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## **Why Have Southeast Asian Governments Stayed Silent Over Ukraine?**

**The region should be concerned about the baneful precedent set by the Russian invasion of the Donbass.**

**By Sebastian Strangio**

For a region whose governments profess a zealous adherence to the norms of national sovereignty and mutual non-interference, the silence emanating from Southeast Asia's capitals after Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine on February 21 has been somewhat hard to fathom.

As of press time, the only Southeast Asian country to have expressed open concern about the Russian action was Singapore, whose Foreign Ministry stated that "the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Ukraine must be respected." According to Foreign Policy, Singapore has also gone one step further, expressing its support for U.S. plans to implement restrictive export controls on Russia.

As far as this observer could determine, the foreign ministries of Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Timor-Leste are yet to criticize publicly the Russian actions. A day before the invasion, Indonesia's President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo urged restraint and said that "war must not happen" over Ukraine, but focused mostly on possible impacts of the crisis on the global economy and the fight against COVID-19.

Even the normally loquacious Teddy Locsin, the Philippines' foreign minister, has been relatively quiet on the issue, except for a few informal comments on Twitter. His foreign ministry, meanwhile, has focused less on violations of state sovereignty than on securing safe passage for Filipinos living and working in Ukraine.

While the coming days may bring more official responses, it would be surprising if the region produced something approaching the forceful and eloquent response of Kenya's mission to the United Nations, in which it denounced the Russian action and urged the world to "complete our recovery from the embers of dead empires in a way that does not plunge us back into new forms of domination and oppression."

So far even China has been more outspoken about the crisis than most Southeast Asian nations. On February 19, Foreign Minister Wang Yi delivered a speech to the Munich Security Dialogue in which he stressed that "the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of all countries should be respected and safeguarded," a principle that he said "applies equally to Ukraine." (Whether Beijing can square this commitment to its quickening strategic compact with Moscow remains to be seen.)

What explains the Southeast Asian reticence? If the offending country was China, and its target a disputed Himalayan enclave or a coral speck in the Spratly Islands, the silence would be if not admirable at least understandable. China is a key economic partner to the region, and for this reason alone many governments would have a strong incentive to keep quiet – as many have done on the question of Beijing's assertiveness in the South China Sea.

Russia is a different matter entirely. It engages in relatively small levels of trade with Southeast Asia, and has very few investments in the region. True, Russia is the leading arms supplier to a number of Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam and military-ruled Myanmar. But it is hard to see this alone acting as a meaningful deterrent to Southeast Asian opposition. As Zachary Abuza of the National War College in Washington, D.C., noted in an article this week, “Russia poses little in the way of an immediate threat to Southeast Asian nations.”

The only explanation that makes sense to this observer is that this silence is an outgrowth of the region’s reflexive diplomatic caution and its honed preference for process over outcome. Some Southeast Asian nations may simply view the Ukraine crisis as remote and not directly relevant to their interests. Others may feel that a protracted conflict can only have negative impacts on the region’s economic prospects, already reeling due to two years of pandemic-induced restrictions and closures, and that if they are unable to contribute to the solution of the crisis, then silence is the better part of valor.

But as Abuza convincingly argued, the Russian incursion into Donetsk and Luhansk sets a baneful precedent that should worry the nations of Southeast Asia. “All the countries of Southeast Asia depend on international law, which is based on the concept of sovereign equality,” he writes. As such, any attempts to violate this principle “cut to the core of Southeast Asian security and prosperity.”

At this point I will enter a minor dissent to the effect that the precedent for the illegal use of force to override national sovereignty was set back in 1999, when the United States and its NATO allies bombed Serbia over its ethnic cleansing in Kosovo in violation of international law, and was reinforced when U.S. subsequently invaded Iraq on dubious premises in 2003. (Indeed, the statement from the Kenyan ambassador to the U.N. nested its criticisms of Putin’s invasion within a broader concern about “powerful states, including members of this Security Council, breaching international law with little regard.”)

Nonetheless, the specific justification that Putin has employed for his action – a unilateral and nationalistic interpretation of Ukraine as a fake nation and an integral part of historic Russia – creates a more specific and worrying precedent. As Abuza writes, “China could easily apply the logic that Putin used to annul Ukrainian sovereignty to make sweeping claims to swaths of Southeast Asia,” citing the case of northern Vietnam, which was ruled as a Chinese imperial appendage for a millennium, and parts of northern Myanmar populated by ethnic Chinese. (Indeed, parts of northern Myanmar were claimed by China’s Nationalist and Communist governments prior to a border settlement in 1960.)

As another observer noted, Putin’s claim, made in the rambling, belligerent speech in which he announced the invasion on Tuesday, is that Ukraine “never had a tradition of genuine statehood” should ring alarm bells in Southeast Asia, since “the same could be said of any premodern territories that were subjected to imperial rule, including ASEAN countries.” Whether China will stage a similar invasion of territorial Southeast Asia remains questionable, for a host of reasons, but there is no doubting the worrying nature of the precedent at the global scale, especially for nations who so frequently assert the bedrock principle of national sovereignty.

No one is pretending that condemnatory statements from Southeast Asian governments will do anything meaningful to halt the seemingly inexorable slide toward war in eastern Europe. But

it remains somewhat mystifying as to why the governments of the region are choosing to remain so tight-lipped on an issue of clear global, and regional, import.

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