸ Hai Hong Nguyen, “Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: The Diplomatic Dilemma Facing Vietnam”, *The Diplomat*, 04 March 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/russias-invasion-of-ukraine-the-diplomatic-dilemma-facing-vietnam/>

Singapore. Standing strikingly apart from its ASEAN counterparts, Singapore has strongly condemned Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine, following up the condemnation with sanctions.⁹ This is not the first time Singapore has taken a clear anti-Russian stance — in 2005, too, it opposed Russia's entry into the East Asia Summit (EAS).

Stating that while they “*value their good relations with Russia and the Russian people*”, Singaporean Foreign Affairs Minister, Vivian Balakrishnan, had declared in no uncertain terms of censure that “*small countries must avoid becoming sacrificial pawns, vassal states or ‘cat’s paws’ to be used by one side against the other.*” He went on to assert that Singapore will not accept such flagrant violations of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of another sovereign State.¹⁰ Singapore has announced sanctions on certain Russian banks and financial transactions connected to Russia and blocked all crypto transactions with Russia, despite criticism of these actions by the Russian envoy.¹¹ The Singapore Government, through the Singapore Red Cross, also announced a contribution of US\$100,000 to humanitarian operations in Ukraine.

Philippines. The Philippines voted against Russia in the UNGA resolution condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Philippine's statement at the Emergency Special Session of the UNGA on Ukraine is, however, tellingly indicative of reluctance on the part of Manila to go the full distance in terms of alienating Russia. Despite unequivocally condemning the invasion of Ukraine and the consequent violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and calling for “*massive assistance commensurate with the growing humanitarian crisis*”, the statement does not include the word “Russia” anywhere, nor does it make any direct call for action from Russia. The statement ends with an urgent appeal to “*resort to the 1982 Manila Declaration on Peaceful Settlement of International Disputes.*”

Former President Rodrigo Duterte, in power from 2016-2022, had maintained and advocated closer ties with China and Russia while distancing itself from the United States, its former colonial power.¹² Duterte's successor, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., has adopted a far more conciliatory stand towards Washington DC, but it is widely felt that that his pro-US stance is unlikely to last¹³ beyond the Ukraine crisis. Adding to the confusion evident in Manila is the fact that after initially ignoring

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, “Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan's Ministerial Statement on the Situation in Ukraine and its Implications”, 28 February 2022. <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2022/02/20220228-Ministerial-Statement>

¹⁰ “In Full: Vivian Balakrishnan's ministerial statement on Russia's invasion of Ukraine”, *Channel News Asia*, 08 February 2022. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/singapore-ukraine-crisis-russia-sanction-vivian-balakrishnan-ministerial-statementfull-2525281>

¹¹ “Russian Envoy to Singapore Criticises Decision to Impose Sanctions over Ukraine”, *The Straits Times*, 12 March 2022. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/russian-envoy-to-singapore-criticises-decision-to-impose-sanctions-over-ukraine>

¹² Manuel Mogato, “Exclusive: Philippines Could Breach US Sanctions if Russia Arms Deal Proceeds” *Reuters*, 18 July 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-defence-usa-russia-exclus-idUSKBN1K817L>

¹³ Richard Heydarian, “Marcos Jr. is putting on a Deceptive New Front”, *International Politics and Society (IPS)*, 07 October 2022. <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/foreign-and-security-policy/marcos-jr-is-putting-on-a-deceptive-new-front-6236/>

appeals from Ukraine and stating quite unequivocally that the Philippines would continue to buy 16 Russian Mi-17 helicopters and had no plans to scrap the deal, Manila did, indeed, scrap the deal!¹⁴

Manila's unwillingness to take an unequivocal and strong anti-Russian stance also probably has much to do with the Russia-Philippine's trade flow.¹⁵ Russian goods in the Philippine market moved to 44.8% in 2021, up from 32.4% in 2020. Further, 50% of Manila's steel billets¹⁶ come from Russia.

Indonesia. Indonesia reluctantly voted for the UN resolution condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo called for a ceasefire and appealed for a resolution through dialogue rather than economic sanctions, seeking to uphold the principles of the UN Charter.

Indonesia's reluctance to outrightly condemn the invasion fits well within its historical policy of non-alliance.¹⁷ However, it is also likely that the primary reason for Jakarta's weak response to the Ukraine invasion is because of Indonesia and Russia's consistently increasing economic and defence ties. Trade between the nations in 2021, generating US\$ 1.49 billion and US\$ 680.98 million for Indonesia and Russia respectively, is anticipated to grow to 50% in 2022.¹⁸ In late 2021, a partnership was announced between Indonesia's national energy company, Pertamina, and Russia's Rosneft to develop an oil refinery and petrochemical complex in Tuban, East Java — a deal that is reportedly worth US \$14 billion. In addition, according to SIPRI,¹⁹ about 15.7% of Indonesian weaponry is Russian made. In December 2021, *"Jakarta hosted the first-ever joint maritime exercise between Russia and ASEAN."*²⁰

Not surprisingly, Indonesia's somewhat passive stance in the Russia-Ukraine conflict has raised questions about its commitment to "independent and active policy." As a middle power, Indonesia is capable of shaping the international order and is, therefore, expected to take a strong position in matters such as the Russian invasion. If Indonesia holds back, strategic initiatives for building peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region, such as the 4th ASEAN-Russia Summit,²¹ are at risk.

¹⁴ Voice of America News, quoting Associated Press (AP), "Philippines Scraps Russian Chopper Deal".

<https://www.voanews.com/a/ap-exclusive-philippines-scraps-russian-chopper-deal/6675487.html>

¹⁵ Lee Allen, "Sanctions on Russia to Push Philippines to Buy More SE Asia Steel Billet", *Fastmarkets*, 08 March 2022.

<https://www.fastmarkets.com/insights/sanctions-on-russia-to-push-philippines-to-buy-more-se-asia-steel-billet-sources-say>

¹⁶ Steel that has been freshly made and is still in the form of a rectangle or a metal bar, is referred to as 'steel billets'.

¹⁷ This was a policy adopted by Indonesia's President Sukarno in 1949 to hold a neutral position between USA and the Soviet bloc during the Cold War.

¹⁸ Russia Briefing, "Russian – Indonesian Trade Up 50% in 2022". <https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/russian-indonesian-trade-up-50-in-2022.html/>

¹⁹ Shotaro Tani and Koya Jibiki, "Indonesia's Jokowi Calls for Cease-Fire in Russia-Ukraine War", *Nikkei Asia*, 09 March 2022. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/Indonesia-s-Jokowi-calls-for-cess-fire-in-Russia-Ukraine-war>

²⁰ Reuters, "Russia Southeast Asia Conclude First Joint Naval Exercise", 04 December 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/02/world/asia/asia-russia-ukraine-war.html>

²¹ President of Russia, "Joint Statement of the 4th ASEAN-Russia Summit: Building a Peaceful, Stable and Sustainable Region", 28 October 2021. <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5725>

Jakarta's seeming passivity begs the question of whether, in the event that China attacks smaller nations like Taiwan, Jakarta will remain silent.

Malaysia. Much like Indonesia, Malaysia voted in favour of the UN resolution condemning Russia but has refused to put sanctions on Russia. Malaysia's Foreign Minister, Saifuddin Abdullah, stated that Malaysia could not agree to unilateral sanctions²² on principle. Nik Mohamed Rashid Nik Zurin, a former special officer to a Deputy Defence Minister, suggested "*banning Russian firms from upcoming arms exhibitions such as Defence Security Asia (DSA2022) and future Langkawi International Maritime Aerospace (LIMA) exhibitions.*" European partners have asked Malaysia to take a clearer stance, but so far, the Malaysians have not explicitly condemned the invasion and have maintained held a more nuanced stance, probably so that the country's their trade relationship with Russia (Malaysia is one of Russia's Top 30 trading partners).²³

Myanmar. Myanmar, surprisingly, voted in favour of the UN resolution and stands in solidarity with the people of Ukraine.²⁴ It must, however, be noted that the nation remains in a state of emergency following a February 2021 coup, in which the Myanmar's democratically elected leaders were deposed by the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military) which then vested power in a military junta. "*Myanmar's vote was lodged by its Permanent Representative, who does not represent the junta.*"²⁵ On the other hand, General Zaw Min Tun, a Burmese military council spokesperson representing the junta, made a clear statement supporting Russian President Vladimir Putin's actions in Ukraine. This is unsurprising because Russia was amongst the few nations that supported the military junta in the February 2021 coup. According to UN experts, Russian fighter jets and armoured vehicles were used by the military junta against civilians during the military coup.²⁶ Following the coup, the relationship between Myanmar and Russia has strengthened significantly. On 29 October 2021, the two sides discussed an "*exchange of maritime technology and information and technical cooperation to build warships. The 'Gremyashiy', a Russian frigate, with 115 Russian military personnel on board arrived at Thilawa Port on October 28 and remained there for three days.... Russia has also promised to continue cooperation with Myanmar's military in the fields of defence, science, and technology.*"²⁷

In summary, it is clear that the UNGA vote does not reflect Myanmar's relationship with Russia or its position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

²² Suganya Lingan, "Malaysia says it Won't Sanction Russia for Invading Ukraine", Benar News, 08 March 2022. <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/malaysia-wont-sanction-russia-over-ukraine-03082022150416.html>

²³ Keertan Ayamany and Ashman Adam, "Here's How the Russia-Ukraine Conflict Affects Malaysia and Why We Should Care", *Yahoo!news*, 26 February 2022. <https://malaysia.news.yahoo.com/russia-ukraine-conflict-affects-malaysia-225125595.html>

²⁴ United Nations, "General Assembly Overwhelmingly Adopts Resolution Demanding Russian Federation Immediately End Illegal Use of Force in Ukraine, Withdraw All Troops", 02 March 2022. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2022/ga12407.doc.htm>

²⁵ Sussannah Patton, "Reading Southeast Asia on Ukraine", *Lowy Institute*, 07 March 2022. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/reading-southeast-asia-ukraine>

²⁶ "China, Russia Arming Myanmar Junta, UN Expert Says" *DW*, 22 Feb 2022. <https://www.dw.com/en/china-russia-arming-myanmar-junta-un-expert-says/a-60868089>

²⁷ "Myanmar and Russia's Close Post-Coup Relationship", *The Irrawaddy*, 02 November 2021. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/myanmar-and-russias-close-post-coup-relationship.html>

Brunei Darussalam. Brunei Darussalam's response to the UNGA resolution against Russia is quite clearly encapsulated in its statement that the Sultanate “condemns any violation of sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of any country” and urges the parties to “settle all differences by peaceful means, without resorting to the threat or use of force, following the UN Charter and international law, in the interest of maintaining international peace and stability.”²⁸ The most revealing aspect of this statement is that the nation has communicated its position without naming Russia.

Laos. Like Vietnam, Laos, too, abstained from the UN resolution against Russia’s invasion. Both nations have deep historical ties and a compelling military dependency on Russia. 44% of Laos’s military equipment comes from Russia. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Laos has called for the utmost restraint from all parties.²⁹

Cambodia and Thailand. Both these nations have voted in favour of the resolution. However, both nations have said that condemning Russia is not the solution and that the conflict must be resolved only through negotiation. Cambodia’s vote also reflects its trade dependency on China and a reluctance to come out in clear opposition to China’s position vis-à-vis Russia, which has consistently led to “Phnom Penh’s history of acting as a proxy for Beijing’s positions in multilateral forums.”³⁰

Timor-Leste. This tiny nation, which has, for the past two decades been aspiring to become a full member of ASEAN, took a clear and brave stance through its outright condemnation of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In taking a strong position, Timor Leste is finding its international voice and validating its credentials as the only ‘free’ country in Southeast Asia.³¹

ASEAN’s response to the Ukraine Crisis. Over the years, ASEAN-Russia maritime cooperation has increased steadily. In December of 2021, Russia and the ASEAN conducted their first joint naval exercises in the South China Sea, marking a new security dimension in the region and sending a signal to China and AUKUS, the new military partnership between Australia, the UK and the US.³² The deepening ties between ASEAN and Russia are evident in the statement issued from the Russia-ASEAN Summit in 2021, ensuring maritime connectivity, freedom of shipping and unimpeded commerce to promote economic growth. One must note, however, that Russia’s economic commitment to the ASEAN now stands somewhat impeded due to the sanctions imposed by nations such as the US, the UK, and Canada.

²⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Brunei Darussalam (2022), “Brunei Darussalam’s Statement on the Situation in Ukraine”, 26 February 2022.

²⁹ “All Parties Involved Must Seek Peaceful Solution in Russia-Ukraine Conflict, says Laos”, *The Star*, 27 February 2022. <https://www.thestar.com.my/aseanplus/aseanplus-news/2022/02/27/all-parties-involved-must-seek-peaceful-solution-in-russia-ukraine-conflict-says-laos>

³⁰ Sussannah Patton, “Reading Southeast Asia on Ukraine”, *Lowy Institute*, 07 March 2022. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/reading-southeast-asia-ukraine>

³¹ Andrea Fahey, “The Ukraine Crisis and Timor-Leste”, *Lowy Institute*, 07 March 2022. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/ukraine-crisis-and-timor-leste>

³² Dimitri Simes Jr., “1st ASEAN-Russia Navy Drills Send Messages on AUKUS, China”, *Nikkei Asia*, 01 December 2021. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/1st-ASEAN-Russia-navy-drills-send-messages-on-AUKUS-China>

Under the current chairmanship of the King of Cambodia, ASEAN has expressed a position condemning the war on Ukraine, albeit without naming Russia. ASEAN has expectedly appealed for maximum restraint to be exercised by all relevant parties and the resolution of the conflict through dialogue.

In summary, ASEAN's main concerns remain threats to maritime security, and the preservation of its centrality. The primary question then becomes, with the economic, military, and diplomatic consequences of its war on Ukraine, can Moscow still provide security to ASEAN member States?

Concluding Remarks

Implication of the Ukraine Crisis on the Maritime Space of Southeast Asia. While Ukraine's invasion has provided the West with a common new purpose and enabled the generation of a unified stand, the member States of ASEAN remain mired in ambiguity and uncertainty, as they have often been in the past as well. Most Southeast Asian nations avoided the use of "Russia" and "invasion" in their statements and have only called for peaceful dialogue and negotiation. The restraint in the ASEAN response is evidence of the close ties between Russia and several key ASEAN members.

Besides economic, infrastructure, energy, and military dependencies upon Russia, members of the Southeast Asian political elite tend to look up to Putin as a strong leader who has the courage and wherewithal to rally nations against a US-led world order. Major General Zaw Min Tun, the spokesman for the Myanmar junta, told *The New York Times* that Moscow had "*done its part to maintain its sovereignty,*" and that the attack was "*the right thing to do.*" Despite warnings, Russia has continued to sell arms to Myanmar after the coup, even as a humanitarian crisis unfolds.³³ The former Philippine president, Rodrigo Duterte, had hailed Putin as his "favourite hero." Cambodia's Prime Minister, Hun Sen, awarded the Russian leader with an "Order of Friendship."

While evaluating ASEAN's response to the Russian invasion as a whole, besides the above factors, it is important to consider the micro-motivations of individual member nations and the macro-motivation of Chinese influence in the theatre. Vietnam's energy security in the oil and gas sector is deeply intertwined with that of Russia. Some of their joint projects fall in the disputed South China Sea region, which perforce creates a dependence on Hanoi's capacity for maritime defence.

In Myanmar's case, although the big companies like Total, Chevron Mitsubishi, Petronas have withdrawn their gas projects in Myanmar, after the military coup, Russia's Rosneft announced plans for exploration in Myanmar.³⁴ Similarly, "*Thailand's state-owned energy company, PTT Exploration and*

³³ Sui-Lee Wee, Emily Schmall, and Sameer Yasir, "We Are on Our Side: Across Asia, a Mixed Reaction to Ukraine War", 02 March 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/02/world/asia/asia-russia-ukraine-war.html>

³⁴ "Russia's Rosneft Plans Oil Exploration Well in Myanmar in 2021", *Reuters*, 30 April 2021. <https://news.trust.org/item/20210430113331-2gr63>

*Production (PTTEP), has announced its intention to bid for the Yadana gas field in Myanmar*³⁵ Both these developments have reduced Myanmar's need to fall in line with the western response to Russia. In fact, the sanctions imposed by the West in response to the military coup have only driven Myanmar to cooperate even further with Russia in oil and gas exploration.

A similar situation can be seen in Indonesia, with *“the PT Pertamina Rosneft Processing and Petrochemical which is a joint venture (JV) of Indonesia’s state-run oil and gas company Pertamina (55%) and Russian energy company Rosneft (45%).”*³⁶

Moving on to the Philippines, it would be recalled that in 2018, Manila and Beijing had agreed to work on joint oil and gas exploration in the contested waters of the South China Sea, without addressing the issue of sovereignty. In recent news reported by the South China Sea Morning Post, President Duterte had warned the new Philippine leader to honour a joint exploration agreement with Beijing or face conflict.³⁷ While time will tell where the new Philippine leader stands, it would not be unreasonable to conclude that with the commitments currently in place, Manila will also fall in line with an anti-West — and therefore pro-Russia and consequently pro-China — leaning.

All this notwithstanding, member States of ASEAN would be well served by a critical evaluation of the lessons that Ukraine has learned. Despite humanitarian support and military equipment as well as the imposition of sanctions from major world powers such as the US, the UK and Canada, Ukraine stands alone in its own defence against the Russian invasion. How then, would a small Southeast Asian nation fare in the face of a Russia-backed Chinese invasion? Such an event would mark a seismic shift in the entire geopolitical order, with Moscow wielding a greater influence in Asia. It would bring the global power balance closer to Putin's goal of pushing back Western influence in what it continues to call the Asia-Pacific region. Russia will then have the potential to build a greater Eurasia that would include an Eastern Economic Forum, the expansion of SCO, maintain focus on a Eurasian Economic Union and ASEAN.

So, the question remains, is an alignment towards Russia or at least a pro-Russia leaning the right strategic position for ASEAN? It is clear that ASEAN needs to align with one or the other major global power for strategic and security reasons. Most of its member nations have most certainly done so in the past, each choosing a partnership between the West or Russia. Given Russia's support for ASEAN centrality and unity, its security cooperation, and its active participation in various ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), Russia may appear to be

³⁵ Scarlett Evans, “Thailand’s PTTEP Launches Bid to Take Over Myanmar Gas Project”, *Offshore Technology*, 11 February 2022. <https://www.offshore-technology.com/news/thailands-pttep-launches-bid-to-take-over-myanmar-gas-project/>

³⁶ “Tuban Oil Refinery and Petrochemical Complex”, *Hydrocarbons Technology*. <https://www.hydrocarbons-technology.com/projects/tuban-oil-refinery-and-petrochemical-complex/>

³⁷ Raissa Robles, “South China Sea: New Philippine Leader Must Honour Joint Exploration Agreement with Beijing or Face Conflict, says Duterte”, *South China Morning Post*, 09 March, 2022. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3169859/south-china-sea-new-philippine-leader-must-honour-joint/>

the more attractive strategic alignment. However, ASEAN needs to critically evaluate this conclusion, keeping in mind its stake in the South China Sea. Russia's reaffirmation of ASEAN centrality notwithstanding, the invasion of Ukraine and the global consequences to Russia as a result, bring Russia's capacity to assist — diplomatically, militarily, or economically — into question. To put it bluntly, if China were to attack Taiwan, a claimant in the South China Sea, would Russia truly be inclined or able to stand up in defence of Taiwan?

ASEAN must choose its alignment with care because a global gestalt is playing out in the Southeast Asian theatre — the global consequence of alignment being significantly greater than the sum of ASEAN member nations current trade, military, and energy security interests. While coming out in clear support of Russia would potentially result in Russian support should China assert dominance with regard to South China Sea sovereignty, the Russian invasion of Ukraine could also serve as a dangerous precedent for the Indo-Pacific region.

Either way, the Russia-Ukraine conflict opens up the Southeast Asian sub-regional space to hard geopolitical threats. ASEAN must protect its maritime boundaries by coherently reformulating its ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). ASEAN would do well to recall that the Treaty on the 'Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone' (also known as the SEANWFZ Treaty or the Bangkok Treaty), is yet to be signed by either Russia or China. While the Chairman's Statement³⁸ at the 36th ASEAN Summit, reiterated the commitment of ASEAN member States to preserving Southeast Asia as a region free of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, the statement seems more than a little hollow, given the current global dynamic.

Will Southeast Asia continue to juggle alignments between the major powers as it has done in the past? In the Southeast Asian theatre, Russia serves as a powerful counterbalance against China and the United States — but whether this remains true will depend upon the outcome of the invasion on Ukraine. Whether Russia wins or loses will serve as a tipping point in the global jockeying that is playing out in Southeast Asia.

While much remains unknown and much lies in the balance, a conclusion may be drawn that ASEAN must remain united in order to maintain its centrality and neutrality. ASEAN's failure to take a clear and unified position in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and its inability to broker a sensible Code of Conduct in the South China Sea put it at risk of becoming irrelevant and losing its power to be a catalyst for peace in the wider Indo-Pacific. Therefore, ASEAN's immediate and most strategic mandate must be to become a unified, clear, and powerful voice in the Southeast Asian theatre.

About the Author

³⁸ "Chairman's Statement the 4th ASEAN-Russia Summit to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of Dialogue Relations 28 October 2021", Brunei Darussalam. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/80.-Final-Chairmans-Statement-of-the-4th-ASEAN-Russia-Summit.pdf>

Apila Sangtam is an Associate Fellow at the National Maritime Foundation (NMF) New Delhi. Her area of research includes Maritime geostrategies of ASEAN and its member states, India-Vietnam relations, South China Sea, and the India-US Indo-Pacific policy. She can be reached at mongzar.apila@gmail.com