

The Impact of the Invasion of Ukraine from Indonesia’s Perspective (U.S.-China Relations Study Group Commentary No. 17)

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Introduction

Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Southeast Asian countries have objected to the violation of sovereignty. However, they did not specifically condemn Russia by name, and, with the exception of Singapore, they did not participate in sanctions that would have worsened relations with Russia. Indonesian President Joko Widodo, popularly known as “Jokowi,” also did not criticize Russia immediately after the invasion but rather issued a tweet on Twitter, “Stop the War,” but did not go beyond that point politically.

For Southeast Asia, while avoiding choosing sides was a diplomatically rational position, on April 7, 2022, the United Nations Human Rights Committee was asked to vote on the resolution to disqualify Russia and make its decision. Southeast Asia voted against the resolution with Socialist Republic of Viet Nam and Lao People’s Democratic Republic opposed, Republic of Singapore, Kingdom of Thailand, Malaysia, Republic of Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam, and Kingdom of Cambodia abstaining, and Republic of the Union of Myanmar and the Republic of the Philippines in favor.

There are probably three factors that explain the split decision among Southeast Asian countries and the abstention of the majority of Southeast Asian countries: 1. the degree of dependence on arms supplies, 2. the basis of comparison in understanding the uniqueness of the invasion of Ukraine, and 3. sympathy as a victim of sanctions. The author would like to focus on these factors to understand the impact on Southeast Asia, and especially on Indonesia, which has the largest population among them.

Factors determining Southeast Asia’s attitude

The first possible factor, as has already been publicly discussed extensively, is each country’s

Russia’s Defence Exports to Southeast Asian Countries, 2000-19 (US\$ million)

	2000-04	2005-09	2010-14	2015-19	Total	As a % of Total Arms Imports
Vietnam	446	404	3,278	2,387	6,515	84%
Malaysia	63	1,221	14	156	1,454	31%
Myanmar	341	443	651	-	1,435	39%
Indonesia	267	206	675	-	1,148	16%
Laos	8	4	14	76	102	44%
Thailand	-	3	20	27	73	2%
Total	1,125	2,281	4,652	2,646	10,704	-

Table 3. Source: ISEAS (Image: Jace Yip)

dependence on Russia for arms procurement. The most prominent relationship between Southeast Asia and Russia is this defense equipment procurement relationship. Russia is Southeast Asia's largest source of defense equipment imports from outside the region, and, according to date up to 2019, Viet Nam's share of arms procurement from Russia exceeded 80% of its total, with Laos accounting for the next highest share at 44%. Given the equipment situation in Viet Nam and Laos, it is essential to maintain good relations with Russia in terms of national security strategy at this point. It is shown here that, while agreeing with the principle of inviolability of sovereignty, going one step further and agreeing to a resolution to disqualify Russia's status on the United Nations Human Rights Committee involves not only political risks but also risks to one's own security. The logic is that a country cannot put its own security at risk by politically joining in solidarity with the security crisis in Ukraine.

The second possible factor that determined the vote for or against the resolution was the question: How unique is Russia's invasion against Ukraine compared to other invasions? If Russia's invasion of Ukraine is considered historically unique and special, it deserves special resolutions and sanctions by the United Nations. However, if it is not, then supporting special resolutions or sanctions would turn irrational. Questions arise such as "What is the essential difference between the U.S. invasion of Iraq and Russia's invasion of Ukraine?" In this sense, taking a special diplomatic action is inexplicable. Upon acts of sovereignty violation, on one hand not taking collective action against the US invasions to Iraq, but on the other hand, calling for collective sanctions and the disbarment of the UN Human Rights Commission for the Russian invasions to Ukraine is a double standard. That explains the reason to abstain from any resolution that would endorse such a double standard.

This sense of double standards, especially in Indonesia, was illustrated through the linking of the Israeli "invasion" of Palestine with the Russian "invasion" of Ukraine. On May 21, 2021, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in response to Hamas rocket attacks on Israel, "The sky of Israel is strewn with missiles. Some cities are on fire. There are victims. Many wounded. Many human tragedies. It is impossible to look at all this without grief and sorrow. It is necessary to stop the escalation immediately for the sake of people's lives," he tweeted. This tweet was spread in Indonesia, where President Zelenskyy's stance of meditating on the plight suffered by the Palestinians, denying the legitimacy of their struggle, and now calling for support for the war for self-defense was called "hypocritical." In Indonesia, there was a growing voice that could not be ignored that the difference between the response of Western countries to the Middle East and the Muslim world and the current response to Ukraine to be unacceptable.

Third, the most important factor is sympathy on the part of Southeast Asian countries toward the position of being subject to international sanctions. The coordinated series of economic and financial sanctions against Russia by the U.S., Europe, Japan, South Korea, and others are highly regarded, especially among G7 members, as an unprecedented success story. However, for countries in Southeast Asia that have been subjected to economic sanctions and arms embargoes for the past 25 years, such as Myanmar, Thailand after the 2014 coup d'état, and Indonesia after human rights abuses in East Timor in 1999, even if they express regret over Russia's violations of the principle of

sovereignty, it would not support the choice of sanctions to be the solution. For these countries, it is difficult, in light of their historical background, to endorse a political position that recognizes the legitimacy of sanctions as a foreign policy strategy, as Western countries do. If they were to endorse sanctions against Russia, it would be an argument for recognizing the international legitimacy of sanctions. If, in the future a country finds itself on the receiving end of sanctions, agreeing with sanctions at this time would be a strategic mistake for the long-term security of one's own country. Thus, the logic goes, it is in the long-term interest of the country to take the diplomatic position of opposition either way.

The fact that Singapore was the only country in Southeast Asia to endorse financial sanctions against Russia in March 2022 was truly an example of the difference in choice between countries that have experienced sanctions and those that have not.

The Ukraine invasion as an economic crisis

It is important to note, on the other hand, that for Southeast Asian countries, staying out of UN resolutions and sanctions and remaining as silent as possible, will not prevent or neutralize the political and economic impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on their own territories. The first reason for this is the magnitude of the economic impact of the Ukraine crisis.

The Indonesian president's decision to tweet "Stop the War," symbolized by his avoidance of condemnation of Russia as well as his avoidance of silence, can be read to indicate that Indonesia needed to clearly state its position against the conduct of the war. In the first place, "Stop the War" is by no means a neutral position statement. Naturally, it calls for a halt to the Russian invasion and military operations, but it also includes a demand for a halt to Ukraine's self-defense efforts and also a halt to military support from the West. Hence calling for Stop the War could be seen as favoring the aggressor. While recognizing the right of sovereign nations to self-defense in principle, Indonesia's statement of its position that the war should cease at this point was a political decision that prioritized Indonesia's economy to minimize the negative impact of the protracted war on its own economy, at the expense of Ukraine's self-defense and the principle of the rule of law in the international community.

Because of the geopolitical remoteness of the war in Ukraine, direct national security implications for Indonesia are negligible. Economically, however, Ukraine is Indonesia's largest wheat import partner, accounting for \$504.4 million, or about a quarter of total imports of about \$2 billion in 2020 data. This economic relationship is a major reason why the Ukraine crisis must be viewed in the light of its impact on Indonesia's economy. Russia is also Indonesia's largest exporter in chemical fertilizers. In order to protect its own agriculture and the broader economy and society, an economy that is even now being battered by the damage of the Novel Coronavirus pandemic, Indonesia needs to be well prepared to produce food and the fertilizer supplies that will make this possible in order to protect its people's livelihood. The people are also aware that although physically far away from Ukraine, they are closely related in economy, and therefore, the translation to food and

energy issues inevitably predominates over the issues of security and sovereignty in the international community.

At first glance, these are an economic logic issue, but it should also be kept in mind that at the same time they are political decisions. The reliance on economic growth, which has ensured the legitimacy of governments in each country, has come to a standstill, as it already had been weakened by the pandemic. The war in Ukraine has exhausted food and agriculture-related supply chains and has the potential to further weaken economic growth. Fuel prices are also skyrocketing, creating a major financial burden. The quickest way to solve this problem is to eliminate or reduce fuel subsidies, as presidents have done in the past. This could lead to a sudden release of accumulated social discontent. Thus, President Joko's decision to place fuel prices and food distribution above sanctions against Russia, was, even more than geopolitical measures, a matter of judgment when considering the maintenance of his government in domestic politics. Hence, Indonesia was in the position of having no other choice but to say that, in any case, the war should stop.

The Ukraine crisis as revealed by Indonesia's basic diplomatic strategy

In understanding Indonesia's foreign policy position and strategy formation, the key point that must be examined is whether its foreign policy position and strategy are rational in light of the three areas of economic growth, domestic political stability, and national unity.

First, the most pressing issue regarding economic growth is to recover from the significant slowdown in economic growth due to the pandemic and become prosperous quickly before the population ages. In other words, Indonesia needs to escape the middle-income trap and become an economic powerhouse. Without economic growth, it will be difficult to achieve a government and nation with a sense of stability that meets the expectations of the people. Further, without more economic growth, defense spending cannot be increased enough to support upgrading its capacity. In other words, the logic is that in order to strengthen the state power, wealth comes first and military capabilities come next. Indonesia has learned this lesson while watching the Middle East becoming a proxy war zone for great power competition. The lesson is that lack of both major production and consumption centers well integrated to the global economy could lower the bar to start a military operation due to its lack of scale in collateral damage onto the global economy. In other words, the failure of economic development is a factor directly related to national security, and it was clear that if the lessons learned were to be applied, the main focus of diplomacy and security should be first and foremost on economic growth as the primary means of national strategy.

The second basic point is the issue of domestic political stability. This is the concern of the domestic economic disparity, which has been expected to widen due to the pandemic, and further due to the Ukraine crisis. There is concern that this economic disparity could have a serious negative impact on Indonesia's domestic political stability by diverging political interest and loss of compassion between different social classes. The key to prevent the seemingly unstoppable social divergence is to introduce measures to mitigate downward living conditions among the lower middle

class and low-income groups. The most immediate impact of the Ukrainian crisis on Indonesia's economy and society has been the sharp rise in food and energy prices. The risk is that it will cause hardship for certain segments of society and from there trigger a political crisis. Russia and Ukraine accounted for just under 30% of the world's wheat exports and 70% of international exports of sunflower oil, the main raw material in cooking oil. By the end of April 2022, international wheat prices had risen by about 35%, and palm oil, the main raw material for cooking oil in Indonesia, had also risen by more than 40%. The Ukraine crisis has also caused prices of daily necessities to rise significantly in Indonesia. With the pandemic creating a large number of unemployed people and the country still unable to recover from the loss of income from informal employment, such a sharp rise in the price of daily necessities posed a major risk to domestic political and social stability. Therefore, if we recognize that maintaining the stability of democracy, more than the stability of the rule-based international order, as the most pressing political issue, then in the short term, it is more important to choose a diplomatic strategy that contributes to the stability of prices within one's own country rather than to support Ukraine's fight and right to self-defense. This is where we find the basis for repeatedly advocating an immediate ceasefire, as heard from Indonesia's President Joko Widodo.

The third point is how the Ukraine crisis affects Indonesia's basic foreign policy strategy of maintaining unity of the nation-state. To date, there is no evidence that the crisis in Ukraine has aroused local insurgencies or religious conflicts in Indonesia. From this perspective, however, even if one chooses to avoid condemning Russia for its actions, an international endorsement of Russia's actions, on the other hand, would certainly set an unfavorable precedent in the context of the history of the separatist movement in Indonesia. If military action for the relief of the Russian population in Donetsk and Luhansk regions is grounded in legitimacy, as Russia touts, it could lead to the logic that, for example, the Papua province in Indonesia would act with the support of foreign powers for the relief of their residents. This is reminiscent of the secessionist movements that once arose in Sumatra and Sulawesi during the nation building process during the Cold War period. If Indonesia's foreign policy strategy is measured from the perspective of managing national unity, it will be understood that while it opposes sanctions against Russia, as mentioned above, it is also opposed to the annexation of the eastern part of Ukraine, as Russia has requested.

If we interpret Indonesia's foreign policy strategy in response to the Ukraine crisis according to the above three points, we can understand that President Joko's statement "Stop the War" could be seen as a balancing act between preventing economic impact of the Ukraine invasion onto Indonesia's domestic political economy and denying any justification of foreign military operations using secessionist movements in some regions of a sovereign nation state.