



ASEAN: Seeing the Russian invasion of Ukraine through a glass darkly

TAN SRI DR MUNIR MAJID



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Don't Ruffle Feathers...the ASEAN Way

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When Vietnam invaded Cambodia on Christmas Day 1978 to topple the brutal Pol Pot regime, ASEAN was united and steadfast in condemning the violation of Cambodia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, whatever the atrocities of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge. ASEAN has not taken a similar united and principled stand with respect to the Russian invasion of Ukraine which began on 24 February 2022.

While ASEAN membership has since expanded to ten, even the five original members (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) are not aligned in their view of the invasion of Ukraine. This disunity has been exacerbated by the now-larger membership (Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia have joined ASEAN, in that sequence).” Only Singapore has taken a principled stand reminiscent of that taken in 1978 against Vietnam, asserting that violation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of another state is not acceptable in the international system. According to Singapore, small states particularly need adherence to international law and the UN Charter for their protection.

It is not typical of ASEAN to have such clarity. There is a propensity to let things be, especially if an event is seen as distant and not of immediate threat to an individual ASEAN state's existence. Better not to antagonise—easier

to pontificate and call for peaceful negotiation and an end to the fighting. Even as the fighting continues for weeks and months, the faraway event is not revisited to give substance to what really is just an uncaring wish.

The most that ASEAN had initially come out with jointly was the foreign ministers' statement of 26 February, a bland and platitudinous two paragraphs that called for peaceful negotiation and an end to the fighting.¹ Russia was not called out as the aggressor and there was no ASEAN-level support for the sanctions against it. A further joint statement was made on 3 March calling just for a ceasefire.²

The Russian invasion of Ukraine confronts ASEAN with stark choices which, as a whole, it does not like to make. So, while eight member states supported the UN General Assembly resolution on 2 March deploring Russian aggression and calling for withdrawal of its forces from Ukraine (with two, Laos and Vietnam, abstaining) a truer picture of the ASEAN position is to be seen in individual statements, which reflect a reticent and prevaricated approach.

Individually, there have been various instances, except for Singapore, of not going all the way against the Russian invasion. Indonesia, for instance, always talks about keeping the door for negotiation open. Now, as chair of the G20, it has invited Russian leader Vladimir Putin to attend the November summit,

despite Western pressure not to do so. It has given in to that pressure, however, by inviting Ukraine, a non-member, to attend, which Jakarta has tried to sugar coat with the pious hope that both Russian and Ukrainian attendance could facilitate peaceful settlement.

President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines (who is set to step down after elections on 9 May) lashed out at American double standards, pointing to the invasion of Iraq. Even after voting for the UN General Assembly resolution, the Malaysian foreign minister stated in Parliament that its wording could have been better drafted and less condemnatory. This kind of prevarication is very much the "ASEAN Way" which Western policy makers often have to grit their teeth and bear. ASEAN believes, if belief is to be found in its lexicon, in not throwing the baby out with the bath water, even if it means not taking a principled stand.

The greatest clarity among ASEAN states on the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been afforded by Singapore, who called it a violation of the territorial integrity of Ukraine in contravention of international law and the UN Charter. The statement on 28 February by its foreign minister was as clear as daylight.³ This was followed with sanctions against Russia similar to those imposed by the West. During an official visit to the United States at the end of March, Singapore's prime minister Lee Hsien Loong alluded to situations in

Southeast Asia that could potentially give rise to military action if there was no respect and adherence to the principles of international law and the UN Charter. While he did not specify, there are disputes in the South China Sea and the outstanding Taiwan issue which could take a turn for the worse. This, it would seem, the other ASEAN member states would rather not talk about to avoid the slightest hint of antagonising China.

Why an ASEAN Stand Matters

ASEAN's position matters in two ways: First, for the credibility of ASEAN itself, and second, for the West, particularly the United States, as it seeks meaningful engagement in Southeast Asia.

ASEAN centrality is a much-vaunted regional claim. Exactly what that centrality means if it is no more than just platforms for endless meetings on peace and stability in the region for its economic progress and development is less clear. Every non-Southeast Asian country that attends these meetings or engages with ASEAN—especially China, but the United States as well—pays lip service to this centrality, serving obeisance to the regional mantra.

Thus, as members of one of the more important of these meetings, the East Asia Summit that first met in 2005, non-ASEAN states have acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, first signed by the union's founding members in 1976.⁴ The present eighteen member states, which include China, Russia and the United States, are committed to its principles of amity, peaceful cooperation and respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty in East Asia.

Further, the ASEAN Regional Forum, a 27-member regional security institution established in 1993 which also includes China, Russia, the United States and the EU, commits itself

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to peaceful settlement of disputes and non-use of force in state relations in the Pacific region.

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In light of the Russian attack on Ukraine, albeit in a theatre outside the region, one would imagine it might be difficult for ASEAN member states to put on a straight face when these two bodies next come to discuss issues of peace, security and cooperation. What can be done and tolerated outside the region could equally occur within it, whether by Russia, say over Sakhalin Island where Japan also lays a claim, by North Korea in northeast Asia and beyond, or more significantly by China over Taiwan and in the South China Sea.

While states such as Singapore have rightly made much of the importance to smaller states of protection against aggression under international law and the UN Charter, which would apply to ASEAN member states individually, there is, for ASEAN as a whole, the additional consideration of its credibility and centrality as it goes about propounding its Kantian-like 'perpetual peace' in the region.

A diminished ASEAN cannot be any good for its claimed centrality. An ASEAN which does not even give pride of place to the rules-based principles enjoined in its own Charter signed in 2007, which espouses respect for territorial integrity, sovereignty and national identity, does not augur well for its legal personality as is proclaimed in that Charter. The statement by ASEAN foreign ministers two days after the blatant Russian attack on Ukraine began was feeble as it wholly avoided the issue of aggression and territorial violation.

Just as important as invasion and occupation are the potential domino-effect ramifications of aggression, which ASEAN saw clearly in the case of Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978. As they turn away from the uncomfortable situation of calling out clear aggression by Russia in Ukraine, ASEAN leaders have not thought about the long-term effects

of Russia's encouragement and support of separatist forces in south-eastern Ukraine. Almost every ASEAN state faces the risk and threat of separatism: Aceh and West Irian in Indonesia; Mindanao in the Philippines, Pattani in Thailand, Sabah in Malaysia (and now also tendencies in Sarawak), ethnic insurgencies among the Shans, Karens and Kachins in Myanmar. The military regime in Myanmar, for instance, does not realise the slippery slope it is on in supporting Russia over Ukraine. Other ASEAN countries, too, should reflect on what message they are sending by seemingly countenancing Russian ambition in Ukraine, which could well result in the break-up of that country. What goes around could come around.

For the West, and the United States in particular, the ASEAN non-stand on the Russian attack on Ukraine reflects not only on the regional grouping, but also on them. There is a lot of ground to cover to make ASEAN as a whole, and its individual member states, come onside on the rules-based world order, which they see as Western-dominated and one-sided. ASEAN member states have and would take the economic goodies from free trade but are not buying into the political and security part of the global order, which is seen as overbearingly American. ASEAN's engagement with China, very strong at the level of some individual states, has something to do with it. While an alternative world order

has not emerged, there are developments, such as the establishment of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP, with 30 percent of global GDP, population and FDI inflows and over 25 percent of global FDI inflows), as well as China's economic achievements—and even political system and stability—which challenge the American-led liberal world order.⁵

The United States and the West have the huge job of showing the good of that world order without being over-assertive and righteous. Seldom is it realised—sometimes by Americans themselves—that total investment by the United States in ASEAN is greater than that of China, India, Korea and Japan combined. There is every justification for the US to want to nurture, protect and grow that investment. In this context, given domestic opposition to trade pacts, what the United States can do through the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework assumes special importance.

On the situation in Ukraine, there is a major propaganda war that is going on in the region which America and the West are losing and Russia, by default, is winning. Again, China's propaganda machine also has something to do with it, although Russia is no mug at this of course. Unscientifically, it looks like viewpoints against America and the West are winning at least three-to-one on social media in the region.

Some of the issues arraigned against the United States and the West are:

1. Double standards, especially by the US, which has a long history of invasion and intervention in other countries—and so many are coming out, whether in the Americas such as Guatemala or in the Middle East, such as in Iraq.
2. Expansion of NATO despite promises made in 1990 not to do so following the collapse of the Soviet Union, resulting now in Ukraine potentially becoming a member, right on Russia's doorstep, with overwhelming buy-in of Putin's claim that Russia is facing an existential threat.
3. Religion and race: the double-standard of Muslim lives and suffering counting so much less, if at all, and of white refugees from Ukraine, who are accepted so willingly in Europe while those from Africa and Asia are not.
4. The United States and the West have no business talking about how a country should be or should not be run, especially as they now are failing so badly in managing their own countries.
5. China is becoming the poster child of the future, with its economic success and political stability. Beijing is riding on this through its propaganda machine, which sits well particularly with the ASEAN business community, including in Singapore where there is restrained disquiet among business leaders over the strong stand the island republic has taken on Russian aggression in Ukraine.

ASEAN-U.S. Special Summit, 12-13 May 2022

The special summit between the US and ASEAN has had to be put off before, with some ASEAN leaders feigning unavailability. They did not wish to be sucked into an American narrative at the peak of the Russian invasion. One even said privately that the Americans wanted ASEAN "to take sides" whereas "we are neutral". This is, of course, a totally wrong stand to take considering the issues involved, but it is something the Biden administration should bear in mind so as not to come out too strongly on Russian aggression. It might work better to emphasise how ASEAN and its member states could become victims of actions similar to those the Russians have taken in Ukraine. A particular emphasis on Russian irredentist support in Ukraine and potential consequences of such separatism in ASEAN countries is something which would make ASEAN leaders look through the glass more clearly.

What will work best with ASEAN is to talk business and economics. There are risks to the world economy which the Ukrainian crisis has wrought. Supply chain disruptions, high food and commodity prices, inflation, and increasing interest rates are matters that worry ASEAN leaders, always fixated on economic performance. Talking through these issues and how to work together to avoid stagflation would be useful and appreciated.

There is the unfortunate perception that it is the response and sanctions of the West that have brought about all these negative conditions, and not the Russian invasion that had to be thwarted. The cause and effect have to be made clear—and then the conversation can move on to what can be done together to save the world economy.

Most of all, it would be useful to follow the theme established by the ASEAN chair in announcing the special summit: celebrating four and a half decades of ASEAN-US dialogue relations. Delegates should enumerate the ways and means to intensify cooperation which are identified in that statement.⁶ On Friday 6 May, a Cambodian Minister stated President Biden should “treat ASEAN leaders with respect” by spending more time with them during the summit than presently planned, to improve ties.⁷

Missing in the announcement is any mention of Ukraine, or of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework which the Americans are, and must be, working hard at. This is ASEAN—avoid matters, headings or concepts that may invite hard decision-making or third party, especially Chinese, reaction. The challenge to Western and especially American diplomacy is to inject juicy content within frameworks without coming on too strong on those frameworks and without making ASEAN take a view too clearly on anything that could be provocative.

When Will ASEAN Take a Stand?

ASEAN is not a principles-driven organisation, however much they may be contained in the ASEAN Charter or agreements such as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. Neither is it a legalistic institution strictly adhering to the letter of the law. Agreements *inter se* are not infrequently given time to be fulfilled. It is an accommodative vehicle moving at the pace of the slowest member. If anything, it is a grouping informed by functional integration and demonstration effect. On the

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one hand it eschews the political approach, and on the other hand in its cooperative endeavours it muddles through with the maxim “if it ain’t broke why fix it.” In this way, adversarial situations are avoided. Indeed, if anything, ASEAN practises the art of the possible to the most frustrating degree to those seeking optimal outcome based on stated commitments.

Even within the grouping, events such as the military coup which deposed the legitimately elected government in Myanmar in February last year are approached with such due care that the widely trumpeted “ground-breaking” interventionist initiative for a return to the *status quo ante*, has hardly made any progress. The “softly, softly” approach does not work with generals as tough as nails who make ASEAN look pathetic.

There nevertheless are situations where ASEAN has to take a stand whether it likes it or not. When Vietnam invaded Cambodia all those years ago, ASEAN took a stand because it was close to home and the threat was discernibly felt, most of all by Thailand as the frontline state. The Russian attack on Ukraine is further away, with

hardly any actual threat felt, whatever the principles involved. In fact, there is a feeling in ASEAN that Western and American reactions to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, especially with wide-ranging sanctions, have made the situation worse. The harm to the world economy that has ensued, even as the world entered an encouraging post-COVID phase, is felt to have been avoidable.

This can be described as unprincipled, but ASEAN leaders overwhelmingly would have advised a more measured approach which they might describe as pragmatic. It is as if they are not too concerned whether that measured approach would gift Ukraine to Russia. This is the most damning part of how ASEAN has viewed the Russian invasion of another sovereign country, whatever the cause or antecedents. It could have taken a more principled stand without great risk to the organisation or region, which will remain one of the fastest growing regions in the world with which many countries and companies would want to engage. There is still time for ASEAN to take a clearer and less equivocated stand with no serious tangible loss which would earn the regional grouping great respect. ■

Endnotes

- 1 ["ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement on The Situation in Ukraine"](#), ASEAN, 26 February 2022.
- 2 ["ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement Calling for a Ceasefire in Ukraine"](#), ASEAN, 03 March 2022.
- 3 ["In full: Vivian Balakrishnan's ministerial statement on Russia's invasion of Ukraine"](#), Channel News Asia, 28 February 2022.
- 4 ["Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia"](#), ASEAN, 1976.
- 5 ["Special Update: Summary of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership \(RCEP\)"](#), CARI ASEAN, 18 November 2020.
- 6 ["ASEAN and the United States to Convene a Special Summit in Washington D.C. on 12-13 May 2022"](#), ASEAN, 28 April 2022.
- 7 ["Cambodian minister says Biden should 'treat ASEAN leaders with respect' to improve ties"](#), *South China Morning Post*, 07 May 2022.



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Ahead of the ASEAN special summit on 12-13 May in Washington D.C., Tan Sri Dr Munir Majid confronts the dichotomy between ASEAN's chartered principles on territorial integrity and the disunity of individual member states' responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The shadow of China looms large over the diminishment of ASEAN's centrality, and the long-term dangers to the southeast Asia region from the conflict have been little considered. The Biden administration should emphasise the war's impact on business and economics during the summit, as well as Russian irredentist support, to help ASEAN's leaders see through the glass more clearly

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