

## Article

# Southeast Asia and the Ukraine Crisis

Vinod Anand

### Abstract

*It might seem that Southeast Asia is largely unaffected by the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, however, this article opines that it cannot be said that the countries of the region remain isolated from its political and economic implications. The article argues that the impact of the strategic contestation between Russia and the US-led Western alliance in Ukraine and the ongoing US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, are being felt in the existing strategic dynamics in Southeast Asia as in other regions. With China supporting Russia on the Ukraine issue, some of the ASEAN states have become even more concerned about a plausible attempt by Beijing to consolidate its territorial expansion in the South China Sea or invade Taiwan. The regional states are also concerned about the rising costs of the conflict to their trade, tourism and oil dependent economies. The article analyses the varied responses of the regional states to the conflict with Singapore and Myanmar as the two extremes. Most of the other states have taken a middle position of neither supporting nor openly criticising Russia, and have called for a cessation and peaceful resolution of the conflict.*

**T**he Ukraine conflict and the still raging Covid-19 pandemic have become defining events of the geo-strategic and geo-economic disruptions in the international order. These two events have also brought to the fore the many schisms that exist in the multilateral and plurilateral organisations. These events have further highlighted that

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nation states often pursue their national interests in ways that may not be favourable to the world at large. Hoarding of vaccines by some developed countries and not sharing them with needy developing countries at the height of the Covid pandemic was one such example. The Ukraine conflict has not only caused immense suffering and devastation but also given rise to high inflation, low growth, as well as food and energy crises in almost every part of the world, including Southeast Asia. The response to the Ukraine conflict, in turn, has been conditioned by the geopolitical orientations of individual countries, their interests and the economic impact.

Though the Russia-Ukraine conflict theatre is quite distant from Southeast Asia it cannot, therefore, be said that these countries remain isolated from the political and economic impacts of the conflict. The ongoing strategic contestation between the US-led Trans-Atlantic alliance and Russia in Ukraine and the US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific theatre naturally find some reflections in the prevailing strategic dynamics in Southeast Asia. With China supporting Russia, some of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states have become even more apprehensive of China further consolidating its territorial expansion and military position in the South China Sea or invading Taiwan. The invitation to Japan, Australia, South Korea and New Zealand to the NATO Summit in June 2022 as key partners is a reflection of a strategic churning taking place as also the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific theatre, despite the Ukraine crisis. The ASEAN countries are not only being strongly impacted by the Ukraine crisis but also remain central to the emerging power play in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Geopolitical Responses**

The responses of the Southeast Asian countries have ranged from one end of the spectrum with Myanmar's unequivocal support to Russia to the other end wherein Singapore, Thailand and Cambodia condemned Russia's special operation against Ukraine. The Myanmar junta stated that Russia had "carried out what is justified for the sustainability of their country's sovereignty" and was in line with Russia's position as a world power.<sup>1</sup> The Myanmar military has been under US and Western sanctions from before the military coup of 1<sup>st</sup> Feb 2021 and thereafter additional sanctions have been imposed on the country. Therefore, it has been at the receiving end of US and the West's displeasure. On the other hand, Russia has been supplying weapons and defence equipment to the Myanmar military regularly. Myanmar military leaders have been visiting Russia to strengthen bilateral defence cooperation. Interestingly, Ukraine has

also been a supplier of defence equipment to Myanmar as they had signed a Military Technical Cooperation Agreement in 2018 and a limited number of light tanks, radar and surveillance systems, armoured personnel carriers and some weapons were supplied. However, after Ukraine voted in the UN General Assembly to ban arm sales to Myanmar in June 2021, such defence supplies were discontinued.

Russia and China have also helped Myanmar in the UN Security Council by preventing it from imposing sanctions or passing resolutions expressing concern, etc., against Myanmar military's humanitarian violations or for making limited progress on ASEAN's Five Point Consensus peace plan, by exercising their veto powers.<sup>2</sup> Earlier, on 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb 2021 Russia (and China) had blocked the UNSC from condemning Myanmar military for staging a coup two days earlier.<sup>3</sup>

It is also worth noting that Myanmar's UN Representative (appointed by the previous civilian Suu Kyi Government) Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun had supported the UN resolution of 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2022 condemning Russia against its invasion of Ukraine. He had further called it a violation of international rules. Earlier, the exiled National Unity Government of Myanmar (established by the elected representatives opposed to the military junta) called the Russian operations against Ukraine as a flagrant violation of the UN Charter and international law. It sees Russia as an enemy as it has continued to supply arms and transfer defence technologies to the Myanmar military which is using them against the civilian population. While Asia Pacific allies and partners of the US such as Singapore, Australia and Japan were quick to condemn Russia and extend support to Ukraine they have not responded in a similar manner to support the National Unity Government of Myanmar.

In contrast to Myanmar's reaction to the Ukraine crisis, Singapore took a strong position against Russia when its Foreign Ministry "strongly condemned any unprovoked invasion of a sovereign country under any pretext" on 24<sup>th</sup> February.<sup>4</sup> On February 28<sup>th</sup>, Prime Minister Lee went on to state that "If international relations are based on 'might is right', the world will be a dangerous place for small countries like Singapore. This is why Singapore staunchly supports international law and the United Nations Charter, which prohibits acts of aggression against a sovereign state".<sup>5</sup> On 2<sup>nd</sup> March Singapore supported the UN Resolution that called for Russia to withdraw from Ukraine territory immediately and unconditionally. Singapore is also the only Southeast Asian nation to have joined the US and the western nations in imposing sanctions on Russia.

Responses of other Southeast Asian nations have been nuanced and varied with most of them refraining from either a condemnation of Russia's actions in Ukraine or expressing support for Russia. For instance, Vietnam, a long-term recipient of Russian defence exports as well as of Moscow's strategic and diplomatic support, has been constrained by the possibility of the US initiating Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) and the prospect of diluting its evolving strategic relationship with Washington, and therefore has chosen to follow a somewhat middle path.

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Vietnam remained absent from the voting on the UNGA resolution of 2<sup>nd</sup> March condemning Russia and it opposed removing Russia from the UN Human Rights Council on 8<sup>th</sup> April.<sup>6</sup> Russia and Vietnam also conduct joint annual military exercises alternatively in each country. In the current year, it is the turn of Russia to conduct such exercises. Vietnam has called such exercises as Army Games and is somewhat reticent in giving them prominence.

Further, Prime Minister Chinh of Vietnam visited the US in May to attend the US-ASEAN Summit as well as to strengthen bilateral relations. Evidently, the US has expressed dismay at the Vietnamese stance on the Ukraine conflict and has cautioned Hanoi about the impact it might have on bilateral ties. PM Chinh after having clarified Vietnam's position on the conflict, announced somewhat limited humanitarian aid of half a million US dollars as a token of goodwill towards Ukraine. In a speech at a US think tank on 11<sup>th</sup> May, PM Chinh emphasised that Vietnam respects the UN Charter, principles of international law, sovereignty and territorial integrity of states and the solving of disputes through peaceful means.<sup>7</sup> The US is the second largest trade partner of Vietnam and the top destination of Vietnamese exports. Between 2017 and 2021, the US has also provided Vietnam with some security assistance. For Vietnam, maintaining a strong relationship with the US is an imperative to realise its policy objectives in the South China Sea where China has become increasingly aggressive.

While Thailand voted in favour of the UNGA resolution of 2<sup>nd</sup> March deploring "in the strongest terms the aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine" the Thai leadership has stated that it maintains a neutral stance on the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

It has not condemned Russia by taking its name. Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha has stated that Thailand would be neutral in the conflict as it has a long-standing friendship with Russia,<sup>8</sup> while Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai observed that there was no need for Thailand to rush to play a role.<sup>9</sup> Thailand has been an ally of the US and the West in the past especially during the Cold War years. Later in the post-Cold War period and in the current era Thailand has been attempting to pursue a balanced approach in its foreign policy outlook, especially when it comes to its relationship with the US and China. Some analysts have called such a policy as 'bending with the wind' foreign policy. Military coups of 2006 and 2014 in Thailand had affected its relationship with the US and had a bearing on its foreign policy stances, especially on its relationship with the US.

Thailand would be hosting the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in the physical mode in November this year.<sup>10</sup> This would present a dilemma for the government on the question of inviting Putin as many other APEC heads of states may refuse to participate because of Russia's action in Ukraine. Adhering to a neutral stance on the Russian-Ukraine conflict would make it difficult for Thailand not to invite Putin. The saving grace for Thailand would be in Putin not deciding to attend or a possible cessation of the conflict by then.

In any case, the debate within Thailand has largely favoured 'Democracy' against 'Authoritarianism'<sup>11</sup>, akin to what has been happening in Myanmar between the military government and the National Unity Government (NUG). The media and press have largely been supporting Ukraine, and some calls have been made for sending some volunteer fighters to Ukraine, though that did not materialize.

Indonesia, which is viewed as the leader of the ASEAN member countries because of its size, population and economy, professes to be neutral in the ongoing Ukraine conflict. It had, however, supported the UNGA resolution of 2<sup>nd</sup> March and deplored the Russian operation against Ukraine, along with other ASEAN countries -- except for Vietnam and Laos that were absent. Indonesia's Foreign Ministry spokesman, as part of the initial reaction on 26<sup>th</sup> February, had spoken about the need for adhering to international law and the UN charter regarding territorial integrity and sovereignty of a country.<sup>12</sup> The ASEAN grouping, after a meeting on 26<sup>th</sup> February, had issued a statement expressing deep concern, calling on the relevant parties to exercise maximum restraint and pursue dialogue.

While Thailand is concerned about the successful holding of the APEC Summit later this year, Indonesia is set to hold the G20 Summit in November, presenting similar dilemmas. President Joko Widodo in late June was invited for the G7 summit as the head of a partner country. Besides highlighting Indonesia's need for finance, he called for measures to deal with the adverse impact of the war in Ukraine on the world economy, especially on the poorer countries. Widodo considered the meeting as a preparatory step for the G20 summit. He also appealed to the G7 countries to enable Ukraine to export its grain and allow Russian fertilizer to be shipped to wherever they are required.<sup>13</sup> He used the opportunity to visit both Kyiv and Moscow on some sort of a peace mission. He met President Zelensky of Ukraine on 29<sup>th</sup> June, becoming one of the first leaders to meet him in his capital.<sup>14</sup> He offered to carry a message for Putin. Apparently, it was more of a gesture of solidarity with Ukraine. Later he visited Moscow and met President Putin.<sup>15</sup> Evidently, his appeals for ending the conflict and looking for a peaceful solution through dialogue did not find a taker in Moscow and thus did not bear any fruit. Nevertheless, he invited Putin to the G20 Summit in Bali scheduled in November. Widodo's immediate interest, besides mitigating the debilitating economic impact of the Ukraine conflict, would be to make the G20 Summit a success and establish himself as an important regional and international leader.

In line with most Southeast Asian countries, Malaysia also maintained a neutral position on the Ukraine issue when its Prime Minister Ismail bin Yakob on 26<sup>th</sup> February expressed concern over the escalating conflict in Ukraine and called for a peaceful solution through dialogue based on international law and the UN Charter.<sup>16</sup> Though later on, Malaysia did support the non-binding UNGA resolution of 2<sup>nd</sup> March deploring the Russian action in Ukraine, it has been less affected by the adverse impact of the war on its limited trade with Russia. Yet, it remains sensitive to its evolving relationship with the US and the Western countries. In early March 2022, Malaysia did not allow a Russian flagged tanker entry to its port because of the US sanctions.<sup>17</sup>

The response of the Philippines leadership to the Ukraine conflict has also been quite muted even though it is technically a treaty ally of the US. Its Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana observed that it is none of its business to meddle in whatever is taking place in Europe.<sup>18</sup> As with some of the other ASEAN countries, for the Philippines, the Russia-Ukraine conflict is taking place in a distant theatre and, therefore, is largely

adopting a non-committal stance. Siding with one or the other might cause more difficulties for them. Though there might not be any direct impact on the Philippines' economy, yet it is aware that there would be a collateral damage to the economy if the conflict continues. The Philippines position on the Ukraine conflict is largely in line with its strategic interests and the prevailing situation in the South China Sea, where it has to protect its sovereignty against the aggressive tendencies of China.

As for Cambodia and Laos, which are firmly in China's camp and have good relations with Russia, their response to the Ukraine crisis has not been similar. While Cambodia voted in favour of the UNGA resolution deploring Russia's action in Ukraine, Laos like Vietnam abstained from voting. Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia even went to the extent of stating that Russian action is an 'act of aggression that is unacceptable to Cambodia'. He also said, "Cambodia takes a stand in principle, no matter Russia, any country that invades another country, Cambodia is always against".<sup>20</sup> This despite Russia being a longtime friend of Cambodia. Many analysts see this as Hun Sen's own one-man approach to the issue, without the backing of either the party or other organs of the government.

In so far as Brunei is concerned it voted in favour of the UNGA resolution against Russia and apparently is not much impacted by the ongoing crisis. It stands to earn more from the rising crude prices.

### **ASEAN and the Ukraine Conflict**

ASEAN's stance on the Ukraine crisis has largely been neutral. The ten Foreign Ministers of the group, after their meeting on 26<sup>th</sup> February, expressed deep concern at the unfolding crisis and asked the relevant parties to exercise maximum restraint and enter into a dialogue for the resolution of the conflict.<sup>20</sup> They stressed on the need for adhering to the principles of the UN Charter as well as to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia. No reference was made to Russia being either an aggressor or whether it had violated sovereignty of Ukraine. Thus, ASEAN as a multilateral group has been careful in taking sides.

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Further, at the US-ASEAN Special Summit held on 13<sup>th</sup> May at Washington the ASEAN grouping maintained its neutral stand on Ukraine issue while President Joe Biden urged the ASEAN members to take a ‘firmer stand’. It is also well known that multilateral groupings especially the ASEAN work on the principle of consensus and it would have been well-nigh impossible to come out with a statement condemning Russia given the political stances of ASEAN nations given in the foregoing paragraphs. The US in pursuit of its larger strategic objectives of Indo-Pacific strategy wherein ASEAN is central to achieving such policy goals, continuing to maintain its broader engagement with Southeast Asian nations is an imperative. President Joe Biden in his speech at the summit said that *“An Indo-Pacific that is free and open, stable and prosperous, and resilient and secure is what we’re all seeking”*.<sup>21</sup> This is in line with what is mentioned in the American document of Indo-Pacific Strategy that observes that *“Like ASEAN, we see South East Asia as central for regional architecture”*.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the Joint Vision Statement of the Special Summit issued after the summit contained one para (second last) on Ukraine. *“With regard to Ukraine, as for all nations, we continue to reaffirm our respect for sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity. We reiterate our call for compliance with the UN Charter and international law. We underline the importance of an immediate cessation of hostilities and creating an enabling environment for peaceful resolution. We also call for humanitarian assistance for those in need in Ukraine”*.<sup>23</sup> There was no mention of Russia leave alone any condemnation or criticism of Russia.

### The Economic Fallout

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) report of 25<sup>th</sup> April has forecast that the Ukraine war, the resurgent Covid pandemic and adverse global financial conditions will reduce the GDP of Asia and the Pacific to 4.9 percent, which is 0.5 percent less than the forecast of January 2022 for the regional economies. Inflation is expected to rise faster in many countries. The Ukraine conflict has also led to higher costs of many commodities and reduced the demand by the European countries for exports from the Southeast Asian nations. The Ukraine conflict has exacerbated many of the negative trends in the economy that were caused by the Covid pandemic and it is likely that these would continue to pose challenges.

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Economic Forecast IMF April 2022	2021	2022	2023
Singapore	7.6	4.6	5.1
Brunei	-0.7	5.8	2.6
Cambodia	2.2	5.1	5.5
Indonesia	8.9	8.2	6.9
Lao PDR	2.1	3.2	3.5
Myanmar	-17.9	1.6	3.0
Philippines	5.6	6.5	6.3
Thailand	1.6	3.3	4.3
Vietnam	2.6	6.0	7.2
Asia	6.5	4.9	5.1

Source: IMF Report on Regional Economic Outlook for Asia Pacific, 25<sup>th</sup> April 2022 <sup>24</sup>

The individual countries of the ASEAN are experiencing variable impacts on their economies depending upon their strength and weaknesses. Singapore is an advanced economy that is likely to slow down by 3 percentage points in its GDP growth in the current year (as compared to 2021) before recovering to 5.1 percent growth in 2023. The rest of the ASEAN economies have been termed as emerging economies which would also be impacted one way or the other depending upon the nature of their economies. For instance, Indonesia, the largest economy in the region, has benefited due to high global prices of palm oil, coal and steel. Its monthly exports were all time high in March (total of 26.5 billion USD and a trade surplus of 4.5 billion USD).<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the rising crude oil and gas prices remain a concern for Indonesia. It is also uncertain as to how long the Ukraine conflict will last and the potential negative impact on the economy. Indonesia's oil imports have also touched a new high due to the recovery in the manufacturing sector following the easing of the Covid pandemic.

Similarly, Malaysia is expected to gain from the high oil prices and is looking to improve its fiscal deficit. Oil and gas production contributes 20 percent to Malaysia's GDP. However, Zafrul Aziz, Malaysia's Finance Minister has observed that: "We are

part of the global supply chain and hence the political and financial stability of our trading and foreign investment partners could impact Malaysia's economy....That's why we are assuming an impact of 20 basis points to the GDP".<sup>26</sup>

The tourism industry across Southeast Asia has been adversely affected by the Ukraine conflict. Thailand is a major destination for Russian and Ukrainian tourists. The coronavirus had impacted the tourist industry and the Ukrainian crisis has further compounded the losses. The effects of high inflation and disruption of supply chains would further slow-down economic growth if the war continues.

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Banning Russia by the US and the Western nations out of the SWIFT messaging system for transfer of funds has created difficulties for countries like Vietnam which has a significant trade relationship with Russia. Its trade in agricultural commodities and import and export of associated products has been adversely impacted, while its tourist industry is facing headwinds. The other ASEAN economies such as Cambodia, Laos and the Philippines have also been impacted by high commodity prices and instability in the financial markets. Their exports, especially to the European countries, have been negatively impacted. In so far as Myanmar is concerned, its economy had contracted almost 18 percent last year due to a variety of factors and is expected to see limited GDP growth of around 1.6 percent. The Myanmar military junta's coup of last February, the Covid pandemic and the US and western sanctions-- all contributed to the worsening of the economic situation in Myanmar. Only Brunei, because of its oil and gas sectors, is expected to do better as a result of increased prices of hydrocarbons.

## Conclusion

Except for Singapore, which has sided with the US and the Western nations on the Ukraine crisis, and the ruling Myanmar military junta, which has fully supported Russia, the other ASEAN countries have maintained largely a neutral stance. However, as a multilateral grouping, ASEAN has chosen to follow the middle path and has asked all the relevant parties to follow the UN charter and solve their dispute through peaceful means.

The ASEAN countries are also apprehensive that attention and commitment of the US and European powers, who had earlier expressed their resolve in meeting the challenges arising in the South China Sea, would most likely be diluted due to their intense involvement in the Ukraine conflict. It is also a given that major deployment of forces and military assets of the US in the North Atlantic and the NATO countries would create problems for deployment of its military assets to the Indo-Pacific. With the US and NATO rushing defence equipment, arms and other supplies to Ukraine, their ability to contest China's rising military power, its coercive and aggressive policies in the South China Sea would be negatively impacted. The question remains as to what would be the substance and content of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy in which ASEAN is central to the regional architecture, and how far will it be implemented. While at the US-ASEAN Special Summit in Washington President Joe Biden did make the usual commitments to assuage the ASEAN leaders' concerns about the regional security environment, yet the ASEAN leaders do not appear to be fully convinced. Past behaviour of the various US regimes while executing their 'Pivot to Asia Pacific' or 'Rebalance to Asia Pacific' strategies have created doubts about the credibility of the US commitment to Southeast Asia's security concerns. Further, most of the ASEAN countries while seeking partnerships with the US and western countries want to avoid the strategic slugfest going on between US and China, or for that matter, with Russia.

In so far as the economic impact of the Ukraine conflict on Southeast Asian countries is concerned it is becoming increasingly visible as the Russia-Ukraine crisis gets prolonged. In the initial stages of the conflict, most of the ASEAN members felt that they were geographically far away from the area of conflict and therefore unlikely to face any repercussions. But given the interconnectedness of the global economy, their economic growth has been negatively impacted. Though some countries like Indonesia and Malaysia might make some profits from rising global commodity prices, in the long-term, their traditional exports to Europe are being affected because of the declining capability of European powers to import. Mixture of inflation and recession, disruption of supply chains and dwindling inflows of tourists has further hit the ASEAN economies. While these countries were recovering from the after-effects of the Covid pandemic, the Ukraine crisis has accentuated the negative trends in the global as well as the Southeast Asian regional economy. An early end to the Russia-Ukraine conflict is what the entire world is looking forward to.

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