

Putin's war in Ukraine has deepened ASEAN disunity

10-member bloc needs to find a way to accommodate opposing points of view

Thitinan Pongsudhirak

Thitinan Pongsudhirak is a professor and director of the Institute of Security and International Studies at Chulalongkorn University's faculty of political science in Bangkok.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's unilateral decision to invade Ukraine on Feb. 24 has further divided the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations, exacerbating existing tensions over other key challenges and compounding internal divisions.

As a consequence, ASEAN's age-old consensus-driven approach of working to find a response seems ill-suited to the current crisis and the regional bloc needs to find new and more effective ways of cooperation among like-minded member states.

ASEAN has been divided since 2012 when Cambodia, as ASEAN's then rotational chair, was unable to put together the traditional joint statement at the end of the annual leaders' summit. The sticking point was China's maneuvers in the South China Sea that were opposed by the Philippines and Vietnam, and ASEAN has remained polarized over China's maritime assertiveness ever since.

The bloc was further challenged by U.S. moves to counter Beijing, first by President Barack Obama's push for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a regional trade deal that excluded China, and then by President Donald Trump's all-out trade war with China and his endorsement of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept to contain Beijing.

As tensions between the two superpowers intensified, ASEAN was pressed and picked apart by both sides. Cambodia and Laos became overt, all-weather China allies, while Singapore and Vietnam increasingly leaned toward the U.S.

The bloc was able to regroup up to a point under Thailand's chairmanship in 2019 when it developed the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, helping it to regain a degree of autonomy and latitude with regard to the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy. This was followed by the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership in 2020 under Vietnam's chairmanship.

But then came the coup in Myanmar in February last year and the ensuing civil war, which has seen Southeast Asian governments line up on opposing sides.

While Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore have called for the return of democracy and a resumption of pre-coup conditions, the rest of ASEAN was muted. Nearly three months after the Tatmadaw, as Myanmar's military is known, seized power, ASEAN came up with a five-point consensus to mediate and facilitate dialogue in Myanmar led by an ASEAN envoy, a proposal that has made little progress.

Now Russia's war in Ukraine has exposed another fault line. ASEAN's initial reaction to the invasion was perfunctory and lame, calling for diplomatic means and peaceful resolution without

condemning the invasion itself and ultimately undermining the organization's core principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and noninterference.

When the United Nations General Assembly forwarded a nonbinding resolution to condemn Russia for "aggression against Ukraine," Laos and Vietnam were among the 35 abstentions, while the other eight ASEAN member states were among the 141 that voted in favor including Cambodia, which co-sponsored the move.

Singapore was among the most active of the ASEAN nations, moving to impose outright sanctions on Russia. Thailand voted for the U.N. resolution, but its written position stopped short of condemning Russia by name.

Curiously, ASEAN disunity has not followed earlier patterns.

When it comes to China's interests in the South China Sea and the coup in Myanmar, Cambodia has remained supportive of Beijing and the Tatmadaw but has refused to support Russia, while Laos has appeared to back all three -- China in the South China Sea, the Tatmadaw and Moscow.

Vietnam has been critical of China, silent on Myanmar's coup and sympathetic to Russia. Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore have remained aligned in their concerns about China's role in the South China Sea, Myanmar's military takeover and Russia's war in Ukraine. Thailand has been soft on China's South China Sea belligerence and Myanmar's coup but has taken a measured stand against Russia's invasion.

Myanmar itself is a telling case. As the U.N. still recognizes its ambassador from the ousted government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's vote was opposite to the Tatmadaw's fervent support for the Kremlin.

With ASEAN again being chaired by Cambodia this year, internal divisions will make it difficult for the grouping to host its annual round of summits with the major powers, which occasionally include Russia. This is because countries such as the U.S., Japan, Australia and others will likely boycott forums such as the East Asia Summit if Russia is allowed to attend. This is a time of existential crisis for ASEAN where fudging and muddling may not get by.

What ASEAN needs is a new approach of like-mindedness. Those willing and able to take common positions short of a regionwide, 10-member consensus, should be allowed to go ahead and do so. Already Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore are leading the way.

Others, such as Thailand and Vietnam, can join on issues and areas they deem to be in their interest. The rest can sit out or come in as they see fit in an ASEAN 5 plus X formula. ASEAN's founding members Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore should lead the way toward this new modus operandi.

The ASEAN we have known over the past 23 years, when Cambodia was admitted as a full member, has run its course. The sooner Southeast Asian countries and their partners can come to grips with this new reality, the sooner the regional organization can undergo a long-overdue revamp.