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# How is the Russian Invasion of the Ukraine Impacting Asia and its Future?

There may be darker clouds ahead for the US in Asia. In the long run, Putin, like Hitler, could be responsible for the emergence of a new geopolitical

order on a global scale in which the US place in Asia is less welcome than it once was.



Michael Charney on March 25, 2022

On 24 February 2022, Russian tanks and armoured personnel carriers crossed the frontier into the Ukraine, a former co-member of the Soviet Union and now an independent, sovereign state. Although the Russian air force has not been inactive, it is nowhere near as ubiquitous as the US air force would have been in a comparable invasion. Russian strategic culture has long favoured hard conventional assets in warfare and whether under communism or under Putin, Russian tanks have been a symbol of Russian military might from the taking of Berlin in 1945 to the occupation of Budapest in 1956 to the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and in an assortment of relatively minor conflicts in the Caucasus that preceded the moves last month. Although the People's Republic of China is a close partner with Russia in many ways today, it was not that long ago (1979) that some predicted the big war in Eurasia would be fought between the two, a fear that was seemingly verified by the massing of Russian tanks along the Chinese border in Central Asia and Siberia. Ideologies change as do bedfellows but not, it seems, Russian military

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aggression or the obsession with the reliability of mobile armour and cannon.

The Russian invasion, the western reaction, and the poor performance of the Russian military (or, depending on your point of view, the resilience of the Ukrainian defenders) have all had taken enough time now to provoke a response from a broad spectrum of Asia, some professing neutrality (the PRC), some irking the US by indecision (India), some (the Burmese) flabbergasted at the quick and sustained Western support for the Ukrainian people despite fighting a similarly authoritarian dictator an military in Myanmar for a year now, and others taking a very firm position against the Russian transgression of the international rules based order (Singapore). The responses have done everything from isolate Russia from important markets and sources of revenue, on the one hand, to raising questions about the moral integrity of the West to the future of the Quad, on the other.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the likely outcomes of the actions and reactions of the last few weeks will have important consequences across the region. South Korea which has tried to soften its relationship with the north has stepped more cautiously than Japan in supporting international sanctions against Russia, although its alliance with the US did lead to its cooperation, although less enthusiastically than was Japan's. South Korea fears emboldening North

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Japan. South Korea fears emboldening North Korea. On the one hand, the invasion of the Ukraine might be a boon for North Korea. As Ruediger Frank has suggested, North Korea, long suffering from the cutting back of the supply of Russian oil and with it, the pariah state's production of chemical fertilizer contributing to economic catastrophe and famine, could see this reverse. Russia, it has been argued, might decide not to abide by the international sanctions that cap North Korean fuel to 500,000 barrels per year. Politically, North Korea would be a clear beneficiary should the Asian economy be affected by the emergence of opposing blocs. And, in line with this hope perhaps, North Korea voted against the United Nations resolution calling for Russia to halt its invasion of the Ukraine.

But the bigger fear for South Korea is the encouragement the Russian invasion gives to revisionist states everywhere who seek to change the borders their leaders inherited and North Korea is one of them. Scot Snyder has pointed to North Korea's long-lasting hope to erase the armistice line and reunite the peninsula under its control. Worse is the fact that what has stymied a Western response in the Ukraine is Russia's possession of a nuclear arsenal. The advantages of pursuing both nuclear weapons and its long-range ballistic missile technology are clear to Kim Jong-un. Russia and China have led efforts to reduce existing sanctions on North Korea, but a changed geopolitical climate

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appears to threaten to make them irrelevant altogether.<sup>2</sup>

While the setting loose of North Korea may be a concern for Japan, it creates larger problems for the longstanding US ally and Quad member. The 'Big Game' in East Asia for a decade now has not been waged between the US and China, but between the latter and Japan. Japan's attempts to compete with the Belt-Road Initiative (BRI) with the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision has secured its alliances with Australia, the US, and India, as well as different Southeast Asian partners. But, as Kathrin Hille explains, Japan had vigorously tried to drive an economic and perhaps security wedge between Russia and the PRC through investment in the declining Far East, a peace treaty returning some of the Kuril Islands to Japan, and cooperation with Russia and limiting China's expanding influence. Forced to choose between Russia and retaining its close relationship with the US, Japan decidedly favoured the latter and responded with robust targeted sanctions in response to the invasion of the Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> Russia has responded with less robust but perhaps more symbolically dramatic moves by withdrawing from WWII peace treaty talks with Japan and freezing joint economic projects in the Kurils.<sup>4</sup>

Southeast Asia's response has been mixed. Singapore came out very quickly against the

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invasion and promised sanctions against Russia. Singapore's vulnerability to Malaysia and Indonesia and the memory of ideas such as Maphilindo ensure that it is a staunch supporter of the international rules-based order and the sanctity of territorial sovereignty. Unsurprisingly and in sharp contrast, the military junta in Myanmar strongly supported the invasion on the grounds of shoring up Russia's national security. Nevertheless, the other nine members of ASEAN (including the NUG representing the overthrown government of Myanmar) have adopted more cautious approaches for a number of reasons. First, the region is only now recovering from the impact of covid and do not wish to risk economic recovery in a sanctions war with Russia (and perhaps its supporters) in the future if they can do so without hurting economic ties with the West and Japan. ASEAN states have traditionally tried to steer clear of political involvement in each other's domestic affairs and the peculiar historical relationship between the Ukraine and Russia is close enough. Third, sanctions have usually been frowned upon as representing unwanted external manipulation from the West. Southeast Asia, thanks to the legacies of the US losing three countries (Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam) to Communism during the Cold War and many decades of military rule in Myanmar has a long experience with both international sanctions on fellow countries in region and pressure from the US and other Western

countries to impose them on their neighbours or how to circumvent them with the help of their regional friends. Officially, Malaysia and Indonesia have no issue condemning the Russian invasion but refuse to cooperate in terms of unilateral sanctions, only raising hope they might do so if put through the United Nations.<sup>5</sup> Laos and Vietnam have a long history of close relations with Russia and have decided to remain neutral, as have Thailand and Cambodia. The Philippines and Brunei have been critical of Russia although slow to come to this and reticent to go much further than condemnation.

The fifth reason for cautious footsteps is that in many Southeast Asian countries the general public is not onboard for the campaign against Russia. Unofficially, among the Malaysian and Indonesian publics, years of Western Islamophobia is paying Russia dividends as Russian propaganda has found a receptive audience among Netizens on social media in the majority Muslim countries where anti-Western sentiment is rife.<sup>6</sup> One might even argue along the lines of Benedict Anderson, that Indonesian (and by extension, Southeast Asian) political culture favours strong leaders (Adolf Hitler is remembered here as a great leader after all) who reveal charismatic power through their bold actions — something the invasion of the Ukraine and even lingering memories of Putin's high-profile horse-riding, bare-chested would seem to support.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the events in the Ukraine being so far away, there may be very serious consequences ahead for relationships between Asian countries. The US may force many of those on the fence to choose sides. President Biden has most recently threatened secondary sanctions against China if it supports Russia.<sup>8</sup> China, like India (despite its place in the Quad), has resisted condemning the Russia invasion and has even considered ways to circumvent the dollars-based system to exchange rupees and rubles which would help Russia evade sanctions.<sup>9</sup> This is mainly due to the pro-trade policies of both the PRC and India (under Modi). In the PRC's case, there is additionally the fear of US leverage over its economy either directly or indirectly through Japanese banks. Biden's threats though raise fears among Southeast Asian states, such as Thailand and Indonesia, that would rather stay neutral that they might also face sanctions for continuing to do business as usual with Russia. We may find in this crisis yet another pressure added to the tension of being caught between the PRC and the Quad as something that threatens to pull ASEAN apart.

There may also be darker clouds ahead for the US in Asia. The region that has often been suspicious of Chinese expansionism and the underlying motives and impact of the BRI as well as its territorial claims to the South China Sea and it once welcomed the prospect, in some quarters, of President Obama's



declared pivot back to Asia (something Biden is purportedly trying to realise) that would help to balance out the PRC and offer Asian countries the opportunity to benefit from safe economic exposure to both. The Western response to the Russian invasion of the Ukraine did raise some sympathy for Ukrainians but, as it continued and was ramped up very quickly, Southeast Asians, such as the Burmese living under the heel of the military in Myanmar find the imbalance in Western concern disheartening. Social media and opinion pieces by both those in the West and in Asia have decried the underlying racism that makes Ukrainian lives appear to seem, to the West, more valuable than those of Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, where responses are often late, half-hearted, and self-serving. The US in particular has been blamed for moral hypocrisy as well, given its numerous invasions and military strikes in the Middle East in the last two decades and a kind of determined unilateralism where the US is the sole arbiter of global right and wrong. It may be that Putin, like Hitler, will fail miserably in the end. Nevertheless, in the long run, Putin, again like Hitler, will have been responsible for the emergence of a new geopolitical order on a global scale in which the US place in Asia is less welcome than it once was.

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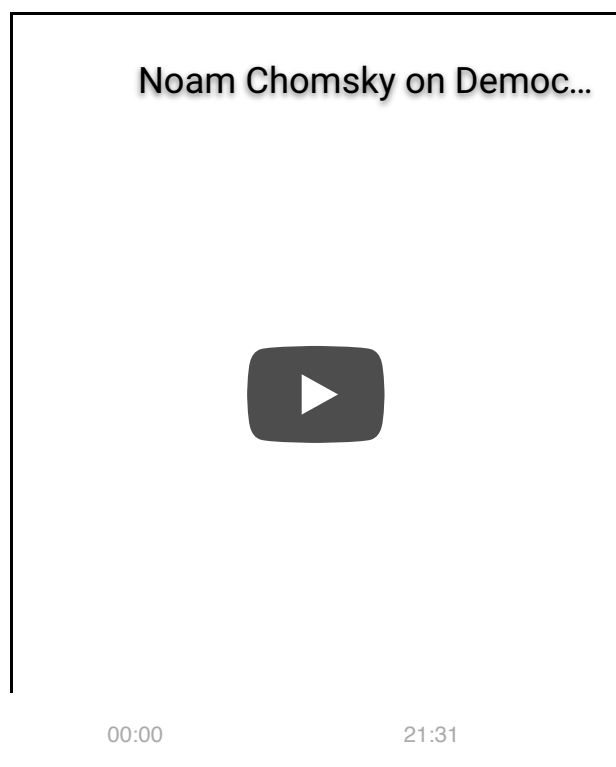


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