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## Southeast Asian States Have Their Own Views on the Ukraine War

*Jeffrey Reeves*

Just as Southeast Asia has emerged as the center of gravity for the countries of the global West's respective Indo-Pacific strategies, so too has the region become a priority area for Western diplomacy on the Russia-Ukraine war. Since the start of the conflict, the United States, in particular, has lobbied Southeast Asian states and the secretariat of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to condemn Russia's aggression and to comply with Western sanctions against Moscow. In May 2022, for example, the Biden administration raised the Ukraine war in discussions with Southeast Asian leaders at their summit in Washington and tried to insert language in a joint U.S.-ASEAN vision statement criticizing Russia's militarism, ultimately having to settle instead for more vague language on support for territorial sovereignty and international law.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in 2022, the entire Western cohort of the G-20 pressured then host Indonesia to include language criticizing Russia's invasion in the group's joint statement. According to one European sous-sherpa involved in the statement's drafting, China and India also partially supported this language, which therefore made it possible to include.<sup>2</sup>

In at least one instance, however, European leaders were unable to bring their Southeast Asian counterparts on side with their criticism of Russia. In a December 2022 joint statement following an EU-ASEAN summit, negotiators failed to draft a common critique of Russia's actions.<sup>3</sup> Neither have Western leaders had much success in securing Southeast Asian state support in condemnation of the war at the bilateral level, aside from Singapore, which is unique in the region for its relative acceptance

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Walsh, "Biden Looks to Nudge ASEAN Leaders to Speak Out on Russia," Associated Press, May 13, 2022 [~ https://www.npr.org/2022/05/13/1098734688/biden-looks-to-nudge-asean-russia](https://www.npr.org/2022/05/13/1098734688/biden-looks-to-nudge-asean-russia); and "ASEAN-U.S. Special Summit, 2022 Joint Vision Statement," Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), May 12, 2022 [~ https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Final-ASEAN-US-Special-Summit-2022-Joint-Vision-Statement.pdf](https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Final-ASEAN-US-Special-Summit-2022-Joint-Vision-Statement.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> "G20 Bali Leaders' Declaration, Bali, Indonesia, 15–16 November 2022," G-20, November 16, 2022 [~ https://www.g20.org/content/dam/gtwenty/gtwenty\\_new/about\\_g20/previous-summit-documents/2022-bali/G20%20Bali%20Leaders%27%20Declaration,%2015-16%20November%202022.pdf](https://www.g20.org/content/dam/gtwenty/gtwenty_new/about_g20/previous-summit-documents/2022-bali/G20%20Bali%20Leaders%27%20Declaration,%2015-16%20November%202022.pdf); and author's interview with a G-20 sous-sherpa, Vancouver, November 2022.

<sup>3</sup> "EU, ASEAN Fail to Jointly Condemn Russia's War in Ukraine," Deutsche Welle, December 15, 2022 [~ https://www.dw.com/en/eu-asean-fail-to-jointly-condemn-russias-war-in-ukraine/a-64099763](https://www.dw.com/en/eu-asean-fail-to-jointly-condemn-russias-war-in-ukraine/a-64099763).

of Western views on the Ukraine war. Indeed, for all the West's efforts to propagate a distinctly critical narrative of Russia in Southeast Asia, regional media, scholarship, and leadership remain either noncommittal to the idea of Russian censure or sympathetic to what they perceive as Russia's strategic logic.

As the Ukraine war passed its one-year anniversary in February 2023, Southeast Asian states were decidedly less interested in the war and in criticizing Russia than before. Although in a March 2022 UN General Assembly resolution eight ASEAN members voted to condemn Russia (Vietnam and Laos abstained), polling now shows that Southeast Asian states lead the world in their disinterest toward the war.<sup>4</sup> Large majorities of the public in Thailand (60%) and Malaysia (56%) and sizable numbers in Singapore (44%) and Indonesia (48%) believe that the war is not their business and that their states should not interfere.<sup>5</sup> Far from being a region that is sympathetic to Western narratives on the Ukraine war, Southeast Asia stands out for its perceived detachment from the conflict.

How can one explain Southeast Asian states' apathy toward the war at a time that stands out in many ways as a high-water mark for Western states' attention? While the diversity within and between Southeast Asian states makes it nearly impossible to answer this question comprehensively in short form, there are several trends and characteristics across the region that provide some degree of insight.

First, there is a clear lack of consensus on the origins, strategic direction, and global impact of the Russia-Ukraine war among Southeast Asian states and within ASEAN. Second, most Southeast Asian states remain open to and interested in maintaining economic, political, and social ties with Russia despite Western pressure to limit or restrict engagement. Third, Southeast Asian states are, in general, more cynical about Western intentions toward the war than other states, particularly with respect to Washington's proclivity to use the conflict to justify the further isolation of China and NATO's attempt to use the conflict to expand its influence in Asia.

In this essay, the author will draw on polling data, official statements, media, and scholarship from across Southeast Asia to detail regional states' contemporary views on the Ukraine war and demonstrate that Southeast Asian states are generally less concerned about Russia's invasion

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<sup>4</sup> "The World's Response to the War in Ukraine: A 28 Country Global Advisor Survey," Ipsos, Game Changers, January 2023, 4 ~ <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-01/node-988296-1004661-en.zip>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

of Ukraine than their European and North American counterparts, more critical of the war's economic impact than of its purported effect on the global rules-based order, and cynical about Western narratives and policies toward Russia.

### *Divergent Views on the War's Origins, Strategic Direction, and Global Impact*

Across Southeast Asia, there are significant differences in perceptions of the Ukraine war both between and within states. At the systemic level, the primary differences exist between (1) those states with close U.S. economic and/or strategic ties (i.e., Singapore and the Philippines) that are largely critical of Russia's decision to invade Ukraine, and (2) those states with historical and/or contemporary ties to Russia (Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, and Vietnam) that are far more circumspect in their critique of Moscow.<sup>6</sup>

Singaporean and Philippine leadership, for instance, have stated clearly and repeatedly that they oppose Russian actions in Ukraine, that they support Western countermeasures toward Moscow, and that they worry that Russia's invasion is undermining the global rules-based order and international law. Singaporean leadership, in particular, has specified unambiguously that it will adhere to Western sanctions against Russia, including limiting Russia's access to international finance and banking.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the Marcos regime has been vocal in its criticism of Russian aggression and has sought to deepen its military and security relations with the United States in response to the Ukraine war.<sup>8</sup>

The rest of Southeast Asia is, however, far more empathetic to Russia's strategic logic, which holds that Moscow's decision to invade Ukraine

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<sup>6</sup> David Hutt, "What's Behind SE Asia's Muted Ukraine Response?" Deutsche Welle, March 7, 2022 ~ <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-conflict-whats-behind-southeast-asias-muted-response/a-61039013>; and Richard A. Bitzinger, "The Russia-Ukraine War: Lessons for Southeast Asia," S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, IP23008, January 13, 2023 ~ [https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip23008-the-russia-ukraine-war-lessons-for-southeast-asia/#.Y\\_F3CnZBzSI](https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip23008-the-russia-ukraine-war-lessons-for-southeast-asia/#.Y_F3CnZBzSI).

<sup>7</sup> "MFA Spokesperson's Comments on the Situation in Ukraine," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Singapore), February 24, 2022 ~ <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2022/02/20220224-Ukraine>; and "Sanctions and Restrictions against Russia in Response to Its Invasion of Ukraine," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Singapore), March 5, 2022 ~ <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2022/03/20220305-sanctions>.

<sup>8</sup> Beteena Unite, "Marcos Says Russia's War in Ukraine Is 'Unacceptable,'" *Manila Bulletin*, November 19, 2022 ~ <https://mb.com.ph/2022/11/19/marcos-says-russias-war-in-ukraine-is-unacceptable>.

stems from Kyiv's stated intention to pursue NATO membership.<sup>9</sup> Leadership statements on the war from Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand are either ambiguous about or oppositional to Western narratives of Russian aggression, instead focusing on the need for a negotiated outcome to the war that recognizes both Russia's and Ukraine's national security interests.<sup>10</sup> Within ASEAN deliberations, strategic views on Ukraine are more notable for their lack of unity than agreement. Where ASEAN has gone on record regarding the Ukraine war, it has done so in general terms, for instance, calling on "all relevant parties" to exercise restraint.<sup>11</sup>

Notably, there are also marked differences within Southeast Asian states, primarily between state and society perspectives. Whereas statements by leaders tend to focus on the war's effect on an international order or rules-based system, recent polling shows that the majority of Southeast Asians worry almost exclusively about the war's impact on the global and regional economies.<sup>12</sup> Rather than seeing the war as a strategic threat, people across Southeast Asia are more concerned that the war has contributed to inflation and a cost-of-living crisis. From this perspective, Southeast Asian societies see the West's response, focused on sanctions, trade restrictions, and global energy markets, as being as destabilizing as Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

### *Continuing Ties with Russia*

Closely correlated with Southeast Asian state perceptions of the war is the degree to which states see their relations with Russia as either problematic

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<sup>9</sup> Ian Storey and William Choong, "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Southeast Asian Responses and Why the Conflict Matters to the Region," ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, Perspective 2022, no. 24, March 9, 2022 ~ [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2022\\_24.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ISEAS_Perspective_2022_24.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, "Indonesian Government Statement Regarding the Military Attack in Ukraine," Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia in Vancouver, Canada, February 25, 2022 ~ <https://kemlu.go.id/vancouver/en/news/17861/indonesian-government-statement-regarding-the-military-attack-in-ukraine>; "Myanmar Regime Backs Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Irrawaddy*, February 25, 2022 ~ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-regime-backs-russias-invasion-of-ukraine.html>; and Subasa Suruga, "Laos President: Sanctions, Embargoes 'Will Not Make World a Better Place': Thongloun Says His Government Will Not Take Sides in Today's Conflicts," *Nikkei Asia*, May 27, 2022 ~ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Future-of-Asia/The-Future-of-Asia-2022/Laos-president-Sanctions-embargoes-will-not-make-world-a-better-place>.

<sup>11</sup> "ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement on the Situation in Ukraine," ASEAN, February 26, 2022 ~ <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ASEAN-FM-Statement-on-Ukraine-Crisis-26-Feb-Final.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Sharon Seah et al., "The State of Southeast Asia: 2023 Survey Report" ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, February 9, 2023, 18 ~ <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/The-State-of-SEA-2023-Final-Digital-V4-09-Feb-2023.pdf>.

or desirable. Within the region, only Singapore has taken a hard diplomatic approach, pledging repeatedly that it will take policy measures to reduce trade, financing, and investment with Moscow in line with Western-led sanctions.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, the rest of Southeast Asia remains remarkably open to diplomatic and economic ties with Russia, up to and including energy trade. According to polling, 73% of Indonesians polled in 2022, for example, supported the continuation of Indonesian-Russian ties, and respondents in Malaysia and Thailand showed similar levels of support.<sup>14</sup> Further, whereas trade with Russia has decreased in Northeast Asia, it has increased across most of Southeast Asia—an indication that Southeast Asian states remain open to and interested in economic ties with Russia.<sup>15</sup>

### *Cynicism over Western State Intentions*

Perhaps most salient with respect to Southeast Asian views of the Ukraine war is the extensive amount of media, policy analysis, and opinion writing that is fundamentally at odds with the prevailing Western narrative. Rather than describe the war as an act of Russian aggression, for instance, most academics, public intellectuals, and media reports from Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand appear to take a more nuanced view of the conflict. This includes critiquing, among other things, U.S. foreign and security policy, the idea of NATO enlargement, the West's increasing willingness to fight a "proxy war" in Ukraine, and Washington's seeming intention to use the war as a pretext to expand its alliance relations in Asia and to promote NATO's involvement in the region.<sup>16</sup> Whereas Western media is replete with reports

<sup>13</sup> Vivian Balakrishnan, "Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan's Written Reply to Parliamentary Question on the Scope of Singapore's Sanctions on Russia," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Singapore), May 9, 2022 ~ <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2022/05/20220509PQsanctions>.

<sup>14</sup> "The World's Response to the War in Ukraine," 12.

<sup>15</sup> "Russian Exports to South and Southeast Asia Show Significant Year-on-Year Increases," Dezan Shira and Associates, Russia Briefing, April 24, 2022 ~ <https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/russian-exports-to-south-southeast-asia-show-significant-year-on-year-increases.html>.

<sup>16</sup> "Nga va NATO tien gan 'diem khong the quay dau' va nguy co chien tranh hạt nhan" [Russia and NATO are Approaching the "Point of No Return" and the Risk of Nuclear War], Bao Dien Tu VOV, January 31, 2023 ~ <https://vov.vn/the-gioi/quan-sat/nga-va-nato-tien-gan-diem-khong-the-quay-dau-va-nguy-co-chien-tranh-hat-nhan-post998785.vov>; "Pthm bth suk yukhern yuththsastr NATO khyay tau" [The Beginning of the Ukrainian War Expansion NATO Strategy], *Thai Post*, January 31, 2023 ~ <https://www.thaipost.net/columnist-people/317166>; and "Mantan pejabat Prancis sebut ekspansi NATO jadi akar krisis Ukraina" [Former French Official Says NATO Expansion Is at the Root of the Ukraine Crisis], *Antara News*, May 18, 2022 ~ <https://www.antaraneews.com/berita/2885957/mantan-pejabat-prancis-sebut-ekspansi-nato-jadi-akar-krisis-ukraina>.

calling for more armaments for Kyiv, Southeast Asian public discourse is more concerned with the potential for Western-prompted escalation.<sup>17</sup>

This is not to say that criticism of Russia's actions in Ukraine is absent from Southeast Asian discourse on the war. Indeed, one can find criticism of Russian tactics in regional media, particularly those published in English. Where the discourse does differ remarkably is in its skepticism of Western intentions, cynicism over Western states' claims to a moral high ground, and treatment of NATO's role.<sup>18</sup> Charges of Western and U.S. hypocrisy are also present in regional discourse, with references to U.S. military interventions in and invasions of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Vietnam being the most commonly made.<sup>19</sup>

Notably, regional media is also keenly attuned to Western attempts to conflate Russian and Chinese behavior and to argue for a common approach to both. While Southeast Asian states are wary of China's increasing influence, they are far less willing than states in the West to accept the logic that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a precursor for a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.<sup>20</sup> Neither does Southeast Asian commentary propagate the belief that Russia and China are similar strategic threats to international order and international law. For most Southeast Asian states, the Ukraine war is far away and inconsequential to Asia's strategic environment.<sup>21</sup>

### *Understanding the Differences of Perspective*

While Southeast Asia is too diverse for simple classification, there are common themes in the regional discourse on the war that provide insight

<sup>17</sup> "NATO mulai 'main' di Asia, 'seret' ke perang Rusia-Ukraina" [NATO Begins to "Play" in Asia, "Drag" into the Russo-Ukrainian War], CNBC Indonesia, February 1, 2023 ~ <https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/news/20230201050046-4-409878/nato-mulai-main-di-asia-seret-ke-perang-rusia-ukraina>.

<sup>18</sup> Norajaya Tanjapatkul, "Yukh smay hæng phumirathsastr: Kaw su rabeiyb lok sxng khaw xansc hæng stwrns thi 21" [The Age of Geopolitics: Stepping into a Bipolar Global Order of the 21st Century], 101.World, December 27, 2022 ~ <https://www.the101.world/world-2022>.

<sup>19</sup> Viet Hai, "Thoi 'dao duc gia' cua cac nuoc lon" [The "Hypocrisy" of Big Countries], Tin tuc, August 28, 2014 ~ <https://baotintuc.vn/phan-tichnhan-dinh/thoi-dao-duc-gia-cua-cac-nuoc-lon-20140828204710755.htm>; and Oleh Muhammad Fahmi Md. Ramzan, "Konflik Rusia-Ukraine hipokrasi Barat?" [Russia-Ukraine Conflict Western Hypocrisy?], Utusan Malaysia, February 23, 2022 ~ <https://www.utusan.com.my/rencana/2022/02/konflik-rusia-ukraine-hipokrasi-barat>.

<sup>20</sup> Cu Huy Ha Vu, "Nga-Ukraine: Hoa Ky co hoa hoan voi TQ de Viet Nam khoi phai 'di day'?" [Russia-Ukraine: Will the U.S. Make Peace with China So That Vietnam Won't Have to "Walk the Wire"?], BBC News, March 9, 2022 ~ <https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/forum-60670679>; and "Tai sao Ukraina khong phai la Dai Loan?" [Why is Ukraine not Taiwan?], RFI, <https://www.rfi.fr/vi/qu%E1%BB%91c-t%E1%BA%BF/20220304-t%E1%BA%A1i-sao-ukraina-kh%C3%B4ng-ph%E1%BA%A3i-l%C3%A0-%C4%91%C3%A0i-loan>.

<sup>21</sup> Reni Erina, "Apa pun hasil perang Rusia-Ukraina, Uni Eropa akan menjadi pecundang" [Whatever the Outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the European Union Will Be the Loser], RMOLID Network, September 23, 2022.

into why Southeast Asian states and societies hold such different views than their Western counterparts.<sup>22</sup>

First, most Southeast Asian countries are developing states and, as such, have different priorities with respect to security. Whereas Western narratives on the implications of the Ukraine war focus almost exclusively on Russia's threat to the international rules-based order, Southeast Asian commentators primarily write about the war's consequences in socioeconomic terms. Viewing the war from this perspective, Southeast Asian analysts tend to treat it as a complex threat system, one more in line with Western narratives on polycrisis than war.<sup>23</sup>

Second, many Southeast Asian states identify as part of the global South, and, as such, their leaders are more naturally inclined toward "third way" worldviews and policy responses to global issues.<sup>24</sup> Across the region, there is an innate disinterest in adopting externally constructed narratives of global affairs, whether propagated by China, the United States, or Russia. Rather, leaders and public intellectuals across Southeast Asia tend to view global affairs through a regional or national lens that is fundamentally informed by their experiences with great-power politics and their desire to remain neutral in the international system.<sup>25</sup> The most demonstrable example of this predilection is the self-ascribed ASEAN identity, which is predicated on ASEAN values, including ASEAN

<sup>22</sup> "Dampak perang Rusia-Ukraina: memperlambat pertumbuhan negara berkembang Asia" [The Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War: Slowing the Growth of Developing Asian Countries], *Antara News*, April 6, 2022 ~ <https://sumbar.antarane.ws.com/berita/497909/dampak-perang-rusia-ukraina-memperlambat-pertumbuhan-negara-berkembang-asia>.

<sup>23</sup> According to the Cascade Institute, "a global polycrisis occurs when crises in multiple global systems become causally entangled in ways that significantly degrade humanity's prospects." Michael Lawrence, Scott Janzwood, and Thomas Homer-Dixon, "What Is a Global Polycrisis and How Is It Different from a Systemic Risk?" Cascade Institute, Technical Paper #2022-4, September 16, 2022. On Southeast Asian perspectives, see Huynh Dung, "Tu chien su Nga-Ukraine: Lam phat dang gay hon loan tren toan the gioi, dau la diem nong?" [From Russia-Ukraine War: Inflation Is Causing Chaos around the World, Where Are the Hot Spots?], *Dan Viet*, October 26, 2022 ~ <https://danviet.vn/tu-chien-su-nga-ukraine-lam-phat-dang-gay-hon-loan-tren-toan-the-gioi-dau-la-diem-nong-20221026080616744.htm>; "Ngeinfex-phl phwng sngkhrum yukhern tha khn yakcn thaw lok pheim khun xik 71 lan khn" [Inflation—Aftermath of the Ukrainian War Makes the World's Poor an Additional 71 Million], *Thansethakit*, July 9, 2022 ~ <https://www.thansettakij.com/world/532091>; and Putri Novani Khairizka, "Dampak perang Ukraina, inflasi RI dapat tembus 4%" [Impact of the Ukraine War, RI's Inflation Can Reach 4%], *Pajakku*, 2022 ~ <https://www.pajakku.com/read/622af310a9ea8709cb189691/Dampak-Perang-Ukraina-Inflasi-RI-Dapat-Tembus-4-Persen>.

<sup>24</sup> Kishore Mahbubani, "Asia's Third Way: How ASEAN Survives—and Thrives—amid Great-Power Competition," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2023 ~ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/southeast-asia/asias-third-way-asean-amid-great-power-competition>.

<sup>25</sup> Thiwin Suputtikul, "Khid pi thang hin lok hmun pi thang nan? Cak Yukhern Tihwan su Wethi Prachum Phuna Lok" [Where Do You Think the World Spins That Way? From Ukraine, Taiwan to the World Leaders Forum], 101.World, November 25, 2022 ~ <https://www.the101.world/world-order-and-self-fulfilling-prophecy>.



centrality, noninterference, and consultation.<sup>26</sup> Given these values, one can understand ASEAN's insistence on remaining neutral on the Ukraine war as a function of its identity.<sup>27</sup>

Third, and related, is Southeast Asia's colonial history—a legacy that informs discourse on the Russia-Ukraine war throughout the region. While postcolonial sentiment does contribute to sympathy toward Ukraine across the region, it also manifests as cynicism toward the West's involvement and NATO's intentions, as apathy to U.S.-led calls for strategic alignment, and as empathy for Russia.<sup>28</sup> Southeast Asian states and societies are more accepting of Russia's narrative of self-defense against Western encroachment and hegemony, rather than viewing Moscow's decision to initiate war as inherently aggressive, for instance.<sup>29</sup> Southeast Asian memories of Western intervention also undermine regional support for regime change in Russia as a precondition for a negotiated peace. Rather, writings and analysis on the war throughout Southeast Asia tend to call for Western negotiations with Vladimir Putin to end hostilities.<sup>30</sup>

Fourth, Southeast Asian states do not want to bandwagon with any great power on the Ukraine war, as doing so is not in their national interests. Rather, Southeast Asian leaders, policy thinkers, and academics are fundamentally committed to the idea of nonalignment, neutrality, and flexibility in their approach to the war, particularly as they believe it has little direct strategic impact on the region. In this respect, the West's

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<sup>26</sup> ASEAN, ASEAN, no. 1, May 2020 ~ <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/The-ASEAN-Magazine-Issue-1-May-2020.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> Ukrit Pattamanan, “Sngkhrām Rāsseiy-Yukhern nī Xaseiyn/lok thr rsn” [Russo-Ukrainian War in ASEAN/Worldview], *Matchon Weekly*, April 28, 2022 ~ [https://www.matchonweekly.com/column/article\\_544762](https://www.matchonweekly.com/column/article_544762).

<sup>28</sup> Theo Mot The gioi, “Bao My: Phuong tay dang can thiep qua sau vao Ukraine?” [U.S. Newspaper: The West Is Interfering Too Deeply in Ukraine?], Thanh vien lien hiep cac to chuc huu nghi Viet Nam, January 31, 2023 ~ <http://vpdf.org.vn/tin-tuc-su-kien/chinh-tri-xa-hoi/bao-my-phuong-tay-dang-can-thiep-qua-sau-vao-ukraine-.html>.

<sup>29</sup> “Yukhern sngkhrām tawthēn fay prachathiptyj kab xanac niym” [Ukraine's Representative War against Democracy and Authoritarianism], *Thai Post*, February 19, 2023 ~ <https://www.thaipost.net/columnist-people/326892>.


<sup>30</sup> Duy Linh, “Tong thong Putin: Nga san sang dam phan voi tat ca cac ben o Ukraine” [President Putin: Russia Is Ready to Negotiate with All Parties in Ukraine], *Tuoi tre*, December 25, 2022 ~ <https://tuoitre.vn/tong-thong-putin-nga-san-sang-dam-phan-voi-tat-ca-cac-ben-o-ukraine-20221225171824743.htm>; and “Pu ti nph r xm cerca Se len ski hak Yukhern yxmrb khwam pen cring reuxng din daen him” [Putin Ready to Negotiate with Zelensky If Ukraine Accepts New Territorial Realities], *Thai Post*, January 5, 2023 ~ <https://www.thaipost.net/abroad-news/297467>.

zero-sum approach to Ukraine war diplomacy is particularly ineffectual in Southeast Asia.<sup>31</sup>

### Conclusion

While the Ukraine war has little direct impact on Southeast Asia's strategic order, it has brought a regional trend into sharp relief: that Southeast Asian states are less willing to act as proxies for great-power conflict than they did during the Cold War and more willing to take positions on foreign and security affairs that run counter to great-power priorities. Even though two states, Singapore and the Philippines, have expressed support for international actions against Russia, Southeast Asian states are, in general, intent on remaining neutral and nonaligned rather than inclined to bandwagon with one state against another. While omnidirectional diplomacy is nothing new in Southeast Asia, that it manifests itself so clearly on a matter of such strategic importance for the global West is notable, particularly when the costs of alignment are minimal.

Further, that Southeast Asian states are able to remain neutral, despite the mounting global pressures for them to endorse Western narratives and perspectives on the Ukraine war, speaks to their growing agency as strategic actors. Rather than passively accepting the predominant Western worldview on Russia, most Southeast Asian states have instead actively developed alternative narratives that are more in line with their own foreign policy and security interests. Finally, Southeast Asia's emergence as an alternative source of narrative power on Ukraine is particularly significant, as it reflects the region's global strategic importance and individual states' abilities to leverage this importance.

The West will likely see this last development as a strategic liability, but it should be recognized for what it is: the deepening of a subregion into a distinct security complex with its own priorities, networks, and narratives. The United States and other countries in the West can no longer look to Southeast Asia as a region to be compelled. On the contrary, Southeast Asian states' reactions to the Ukraine war show that it is now a region that must be convinced. 

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<sup>31</sup> Kris Mada and Harry Susilo, "Tek-teki kekuatan besar dalam perang Rusia-Ukraina" [The Great Powers Riddle in the Russo-Ukrainian War], *Kompas*, July 7, 2022  $\approx$  <https://www.kompas.id/baca/internasional/2022/07/07/teka-teki-kekuatan-besar-dalam-perang-rusia-ukraina>; and "Xung dot Nga-Ukraine: Nhung an so kho doan" [The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict: Unpredictable Unknowns], Central Agency of the Vietnam Communist Party, February 10, 2023  $\approx$  <https://dangcongsan.vn/the-gioi/tin-tuc/xung-dot-nga-ukraine-nhung-an-so-kho-doan-631329.html>.