



ASEAN UNITY AND THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CRISIS

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Dato Lim, ASEAN's former secretary general, recently [admitted](#) that ASEAN's ability to function effectively depends on the capability of its members to align their national interests with regional imperatives. Given the diversity within and between its member states, preserving unity has been a core objective since the organization's inception.

For example, the 1967 [Bangkok declaration](#)—the organization's founding document—emphasized regional cooperation and strengthening existing bonds of regional solidarity. The [1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation](#) reiterated these sentiments. In the aftermath of the 2012 [Bali Concord II](#), however, ASEAN set out to create a “cohesive, resilient and integrated ASEAN community” with a “common regional identity.” This drive toward unity was accentuated through the ASEAN [Regional Community Vision of 2025](#), with its target of “one identity and one community” adhering to “shared values and norms.”

Even so, disunity persists. The crisis of Myanmar, for example: In April 2021, two months after the junta took power in a [coup](#), ASEAN forwarded a [five-point consensus](#) on the crisis. Violence continues to escalate, however, generating vocal international [criticism](#) toward ASEAN's slow response. While Indonesia,

Malaysia, and Singapore have been largely more critical of the junta's actions, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos have remained taciturn.

Global issues have similarly failed to engender regional consensus. The Russia-Ukraine war is a notable example. ASEAN responses, in terms of policy documents and statements, to the events since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 have been relatively muted. A 2014 joint EU-ASEAN [statement](#) following the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, condemned the act and called on all parties to stop the violence. The organization also addressed the situation in Ukraine at the foreign ministers' level, but interestingly, only after 2022.

On [Feb. 26, 2022](#), [March 3, 2022](#), and [April 8, 2022](#), ASEAN foreign ministers issued statements on the conflict. The Russian invasion of Ukraine was referred to as “hostilities” taking place in Ukraine. Instead of calling on Russia to withdraw from its occupation of Ukrainian territory in contravention to international law, the statements only called for “an immediate ceasefire or armistice” followed by “political dialogues that would lead to sustainable peace in Ukraine.”

Singapore and Laos represent contrasting perspectives. A [2023](#) survey conducted by Singapore's Yusof Ishak Institute shows that only 14% of respondents from Laos are “very concerned” about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, compared to over 50% of respondents from Singapore. A [2020](#) survey asking “Who would you consider your country's preferred strategic partner if the United States was unreliable” found that 33% of respondents in Laos considered Russia a suitable partner, while less than 1% felt the same way in Singapore. Differing sentiments toward Russia and, more importantly, how each nation frames the conflict, weakens efforts at unity.

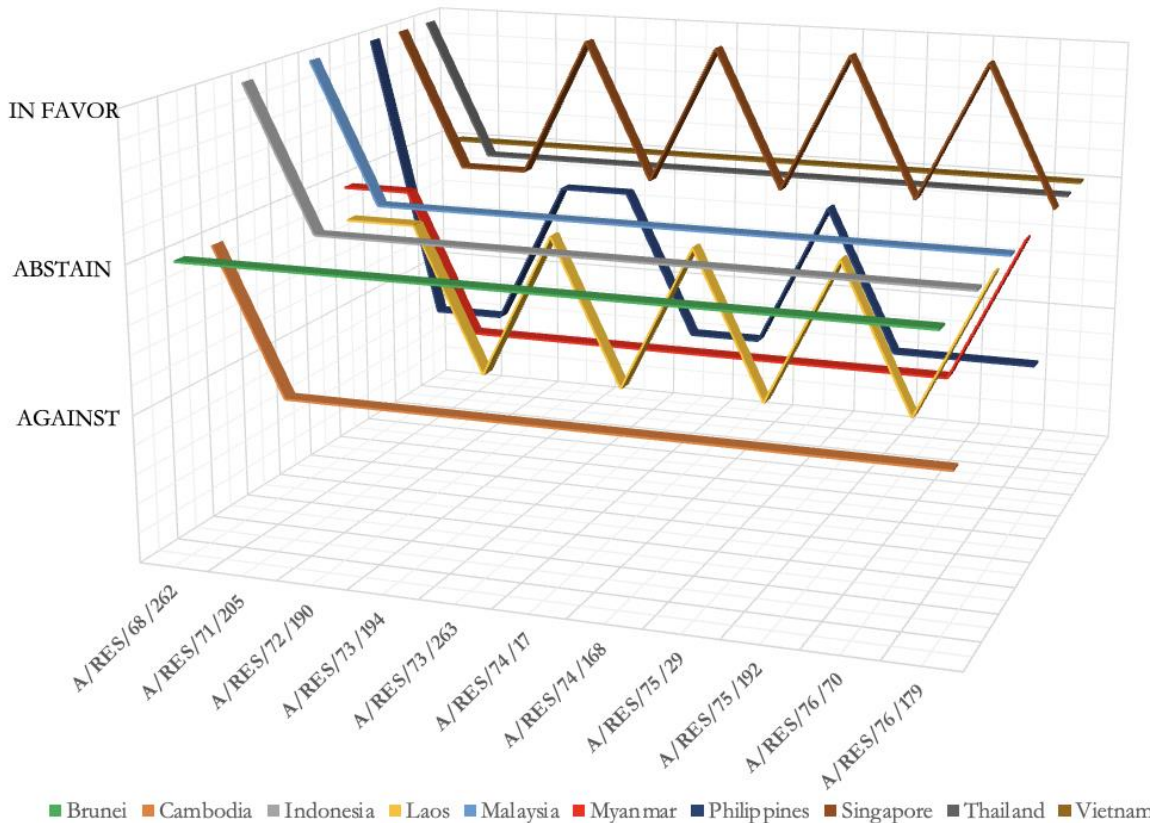
ASEAN unity in praxis—voting in the UNGA

From 2014 to February 2023 there were 11 General Assembly resolutions on the Ukrainian crisis. In each, barring one (A/RES/68/262), all 10 ASEAN nations expressed their vote. The trajectories of voting

patterns demonstrates the absence of a united position in the organization.

war, Laos (except for A/RES/68/262, where it did not vote) has consistently voted against.

UNGA Resolutions on Russia's invasion of Ukraine



Source: Author's data, based on United Nations General Assembly Voting Records.

As this graph makes evident, most of ASEAN abstained on resolutions concerning the Ukraine War. Brunei and Vietnam, for example, have consistently abstained on UNGA resolutions. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, initially in favor, shifted to abstaining in each subsequent resolution. Singapore is the only ASEAN country that has voted in favor of UNGA resolutions on the subject on more than one occasion. Even so, it has not consistently voted in favor of resolutions. Laos, in contrast, has either abstained or voted against resolutions on the Ukrainian crisis.

Laos and Singapore on the Ukrainian Crisis

To delve deeper, let's explore the voting patterns of Laos and Singapore, the two countries that show the greatest divergence among ASEAN nations. While Singapore has proven most willing among all ASEAN nations to support UNGA resolutions on the Ukraine

[A/RES/73/194](#), a resolution adopted on Dec. 17, 2018, is the point where this divergence begins. The resolution directly addressed hostilities taking place in the region and condemned Russia's occupation of Ukrainian territory. It also urged the Russian federation "as the occupying power" to withdraw its forces without delay. Examining the resolution reveals three recurring points of contention between Singapore and Laos. This relates to Article 1, Article 5, and Article 8. Each of these articles are repeated in the resolutions of the next General Assembly session (not the next resolution) and in each case Singapore and Laos adopted starkly differing positions, with one voting in favor and the other voting against. Article 1 focuses on Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty by launching an attack on Ukraine.

Article 5 points out the unjustified nature of Russian action in Ukraine, i.e., that it is in violation of international law. Article 8, meanwhile, classifies

Russia as an “occupying power” and directs our attention to the importance of it ending its “occupation of Ukraine’s territory.” As a result of these three clauses, and more specifically, the framing of Russia’s actions in these clauses, we see a significant divergence in the positions of Singapore and Laos.

[A/RES/73/263](#), a UNGA resolution adopted five days later, does not include these three articles. Consequently, Laos and Singapore abstained. In [A/RES/74/17](#) we witness the divergence once more, as it contains the three articles noted in [A/RES/73/194](#). A/RES/74/17 was passed in 2019, a year after A/RES/73/194. By then the two nations had begun disengaging forces in Zolote and Petrovske (in Eastern Ukraine) and conducted [Normandy Format Meetings](#) – an [informal meeting](#) between French, German, Russian and Ukrainian diplomats.

Even so, the positions of Singapore and Laos remained unchanged as reflected by their voting pattern. *Whenever* UNGA resolutions discuss Russia’s actions as a violation of Ukrainian territorial integrity, note that Russia’s actions are unjustified (and therefore contravene international law), and classify Russia as an occupying power which should withdraw from Ukrainian territory, Laos votes against it while Singapore votes in favor.

This pattern between Singapore and Laos shows the latter’s disregard for the gravity of Russia’s actions. Moreover, it also explains why ASEAN foreign minister meetings did not classify Russia as an “occupying power” in violation of Ukraine’s territorial integrity or even mention Russia in any statements.

Laos’ position may have a direct correlation with its economic crisis. According to its [statistics bureau](#) inflation hit a 22-year high in 2022 which eroded the population’s purchasing power. The nation also struggles to acquire sufficient foreign currency for its imports which has caused fuel shortages. In May 2022, the government stated that it would look for cheaper fuel sources [instead of relying solely](#) on China, Thailand, Vietnam and other nearby nations. Russian gas, meanwhile, is [70% cheaper](#) than other international suppliers which will most likely draw

Laos towards Moscow. Laos’ economic dependence on China might also induce it to welcome stronger ties with Russia; thereby diversifying its foreign relations and enhancing its strategic position through [“mutual checks and balances among its partners.”](#) At the outbreak of hostilities between Ukraine and Russia, Laos’ Foreign Ministry only [stated](#) that it will follow the “evolving, complex and sensitive” situation in the region and called upon all parties to “exercise utmost restraint.” Vientiane also [conducted](#) joint bilateral military drills with Moscow as recently as November 2022.

Accordingly, the fact that ASEAN members cannot agree on who violated international law in the Ukraine conflict casts doubt on the organization’s commitment to a “rules-based” international order. Moreover, if members cannot agree on violations taking place in Eastern Europe, thousands of miles from Southeast Asia, its inability to deal with contentious issues closer to home should be expected.

Conclusion

This is a problem because ASEAN Centrality presupposes unity. If ASEAN hopes to be at the center of the region’s security and economic architecture, the organization must not only adopt a proactive role on regional issues, but also maintain unity and a sense of cohesion on framing regional and global issues. That ASEAN members cannot adopt a common position on a conflict in Eastern Europe casts doubt on its ability to guarantee centrality. The absence of “ASEAN Centrality” could also further enable the establishment of new minilateral initiatives such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and AUKUS to exert a greater role in shaping security developments in Southeast Asia and the wider Indian Ocean region.

A first step to greater unity would be enhancing cooperation among ASEAN states. Wealthier ASEAN countries should seek to help those, like Laos, in a more precarious financial position reduce its dependence on external actors such as Russia.. Given Laos’ financial position other ASEAN nations should provide economic assistance to Vientiane and thereby reduce its dependence on external actors such as Russia. Regular bilateral meetings alone are

insufficient to promote unity—one nation's difficulties must be viewed as the entire region's problem. If the ASEAN nations perceived challenges from this perspective the probability that disunity persists on international issues such as the Ukraine-Russia conflict would decline significantly.

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