



## **WHY ASEAN SHOULD HEED THE DISTANT TOLLING OF BELLS**

BY **PATRICK O'CONNOR**

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It is hard to know what deft (or otherwise) diplomacy is going on behind the scenes in ASEAN-led architecture in the lead-up to the season of summitry, most importantly the East Asia Summit (EAS). This includes the range of precursor senior officials meetings which often set the conditions for ministerial and leaders-level meetings later in the year. But diplomacy will need to be deft to find a position that at least balances the concerns of all EAS partners with respect to Russia's participation.

Based on public-facing statements and commentary, right now it appears there is no balance. ASEAN does not seem to have taken action that has imposed costs on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, acknowledged the concerns of other EAS members, or expressed ASEAN condemnation of Russia's actions.

ASEAN foreign ministers did issue three statements in relation to Ukraine: one calling for restraint and de-escalation on [Feb. 26](#); one calling for a ceasefire on [March 3](#); and one about the killing of civilians and humanitarian access on [April 8](#).

While this was welcome, these statements did not mention Russia. They thus did not challenge Russia's reprehensible actions.

ASEAN countries also largely supported the UN General Assembly resolution on [March 2](#), which

“deplored in the strongest terms” Russia's aggression against Ukraine and demanded Russia's immediate, complete, and unconditional withdraw from Ukraine territory (Laos and Vietnam abstained); and on [March 24](#) in relation to the humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine (Brunei, Laos, and Vietnam abstained). But only the Philippines voted in favour of the UN Human Rights Council's resolution to suspend Russia on [April 7](#).

ASEAN's statements and each country's UN voting record indicates the limits of action for individual ASEAN members and ASEAN as a bloc. Singapore, however, has been the most forward-leaning, applying sanctions against Russia).

Cambodia, as the chair of ASEAN, with Indonesia as chair of the G20, and Thailand as chair of APEC, issued a [joint statement](#) on May 4 saying: “we are determined to work with all our partners and stakeholders to ensure a spirit of cooperation.”

Russia no doubt was pleased to see this, [stating publicly](#) that the statement represented “an important contribution to strengthening multilateralism, building an atmosphere of cooperation and trust, mutual respect and a reciprocal consideration of interests, not only in the region but also globally.”

While it does not make explicit references to Russia, the trilateral statement indicates that the chairs of these three international groupings will not exclude Russian participation.

Make no mistake, despite the waves of mis- and disinformation and fallacious narratives, Russia's actions are a breach of international law, both in the principle of its invasion as well as in its ongoing execution—particularly as there are multiple reports detailing violations of the laws of war, and crimes against humanity occurring at the hands of Russian officers and soldiers.

But this is not just a breach of international law. It is also a trampling of the principles that ASEAN purports to hold dear—including sovereignty, non-interference, and the rule of law. These are the principles ASEAN has captured in its own [Charter](#), and the [Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast](#)

[Asia](#) to which, as a Dialogue Partner of ASEAN, Russia is a party.

ASEAN has constantly voiced (almost in desperate, anxious tones) the need to maintain its centrality in the region's institutional architecture. But centrality requires credibility. ASEAN risks its credibility by not taking stronger action.

ASEAN's consensus-based and conservative approach means that it proceeds at the pace of the slowest member and lowest level of comfort to take action. ASEAN consensus is also influenced by the longstanding relations that some ASEAN members have with Russia, including on military sales. Through this approach, ASEAN seeks to maintain the status quo, to avoid confrontation with major powers or having to "choose sides." That approach, however, constrains ASEAN's ability to respond with agility to the shifting geostrategic reality and overlooks the threats to its longer-term interests.

Many countries in the region want ASEAN to maintain credibility and relevance, and believe it is important for regional stability. If ASEAN is to do so, it must take a stance against breaches of international law and (for the most part) universally accepted principles. Otherwise, those principles are moot.

Failure to take action is to legitimize and normalize Russia's aggression in Ukraine. It ignores not only Ukraine's current plight, but also Russia's threats to other countries in Europe—including Sweden and Finland, who see the writing on the wall and have shifted their long-standing position about NATO membership.

It is important to recognise ASEAN's rationale for not wanting to take sides. But this is not about taking sides with any one country. This is about taking the side of principle. It is essential to reinforce regional stability, security, and prosperity.

Expelling Russia from international fora where Moscow participate with Southeast Asian countries would be a step too far for ASEAN. But finding a better balance would be in order. A good start would be an explicit acknowledgement that Russia is the aggressor.

It is time ASEAN stepped up to demonstrate why it has become an integral part of the regional political architecture. Doing so will prove its value as a key platform in shaping and reinforcing norms of behavior.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*