

**Unveiling ASEAN’s Diplomatic Equilibrium:  
Assessing Member Nation-States’ Responses to  
Russia’s Attack on Ukraine amidst the  
Rivalry between United States and China**

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**Abstract**

Since the beginning of Russia’s attack on Ukraine in 2022, the stance of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) towards the crisis has been grounded on one of its core principles as a regional bloc—non-interference, with member nation-states expressing varying levels of concern, neutrality, and implicit condemnation. ASEAN as a supranational institution trying to consolidate power in the region’s security, economy, and diplomacy has attracted the eyes of the global powers, such as the United States (US) and China, as they seek support in resolving the conflict and advancing their own interests. With Russia’s invasion of Ukraine at the backdrop, the Sino-US rivalry has intensified in the region through their strategic attempts in influencing the Southeast Asian (SEA) nation-states’ stance in the on-going crisis. It

is on this premise that this paper delves into several key interwoven politico-economic relations and historical ties that justify ASEAN member nation-states' responses in the crisis by (1) tracing the SEA governments' immediate responses, (2) comparing proactive measures taken by these governments to pursue decisions that align with their respective interests, (3) examining the bases of SEA states' actions and public responses, (4) probing into the existing varying interests among SEA governments, and (5) establishing the links between SEA governments' responses to that of US and China. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of ASEAN's roles and actions in global politics, specifically in dealing with issues on peace, security, and stability, amidst the intricate geopolitical landscape of the Asia-Pacific region.

**Keywords:** *ASEAN, Russia-Ukraine conflict, US-China rivalry, ASEAN diplomacy*

## **1. Introduction**

The prevailing dynamics between the United States (US) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have undergone a discernible evolution into a nuanced rivalry, manifesting as a spectrum of persistent tensions in the realms of international security and economic primacy. This rivalry has unfolded through a nuanced progression of diplomatic interactions, encompassing military exercises, impactful economic stratagems, explicit and implicit condemnations, as well as comprehensive high-level sanctions.

After the second World War, the US has adeptly sustained its ascendancy across a spectrum of global equilibrium facets. The US government has strategically wielded both its robust and subtle forms of

influence—coercive and non-coercive, solidifying its status as a paramount global superpower (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). This ascendancy extends to its position as a preeminent international hegemon in the theaters of military and security affairs, harmoniously interwoven with its role as a potent force within the expanse of the global economic matrix.

In parallel, the PRC has embarked on an incremental yet steadfast trajectory toward global presence and influence. PRC's economic prowess, exemplified by its status as a primary global manufacturing nucleus, has experienced striking amplification in recent years (Chabra *et al.*, 2020). Notably, China has surpassed the US in becoming the primary trading partner for across Latin America, Africa, and, notably, in the Indo-Pacific Region (U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, 2021). These assertive actions by China have prompted concerns among incumbent powers invested in the Indo-Pacific Region, thereby triggering a sense of circumspection and vigilance.

In the Southeast Asian (SEA) region, the rivalry between US and China is encapsulated in their relationships with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The US-ASEAN relation is characterized by extensive commercial and trade ties, with the US being ASEAN's largest source of foreign direct investment. The US has provided significant development, economic, health, and security assistance to SEA allies and partners, including ASEAN member nation-states. The US and ASEAN are working together to address shared challenges and promote a free and open Indo-Pacific (U.S. Department of State, 3rd August 2022; ASEAN, 7th March 2023). On the other hand, China's relationship with ASEAN is complex, with some member nation-states enjoying longstanding and substantive relations with China. PRC has been actively strengthening its ties with ASEAN

countries, particularly through economic cooperation and people-to-people exchanges. However, ASEAN leaders are cautious about China's new foreign policy initiatives through the Global Security Initiative (GSI) but remain to appreciate the country as an economic partner. (Hoang Thi Ha, 2023).

Russia's military invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, provided a novel scenario that illustrates the US-China rivalry and their influence on the responses of ASEAN member nation-states. The conflict between the two countries is deeply rooted in the post-Cold War era when a deal for greater economic integration with the European Union (EU) faltered. In the past three decades, Russia made significant strides to consolidate Ukrainian civic identity, especially since the 2014 annexation of Crimea and intervention in the Donbas region (Mankoff, 2022).

Russia formally sent its troops to the Ukrainian territory on the same ground they asserted for Crimea's annexation. Undeniably, it is more than just a battle of arms, assuming the contours of a clash of competing narratives. The Western powers, which are the primary sponsors of Ukraine's defense, described Russia's action as an unjustifiable invasion, regardless of the profound history and cultural linkages that exist between the two countries (Masters, 2023).

On March 2nd, 2022, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a resolution on the "Aggression against Ukraine" with ASEAN members Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Timor-Leste in favor. Vietnam and Laos abstained. The resolution condemns Russian aggression, demands cessation of hostilities, withdrawal of Russian forces, and adherence to humanitarian and human rights laws, stressing Ukraine's sovereignty and civilian safety (UNGA, 1st March 2022). On March 24, 2022, the "Humanitarian consequences of aggression against Ukraine"

Resolution passed with similar ASEAN support except for Brunei, Laos, and Vietnam abstaining, urging hostilities end, civilian protection, and infrastructure safeguarding through international cooperation and diplomacy (UNGA, 24th March 2022). On February 23, 2023, the “Principles of Charter for comprehensive peace in Ukraine” Resolution gained ASEAN backing, except Laos and Vietnam abstaining. Addressing global impacts of the Ukraine conflict, it urges just and lasting peace per United Nations (UN) Charter, supports Secretary-General and state peace efforts, emphasizes sovereignty and territorial integrity, and advocates withdrawal of foreign forces, cessation of hostilities, and global cooperation (UNGA, 23rd February 2023).

The advent of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has exposed the lack of unanimity in ASEAN’s response to the conflict (Storey and Choong, 2022; *Nikkei Asia*, 28th February 2022). The responses of ASEAN member nation-states varied considerably, with Singapore explicitly condemning Russia by name and announcing a range of sanctions, Myanmar endorsing the Kremlin’s actions, and the relatively mild and muted responses from the rest of the ASEAN member nation-states (*ibid.*). Two days after the invasion, on February 26, 2022, ASEAN issued a “lowest common denominator response” to the conflict with the ASEAN Foreign Ministers stating that they are “deeply concerned over the evolving situation and armed hostilities in Ukraine” (Storey and Choong, 2022). Despite its urge for both parties to exercise maximum restraint and highlighting the principles of the United Nations Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, the statement was criticized for its lack of significant substance as it failed to mention Russia as the aggressor (*Benar News*, 3rd March 2022; *Nikkei Asia*, 28th February 2022; Shoji, 2022).

Given China’s substantial economic influence and presence, alongside the US military strength, foreign aid, and soft power in the

region, the intensified rivalry between these two superpowers has placed SEA in a prominent position, elevating the regional significance of the ASEAN bloc. By adopting a comprehensive perspective that encompasses both ASEAN as a regional organization and the individual responses of its member nation states, this study explores the delicate balancing act undertaken by ASEAN member nation-states in harmonizing their respective interests and norms by (1) tracing the SEA governments' immediate responses, (2) comparing proactive measures taken by these governments to pursue decisions that align with their respective interests, (3) examining the bases of SEA nation-states' actions and public responses, (4) probing into the existing varying interests among SEA governments, and (5) establishing the links between SEA governments' responses to that of the US and China.

## **2. ASEAN Members' Immediate Response to Russo-Ukrainian Crisis**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine demonstrated the complexity and diversity of ASEAN member-nation states' reactions, a reflection of their interests in regional and global politics. These responses encompass a wide spectrum, illustrating the intricate web of diplomatic considerations, political alliances, and economic ties (Storey and Choong, 2022). This section highlights the immediate responses of each ASEAN member nation-state to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, based on the formal statements of their respective governments, including the statements of their foreign ministers in ASEAN, voting patterns in the UNGA resolutions condemning Moscow, and sanctions imposed on Russia.

The immediate responses of the ASEAN member nation-states are analyzed through a comprehensive categorization framework that

encompasses four distinct classifications: (1) Hardline Response, (2) Measured Diplomacy, (3) Neutrality, and (4) Affirmative Endorsement. The countries having a hardline response demonstrated explicit condemnation of Russia's actions, consistently aligned their official statements and participation in international responses such as the UNGA resolutions and ASEAN official statements, and have imposed sanctions against Russia. Countries exhibiting measured diplomacy in their responses include those that voted in favor of the UNGA resolutions condemning Russia and advocate for peaceful resolution, but at the same time consistently failed to call the conflict an "invasion" or name Russia as the "aggressor". Neutral countries are those that stayed relatively muted as the conflict progressed, neither voting for or against Russia in UNGA resolutions nor condemning or calling out Russia by name. Lastly, the country with affirmative endorsement of Russia's actions explicitly justifies its actions and continuously supports the country's campaign towards Ukraine.

### ***2.1. Hardline Response***

Among all the ASEAN member nation-states, Singapore is the only country having a hardline response to the Russian invasion. Singapore has exhibited a robust and unequivocal response to Russia's incursion into Ukraine by explicitly condemning Russia by name and announcing a range of sanctions (*ibid.*; *The Straits Times*, 28th February 2022). Along with Cambodia and Timor-Leste, Singapore co-sponsored the March 2, 2022 UNGA resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Shoji, 2022). Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore underscored the violation of established international norms and the UN Charter by Russia's unprovoked military intervention, underscoring the imperative of upholding a rules-based international order to safeguard the interests of smaller nations (Lee, 2022). Moreover, Singapore's

Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan articulated the gravity of the situation, denouncing the transgression of fundamental norms, highlighting the unsettling precedent set by the invasion, and underscoring the inherent risk to smaller states within a “might is right” paradigm (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, 5th March 2022). This response, characterized by explicit condemnation of Russia’s actions, is reminiscent of Singapore’s principled approach during historical events such as Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia and Russia’s annexation of Crimea (Storey and Choong, 2022).

## ***2.2. Measured Diplomacy***

Most of the ASEAN member nation-states can be classified as having a measured response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Singapore, along with Cambodia and Timor-Leste, co-sponsored the UNGA resolution condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, while Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Brunei, and Myanmar (UN seat held by National Unity Government) voted in favor of the resolution as well (Shoji, 2022). However, outside of the ASEAN member nation-states’ votes in favor of the UNGA resolution, each has lacked publicly naming Moscow as the aggressor nor imposing sanctions against the country (Storey and Choong, 2022).

Initially, Indonesia’s government response was muted. Later, with Indonesia’s Foreign Ministry calling the attack on Ukraine “unacceptable” without naming Russia as the aggressor (Murphy, 2022), the Indonesian government supported the UN resolution condemning the invasion. Supporting the UN resolution, Indonesia highlighted the fundamental principles of the UN Charter, territorial integrity, and sovereignty while forwarding its call to address the situation in a “balanced manner” (*ibid.*; *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 17th July 2022; Engel, 2022). Indonesia’s commitment to peacekeeping was also



pronounced in President Widodo's speech during his visits in Kiev and Moscow (Bloomberg, 2022). However, despite Indonesia's efforts, its responses were criticized as "inadequate," as it refused to impose sanctions on Moscow or clearly condemn Putin's actions in Ukraine (TASS, 9th March 2022; *Asia Times*, 27th July 2022; Engel, 2022).

Similarly, Malaysia's immediate response to the conflict was relatively weak. Though its government expressed concern about the increasing tensions of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, with Malaysia's Foreign Ministry issuing a statement that called the attack on Ukraine "unacceptable" (*The Star*, 3rd March 2022), it refused to mention Russia or endorse Ukraine's sovereignty (*The Diplomat*, 1st April 2022). Malaysian Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob also stated that his government's priority is ensuring the safety of Malaysian families in Ukraine and hopes for a peaceful settlement between Ukraine and Russia (*The Straits Times*, 24th February 2022).

Malaysia voted in favor of the UNGA resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine on March 2, 2022, emphasizing its commitment to the principles and purposes of the UN Charter, as well as the significance of territorial integrity and sovereignty, but aside from these responses, not much has been heard from the Malaysia's government (*The Star*, 3rd March 2022).

The Philippines, on the other hand, responded to the Russian invasion of Ukraine with a mixture of neutrality and condemnation, prioritizing its national interests by securing ties with the US (De Castro, 2022). Initially, the Duterte Administration announced a policy of neutrality in the conflict (Philippine News Agency, 10th June 2022; De Castro, 2022). The Philippines later condemned the invasion and voted in favor of a UNGA resolution demanding an immediate halt to Moscow's actions (Associated Press, 10th March 2022). At the change of administration in the Philippines, after his inauguration, President

Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. denounced the war as “unacceptable” and called for a diplomatic resolution, expressing concern for global economic repercussions without explicitly naming Russia as the aggressor (*Philstar*, 19th November 2022). This approach highlights the intricate balance the Philippines keeps to maintain in addressing regional security challenges while promoting peace in the Indo-Pacific region (De Castro, 2022).

Despite voting in favor of the UNGA resolution condemning Russia’s actions in Ukraine, Thailand’s Foreign Ministry did not explicitly name Russia as the aggressor (Storey, 2022a). This behavior reflects Thailand’s delicate balancing act between its historical relationships and commitment to neutrality. This cautious approach is attributed to Thailand’s long-standing friendship and neutrality stance which was driven by its national interests (*Bangkok Post*, 3rd March 2022; Storey, 2022a). It is aligned on its constructive engagement and crisis diplomacy concerning politicization of international principles and the potential impact on diplomatic efforts (*Bangkok Post*, 10th March 2022; *Benar News*, 3rd March 2022). Thailand’s diplomatic strategy is further underscored by its support for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and opposition to the use of force in annexations (*ibid.*).

Cambodia’s response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict is marked by Prime Minister Hun Sen’s unexpected stance against Russia’s invasion, contrasting his close relations with Russia (Storey, 2022b). While initially appearing neutral, the shift on Hun Sen’s stance is translated to Cambodia’s UNGA vote that is aligned with the Western views that emphasize principles, history, and economic consequences (*The Diplomat*, 11th November 2022; Storey, 2022b). He condemned the invasion and supported ASEAN’s call for a ceasefire (Reuters, 28th March 2022). The statement is also in parallel with Cambodia’s past experiences and expression of solidarity with Ukraine (Sokvy Rim,

2023). The statement, further, reflects Cambodia's concerns on the security of smaller states and its drive against powerful countries' interference (*ibid.*).

Amid the conflict, Brunei exhibited deep concern and condemned any violation of sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of nations (*The Scoop*, 28th February 2022; Shoji, 2022). Brunei's foreign ministry urged all parties to de-escalate tensions, seek peaceful resolutions, and avoid the use of force (*The Scoop*, 28th February 2022). In a display of solidarity with Ukraine, Brunei-based envoys from various countries also joined in condemning the Russian invasion and called for Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine to prevent further escalation, echoing the UN Secretary-General's appeal (German Embassy in Brunei, 2022).

Timor-Leste's immediate response to the conflict is rooted in its historical experience with war and invasion. Despite its size and limited influence, Timor-Leste courageously condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine by co-sponsoring and supporting the UNGA resolution (Fahey, 2022). Aside from supporting the UNGA resolution, the Timorese government donated USD 1.5 million to the UN World Food Programme (WFP) for urgent humanitarian aid in Ukraine, drawing parallels between Timor-Leste's historical experiences with conflict and war and the current crisis faced by Ukrainians (WFP, 7th April 2022).

### ***2.3 Neutral Countries***

Among Southeast Asian nations, only Vietnam and Laos abstained from the resolution due to their longstanding ties with Russia and the former Soviet Union (*The Diplomat*, 28th February 2022). Despite Western pressures, Laos has maintained its neutrality and abstained from endorsing UN resolutions condemning Russia, a stance that is underpinned by its long-standing relationship with Moscow (*The Star*,

27th February 2022). However, Laos has sought a peaceful solution to the crisis through diplomatic means. Laos' Ministry of Foreign Affairs released an official statement expressing its hope for a peaceful resolution by all parties involved and urging restraint and de-escalation of tensions (*Laotian Times*, 26th February 2022) while Vietnam maintained to abstain from taking sides. Vietnamese government's response to the crisis is anchored to its adherence to its principle of neutrality. Vietnam's perception is that the conflict's categorization as an "invasion" could have been avoided (Huynh Tam Sang, 2022) and that directing its position to abstain from UN resolutions. The Vietnamese has maintained a similar response since Russia's annexation of Crimea (*The Diplomat*, 28th February 2022). This tepid, but consistent approach of Vietnam, however, emphasize "deep concern" and calls for peaceful solutions from both sides.

#### ***2.4 Affirmative Endorsement***

Among the Southeast Asian countries, only Myanmar instantly spoke in favor of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Myanmar's military junta has aligned itself with Russia, asserting that the action is "justified" to protect sovereignty and exhibit global power (*The Straits Times*, 25th February 2022). The junta's spokesperson, Zaw Min Tun, emphasized Moscow's significance as an ally and arms supplier (*ibid.*). Despite global condemnation and sanctions that followed against Russian "invasion" of Ukraine, Myanmar's military council's supported Russia's actions and went on to further highlight its closer ties with Moscow (*VOA*, 2022).

However, Myanmar's voting behavior at the UN, where it supported Ukraine, diverged from its military regime's stance. This divergence reflects the multifaceted nature of Myanmar's response to the Ukraine crisis (Kawsar Uddin Mahmud and Nasrin Jabin, 2022) and its complex

dynamics, as well as the influence and the role of UN representative Kyaw Moe Tun (*ibid.*).

The multifaceted responses of ASEAN member nation-states toward the Russo-Ukrainian crisis have unveiled the intricate web of diplomatic considerations, historical ties, and geopolitical interests that define the region's international engagements. The diverse reactions underscore the complexity of ASEAN's unity in the face of a crisis, revealing the individual priorities and stances of each nation.

**Table 1** ASEAN Members' Immediate Response to the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict

Hardline Response	Measured Diplomacy	Neutral Stance	Affirm/Endorse
Singapore	Indonesia Malaysia Philippines Thailand Cambodia Brunei Timor-Leste	Vietnam Laos	Myanmar

### 3. SEA Governments' Proactive Actions on the Crisis

#### 3.1. Support for Ukraine – Humanitarian Aid

Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste have taken similar actions to provide humanitarian aid and assistance to Ukraine in the on-going crisis. However, each country has made their own unique contributions.

Singapore has imposed sanctions and restrictions against Russia, including a ban on the transfer of military goods, export controls on items that could facilitate offensive cyber operations (Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, Singapore, 5th March 2022), and financial restrictions on Russian financial institutions, entities, and activities in Russia. Singapore has also extended a humanitarian assistance package to Ukraine (*Channel News Asia*, 10th June 2022), which includes ambulances, firefighting protective gear, rescue equipment, mine detectors, and crucial medical supplies.

Malaysia has provided medical assistance to Ukraine (*New Straits Times*, 7th February 2023), including medical supplies such as Levothyroxine Sodium tablets, Fentanyl Citrate injections, Amikacin injections, and Propofol injections. The Malaysian government has also expressed its commitment to fostering enhanced collaboration with Ukraine, specifically on healthcare, and proposing a diplomatic solution and ceasefire before considering sanctions (*Benar News*, 8th March 2022).

Thailand has offered a platform for direct dialogue between Russia and Ukraine to facilitate negotiations among the conflicting parties and attain a peaceful resolution to the ongoing conflict (TASS, 5th November 2022; *Bangkok Post*, 25th February 2023). The Royal Thai Government has also approved the provision of humanitarian aid to Ukraine, amounting to two million baht (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand, 12th April 2022), which includes essential provisions such as food, blankets, sleeping bags, baby and child items, hygiene products, and first aid kits.

Vietnam has extended a humanitarian aid donation totaling USD 500,000 to Ukraine (*Hanoi Times*, 12th May 2022), which is allocated to the Central Emergency Response Fund, the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN International Children's Emergency Fund, and the Ukraine Red Cross. Vietnam's decision for this contribution is based on the immediate necessity to terminate the use of force, ensure

civilian security, safeguard critical infrastructure, uphold international humanitarian law, and facilitate humanitarian access and the evacuation of foreign communities, including the Vietnamese population, residing in Ukraine (Vietnam News Agency, 12th May 2022; *VOV World*, 23rd February 2023).

The Philippines has pledged a sum of USD 100,000 to facilitate essential humanitarian aid for the afflicted population, encompassing those displaced beyond national borders. The Philippines also underscores its commitment to welcoming Ukrainian refugees seeking refuge from the conflict (Philippine News Agency, 7th April 2022).

Timor-Leste has provided USD 1.5 million in aid, allocated through the UN's World Food Programme (*UCA News*, 10th March 2022), to extend the solidarity of the Timorese people with the Ukrainian people. The government of Timor-Leste has also advocated for an immediate ceasefire and a diplomatic solution to the conflict.

### ***3.2. Support for Ukraine – Pledge for Material Support***

Indonesia and Cambodia have both pledged material support for Ukraine, but their contributions differ in some ways.

Indonesia's President Joko Widodo visited both Kyiv and Moscow in June 2022, with the aim to address the global food supply crisis that has arisen due to the conflict (*Deutsche Welle*, 7th July 2022). Widodo conveyed his desire for the conflict to end during his visit in Kiev and Moscow and advocated for the peace mission for both countries (Bloomberg, 3rd July 2022).

Cambodia, on the other hand, has actively extended material support to Ukraine's war effort by dispatching demining experts to assist in the eradication of landmines laid by Russian forces (*The Diplomat*, 2nd November 2022). A contingent of Ukrainian experts also traveled to Cambodia to acquire insights into the process of dismantling

Russian-laid mines, with the help of Cambodian Mine Action Centre trainers (*Euronews*, 19th January 2023).

### **3.3 Favorable Support for Russia**

Laos and Myanmar have taken similar actions at the advantage of Russia. Laos has refrained from endorsing UNGA resolutions that condemn Russia and has expressed skepticism about the efficacy of economic sanctions and embargoes. Lao President Thongloun Sisoulith, moreover, expresses his government's commitment to impartiality in contemporary conflicts and disputes, stating that Laos will not take sides in the conflicts and disputes (*Asia Times*, 27th July 2022). On the other hand, Myanmar has endorsed the UN resolution condemning Russia's aggression towards Ukraine on March 2nd, 2022 when their seat at the UN was held by the National Unity Government, but abstained on the February 23rd, 2023 UN resolution where the seat was occupied by the military junta (*VOA*, 11th March 2023). The junta's overt support for Russia's incursion into Ukraine is accompanied by an explicit offer of Myanmar as a conduit for Russian business penetration into Asian markets, thereby sidestepping imposed sanctions (Justice for Myanmar, 27th March 2022).

### **3.4 Limited to No Development**

As for Brunei, there is a lack of accessible data concerning the ongoing actions undertaken by the government related to the on-going crisis. Their most recent engagement pertains to an announcement made at the outset of the invasion, where they declared their alignment with Ukraine in solidarity. Within Brunei, a country characterized by peace and the prevalence of legal norms, there is a noticeable absence of discernible actions pertaining to the conflict (Vongpaseuth *et al.*, 2022).



#### **4. Bases of SEA Governments' Actions**

Primarily, the UN Charter serves as a foundational treaty for its establishment and its system. Beyond its role as a multilateral international agreement of 192 member states, the UN Charter reaffirms numerous key tenets of international law, as well as encompassing customary norms. This is specifically expressed in Article 1, Chapter 1: Purposes and Principles, 1st paragraph of the UN Charter reads, "To maintain international peace and security and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace." This provision dictates that the UN shall secure and maintain peace and security, and should be collectively enforced by its member nation states.

With the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the individual response of most of the ASEAN member nation-states to the issue has cited the UN charter as their basis for promoting peaceful negotiations in resolving the conflict. The non-interference policy of the ASEAN Charter has also been adopted by a few of the ASEAN member nation-states that did not show a strong stance on the issue.

Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, Cambodia, Brunei, Timor-Leste, and Myanmar (UN seat held by National Unity Government) expressed their support for the UNGA condemning Russia for the use of armed actions against Ukraine. Laos and Vietnam abstained from voting in the UNGA Resolution, citing neutrality. Meanwhile, Myanmar's military junta took a separate stance and showed its endorsement of Russia's actions (Premesha Saha, 2022). The military junta argued that Russia needs to protect its sovereignty and went to

praising Moscow's role in global power balance (*The Irrawaddy*, 25th February 2022).

Along with Cambodia and Timor-Leste, Singapore has expressed strong condemnation of the Russian invasion, aligning its stance with international law, the UN Charter, and the principles of sovereignty and independence. The three countries co-sponsored the UN resolution condemning Russia's actions. This reflects their consistent advocacy for international law and principled stands on global conflicts. However, there are varying opinions within Singapore about aligning with Western powers due to potential economic implications (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, 5th March 2022; *The Straits Times*, 26th March 2022). Cambodia's stance emphasizes adherence to international principles, reflecting its history and commitment to a rules-based international order. Its proactive foreign policy aligns with the trend in Southeast Asia to uphold international norms (Storey, 2022b; *The Phnom Penh Post*, 1st March 2023). Timor-Leste's condemnation of the invasion anchored on its commitment to democratic values and its support for Ukraine through humanitarian aid showcases its solidarity and empathy, drawing from its own history (Fahey, 2022; WFP, 7th April 2022).

Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines have advocated for diplomatic negotiations and peaceful resolutions while emphasizing the significance of international legal norms in maintaining global stability (*Jakarta Globe*, 24th February 2022; *The Star*, 3rd March 2022; *Interaksyon*, 2nd March 2022). Brunei's response highlights the importance of respecting fundamental principles and emphasizes its commitment to regional stability and global peace. Its solidarity with Ukraine underscores its dedication to diplomacy and peace (*The Scoop*, 28th February 2022; German Embassy in Brunei, 2022). Thailand's approach involves nuanced diplomacy; voted to denounce the Russian

invasion while expressing neutrality by not taking any further actions. The Thai Government's stance reflects its desire to facilitate diplomatic resolution, balancing its neutral stance with regional stability considerations (Storey, 2022a; *The Diplomat*, 13th October 2022).

Lastly, Vietnam and Laos abstained from voting on two separate UNGA resolutions – one condemning the Russian invasion and the other calling for the withdrawal of Russian troops. Despite their abstention, Vietnam and Laos underscores their commitments to international law, regional stability, diplomatic engagement, and dedication to peaceful resolution (Vietnam News Agency, 6th October 2022; Vietnam News Agency, 22nd February 2023; *Laotian Times*, 26th February 2022).

## **5. Interests of Governments and Citizens in Southeast Asia**

The Russo-Ukrainian crisis has triggered a spectrum of responses among SEA countries, revealing a nuanced tapestry of positions that bear the imprints of economic interests, geopolitical calculus, historical affiliations, and domestic sentiments. This section undertakes a comprehensive synthesis of the multifaceted reactions across in the region, categorizing them thematically to elucidate discernible patterns and offer an extensive overview of the region's intricate geopolitical landscape.

### ***5.1 Economic Interests and Geopolitical Considerations***

Indonesia and Laos have demonstrated adept maneuvering between economic interests and geopolitical considerations. Indonesia's response is characterized by a careful equilibrium between its "free and active" foreign policy approach and robust economic ties with Russia. It proceeds judiciously, balancing defense collaboration and economic relations while prudently safeguarding its economic interests amidst

disruptions in vital commodities (Engel, 2022; *Asia Times*, 27th July 2022). Laos' alignment with Russia is likewise founded on historical connections and pragmatic economic necessities, as evinced by their joint initiatives in unexploded ordnance clearance and shared facility construction (*Asia Times*, 27th July 2022).

### ***5.2 Domestic Sentiments and Historical Affinities***

Domestic sentiments and historical connections have significantly molded responses across the region. Malaysia has borne witness to the emergence of pro-Russia sentiments, which are steeped in narratives of anti-Western inclinations and historical skepticism towards the US, collectively contributing to a prevailing public endorsement of Russia (*Al Jazeera*, 18th November 2022). Moreover, according to a 2022 survey conducted by market analyst Ipsos Malaysia titled "The War in Ukraine Today," 81 percent of Malaysians polled said that Malaysia should avoid military involvement in the Ukrainian conflict, and 59 percent of Malaysian respondents believe the war in Ukraine is none of Malaysia's business (*Malay Mail*, 27th April 2022).

In Indonesia, there has been a disparity in the responses of civil society and the government. According to Evello's digital platform analysis, many Indonesian citizens clearly support Russia's position on the conflict. This is due to a strong anti-American sentiment in Indonesian society and Russia's successful soft power campaign in the country (Gerstl *et al.*, 2022). Vietnam, on the other hand, projects a nuanced stance from its historical affinity with Russia and exposure to international news, which in turn resulted in a diverse gamut of responses within its populace (*The Diplomat*, 18th March 2022).

Cambodia's alignment with a UN resolution denouncing Russia's invasion served as a surprising assertion, driven by historical bonds and a principled government commitment (Storey, 2022b).

### ***5.3 Non-Interventionism and Pragmatic Diplomacy***

Singapore's response is emblematic of non-interventionism harmonized with pragmatic diplomacy. The majority of Singaporeans advocate for a policy of non-intervention, buttressed by a government stance that is rooted in principled nonalignment and an aversion to military entanglement (Ipsos, 26th January 2023). Vietnam's pragmatic approach finds expression in its abstention from a UN vote on Ukraine, reflecting a calibrated pursuit of national interests and the seamless continuation of its foreign policy prerogatives (*The Diplomat*, 24th February 2023). Thailand, initially inclined towards neutrality in the name of national interest, subsequently transitioned to supporting a UN resolution, thereby showcasing its diplomatic pragmatism (*Bangkok Post*, 25th February 2023).

### ***5.4 Security and Regional Power Dynamics***

Beyond immediate economic concerns, the repercussions of the conflict extend to security imperatives and regional power dynamics. The Philippines proffers caution against dismissing the conflict's pertinence predicated solely upon geographical distance, emphasizing the potential to recalibrate the regional security landscape (Gallaga, 2023). Vietnam navigates the security implications of its strategic partnership with Russia while adroitly managing its relationships with both Moscow and Beijing (Hoang Thi Ha, 2022; Nguyen Quang Dy, 2022). Meanwhile, Myanmar's response unveils internal cleavages, reflective of geopolitical complexities, media reportage, and internal political dynamics (*VOA*, 25th February 2022; Kawsar Uddin Mahmud and Nasrin Jabin, 2022).

The manifold SEA responses to the Russia-Ukraine conflict unveil the intricate geopolitical mosaic of the region. Economic interests, geopolitical calculus, historical ties, and domestic sentiments intricately

intersect to form a rich tapestry of reactions. As nations negotiate these multi-layered dynamics, their positions evolve, thus offering a panoramic insight into the nuanced diplomatic choreography that shapes their engagement with a global crisis. This synthesis stands testament to the intricate realm of SEA politics and governance, proffering illumination into the intricate interplay that molds their international standing.

## **6. Competing Influences of US and China in Shaping ASEAN Members' Stances**

This section analyzes the impact of the US-China rivalry in shaping the international order and in resolving the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, to the positions of SEA states. The analysis focuses on assessing ASEAN member nation-state's position and alignment. By adopting a comprehensive perspective, this section aims to shed light on the complex dynamics at play in the regional and international politico-economic landscape and, finally, to provide insights in the strategic choices made by the nations facing the stakes of this rivalry in relation to the on-going crisis.

Amidst Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, the US and its allies employ diverse sanctions, export controls, and trade measures to hinder Russia's war capabilities. Sanctions on Russian financial institutions and defense-related goods force Russia to seek alternative weaponry sources. US Congress ends Russia's trade status, raising tariffs on imports while safeguarding vital sectors. Also together with its allies, the US offers energy aid, exerts more efforts to stabilize markets, and mitigates nuclear risks. The US has utilized the Presidential Drawdown Authority for military support, with USD 12.1 billion in Fiscal Year 2023 via the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative. Military aid includes surplus

defense items and Coast Guard cutters. The US continues comprehensive backing for Ukraine, enhancing defense, providing humanitarian aid, and ensuring economic stability (The White House, 21st February 2023; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 24th February 2023). Related to this, a Humanitarian aid amounting to more than USD 1.9 billion was also allotted. Economic support bolsters basic services.

PRC's multifaceted response to Russia's 2022 Ukraine invasion spans informational, diplomatic, economic, and military dimensions. Beijing's alignment with Moscow, driven by countering the US and safeguarding Chinese interests, is evident in resolute rhetorical support, sustained military collaboration, and pragmatic economic actions. China's strategic stance is influenced by internal stability concerns, its critique of existing security architectures, and implications for Taiwan.

While backing Russia, China carefully balances its support to maintain its own stability and interests (Greitens, 2022). All the intertwined internal and external conditions made China's behavior toward securitizing its geopolitical and economic interests in this crisis (Flores, Castaño and Bautista, 2022). Hence, China's Ongoing strategic response to Russia's involvement in Ukraine entails a nuanced approach. A swift ceasefire without direct support for Russia to evade sanctions, Beijing prioritizes EU markets for economic gains while cautiously collaborating with Moscow on specific security matters. This move is consistent with its goal of establishing a multipolar world order that counters the US dominance. China's involvement aims not only to address immediate concerns but also to reshape global power dynamics for a more inclusive international order (Kusa, 2022).

As the rivalry between the US and China intensifies, the SEA states are confronted with the conundrum of aligning with either Washington or Beijing in relation to the Russia-Ukraine conflict; and in the absence of a unified strategic stance, each member nation-state is left grappling

with the undeniable fact that a continuation of their conventional diplomatic and geopolitical practices is no longer feasible (Stromseth, 2019). The prevalent dynamics within the global arena compel these nations to initiate a practical recalibration of their strategic stances, acknowledging the inescapable necessity of forging meaningful alignments within the prevailing international landscape (Premesha Saha, 2022).

### **6.1. Singapore**

Primarily, Singapore stands as the sole SEA state that has chosen to join the barrage of Western economic and political sanctions directed towards Russia, suggesting a visible alignment with the West, fore fronted by the US. This stand is affirmed by the country's favorable votes for UN resolutions aimed at condemning Russia's actions, indicative of a shared perspective with the US on the matter (Storey and Choong, 2022). Additionally, Singapore's provision of humanitarian aid to alleviate the ground situation in Ukraine manifests a sense of resonance with the values and beliefs espoused by the US and the Western countries (*Channel News Asia*, 10th June 2022). The bold move to block and prohibit a substantial volume of Russian commodities advances its economic solidarity alongside Western narratives. Singapore's hardline response exhibits its strong strategic partnership with the US, signifying a shared commitment to addressing the conflict with a resolute posture.

Considered as the US' best friend in the region, Singapore has positioned itself as an integral partner of the Western countries in the Indo-Pacific Region. This best-friend-like relationship is further solidified by their joint military participation in the US and European countries. This suggests Singapore's strong security alliance with the



West (Scott, 2022; The White House, 21st February 2023). China, on the other hand, has likewise maintained its ties with Singapore in defense, economy, culture, education, and the Belt and Road Initiative (*The Straits Times*, 21st September 2017). However, it is noteworthy that these bilateral relations are not, in any apparent way, infringed by the stance that both of them have in relation to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

### **6.2. Timor-Leste**

Timor-Leste, though has been striving since 2002 to establish a strong effective state (Croissant and Rebecca Abu Sharkh, 2020), courageously manifested its condemnation against Russia's aggression in Ukraine. It did not only co-sponsor the UN General Assembly resolution (Fahey, 2022), but have donated a monetary amount for urgent humanitarian aid in Ukraine to the UN World Food Programme (WFP, 7th April 2022). Its Foreign Minister, Adaljiza Magno, also called for an immediate ceasefire and diplomatic resolution to the ongoing conflict, emphasizing the futility of war and the lack of benefits for all involved (*UCA News*, 10th March 2022).

### **6.3. The Philippines**

The response of the Philippines highlights its prioritization of national interest in navigating the US-China rivalry balancing its longstanding history with both superpowers with its territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea in the backdrop. Initially the country's stance was marked by President Duterte's policy of neutrality, but later reverted by voting in favor of condemning Russia's actions through March 2, 2022, UN resolution (Philippine News Agency, 10th June 2022; De Castro, 2022).

Beyond advocating for a peaceful resolution and expressing concerns over economic repercussions, the Philippines, under the Marcos administration, committed to humanitarian efforts by providing USD 100,000 worth of assistance to Ukraine and willingness to open its borders to Ukrainian refugees affected by the conflict (Philippine News Agency, 7th April 2022).

Drawing parallels with the US, the Philippines both implicitly and explicitly showcases its national interest by renewing its ties with the Western superpower. Historically, the Philippines has a strong connection with the US including the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty (De Castro, 2022). By far, the Philippine pivot toward the US was due to the perceived threats of the conflict extending into Asia; with China potentially using Russia's tactics in Taiwan and the South China Sea dispute (*ibid.*).

Despite efforts to distance itself from the superpower rivalry and efforts to reform its foreign policy to be independent from the US, the Philippines still perceives the Western power as its primary ally amid China's threat. The current administration's renewal of security ties with the US that led to enhancing its maritime cooperation and mutual defense posture signifies the country's strategy in protecting its national interests over regional security challenges (*ibid.*).

#### **6.4. Brunei**

While Brunei is viewed as heavy reliant on the US security umbrella, there is no other information available supporting that there is such a strategic alignment on specific geopolitical concerns (U.S. Department of State, 28th May 2021). However, its robust economic ties with China reflect a multifaceted relationship that extends beyond a singular geopolitical conflict (Chinese Embassy in Brunei, 17th August 2022).

The country's cautious and non-committal foreign policy approach, rooted in prudent diplomatic practices, is evident in its lack of explicit statements or proactive measures in relation to the on-going crisis in Ukraine.

### **6.5. Indonesia**

Indonesia's stance on the Russia-Ukraine conflict is evident through diplomatic maneuvers and actions, displaying a seemingly independent yet divergent approach, avoiding explicit associations with the US or China. Notably, Indonesian President Joko Widodo's distinction as the first ASEAN leader to initiate a diplomatic visit to both Kyiv and Moscow during the onset of the conflict reflects a proactive engagement related to the crisis that aligns to the comprehensive understanding of global dynamics often propagated by the US (Associated Press, 30th June 2022). This action by Indonesia, relatively, follows the diplomatic pathway endorsed by the Western powers. Furthermore, Indonesia's commitment to peacekeeping was elaborated by President Widodo during his visits citing his country's participation in various UN Peacekeeping Missions and post-conflict stabilization efforts (Bloomberg, 3rd July 2022). However, Jakarta's behavior relative to the international call to end hostility in Ukraine has been described as somewhat "inadequate" – a narrative that Western powers are akin to propagating against countries that do not agree much with their values (Murphy, 2022; Engel, 2022). Hence, in general, Indonesia's favorable behavior toward the US stance in relation to the Russia-Ukraine conflict have emerged due to reasoned presumptions stemming from shared values, diplomatic engagements, and a comprehensive understanding of global dynamics, that are often championed by the US.

## **6.6. Thailand**

Thailand's response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict is based on its desire to maintain independence and avoid a zero-sum game between the US and China; and following its previous approaches to international conflicts that is characterized by neutrality, value to historical relationships, and most importantly national interest (*Bangkok Post*, 10th March 2022; Storey, 2022a). Over the past two decades Thailand has been balancing its relations with major powers, including the US, China, and Russia. Thai Government's crisis diplomacy avoids the "politicization of international principles" which was demonstrated in its reluctance to explicitly call out Russia while voting in favor of condemning its aggression (Storey, 2022a; *Benar News*, 13th October 2022) and publicly committed to helping to find means for peaceful resolution and providing humanitarian assistance to Ukraine (TASS, 5th November 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand, 12th April 2022).

## **6.7. Malaysia**

Malaysia's strategic balancing act in response to the conflict contrasts with that of the US and China, but draws parallelism with other ASEAN member nation-states that employs measured diplomacy. The country's voting pattern in the UN is a reflection of its government's respect for international law, national integrity, and sovereignty. However, Kuala Lumpur avoided to call out Russia in its official statements, instead called for a peaceful resolution. Its decision to avoid imposing sanctions on Russia was also a manifestation of its reluctance to take a strong stance in relation to the conflict. This careful approach detaches Malaysia from being associated with the superpower rivalry amid the Russia-Ukraine conflict (*Benar News*, 8th March 2022).

Generally, according to Malaysian Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob, the safety of Malaysians in Ukraine remains one of government's paramount concerns. The country's efforts to provide Ukraine with essential medical supplies through its embassy in Malaysia likewise exemplifies its pledge to humanitarian needs (*New Straits Times*, 7th February 2023).

Malaysia's decision to avoid sanctions against Russia is based on its understanding of how the crisis could affect civilians, particularly its citizens. Politically, economically, and strategically, Malaysia has enjoyed the fruits of functional and productive relationships with both China and the US and competitions between these two powers have also been beneficial to Malaysia (Daniel, 2023). While Malaysia has deepened its economic relations with China, it has able to warm relationship with the US. Malaysia's new Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, has described their ties with China as "pivotal". Anwar was previously seen as 'pro-West', but experts view that the veteran politician is likely to take a more balanced approach (*South China Morning Post*, 24th November 2022) as he also hoped to strengthen ties with Beijing, the Washington, and other partners.

### **6.8. Vietnam**

Vietnam's response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict exemplifies its unique non-alignment principle and neutrality policy, rooted in its history of being caught between great power politics. Vietnamese government is one of the two Southeast countries that abstained from two separate UNGA resolutions deploring Russia's actions and calling for the withdrawal of Russian troops (*The Diplomat*, 18th October 2022; *The Diplomat*, 24th February 2023). The country poses itself as a non-aligned, neutral country, and goes as far as avoiding referring to Russia's actions as "invasion" (*The Diplomat*, 18th October 2022). Nonetheless,

Vietnam has contributed a substantial amount of humanitarian assistance to Ukraine highlighting its commitment to humanitarian law and civilian security (Vietnam News Agency, 12th May 2022). It likewise expressed its commitment to contribute to diplomatic initiatives and rehabilitation of the affected areas. Vietnam's approach to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict reflects introspection over foreign and defense policy, cautioning against great power conflict and risk-averse hedging between the US and China (*The Diplomat*, 18th October 2022; Hoang Thi Ha, 2022) and is influenced by its geopolitical position, historical ties, and need to navigate relationships with major powers without necessarily aligning closely with the US or China.

### **6.9. Laos**

China is considered as an important partner to Laos. However, the State of Southeast Asia Survey Report shows that China's influence in Laos may be significant yet slowly waning (Seah *et al.*, 2023). Accordingly, despite Western pressures and condemnation from Southeast Asian countries, Laos has maintained a neutral stance amidst the US-China great power rivalry. In separate UNGA resolutions, a significant number of Southeast Asian states voted to condemn Russia's actions in the Ukraine conflict (*The Diplomat*, 24th February 2022). However, Laos and Vietnam, abstained from endorsing the resolution due to their historical connections with Russia (*ibid.*). Laos' asserts that its decision to abstain demonstrates the government's commitment to a neutral stance on contemporary conflicts and disputes (*Asia Times*, 27th July 2022). This was articulated by Lao State President Thongloun Sisoulith in May 2022 by asserting that Laos would not take sides in current conflicts (*ibid.*). President Sisoulith aims for diplomatic neutrality and doubts economic sanctions' effectiveness in global conflicts citing its limited trade and geopolitical impact (*ibid.*).

### **6.10. Cambodia**

Cambodia's stance on the crisis is marked by ambiguity as it has consistently employed a balancing approach in its diplomatic engagements. This indicates a lack of a definitive or overtly clear position over the crisis. It is noted that China is the largest investor and donor, contributing to a whopping 21.8 percent of the country's cumulative foreign direct investment (FDI) from 1994-2019 (Kin Phea, 2020). Looking at this vantage point, the Cambodia's historical relationship between China and Cambodia can never be discounted. This relationship spans from the 13th century which harmoniously grew to have forged and nurtured an unbreakable "ironclad" friendship that weathered many storms and survived many difficulties.

Prime Minister Hun Sen's statement was unexpected as he forwarded a bold statement against the Russian invasion (*The Diplomat*, 2nd December 2022). There are two foreboding critiques of these actions. While Hun Sen's move was viewed as against the aggressor, the statement could also be a reflection of its diplomatic pragmatism and cordial historical relations with both China and Russia.

On the other hand, although it can be discerned as a completely unexpected stance, Cambodia has able to translate its commitment to contribute in global efforts to stabilize the global matrix that is disrupted by the conflict. The publicized telephone conversation between Cambodia's leadership and Ukraine, pledging support in the form of demining experts exemplifies a distinct degree of diplomatic independence within their existing relations with China (*Euronews*, 19th January 2023). Notwithstanding the un-discountable certainty that such actions underscore a hard commitment to helping Ukraine and stabilizing the region.

In order to ascertain the contemporary trajectory of the nation's perspective, it is imperative that a more abundant corpus of accessible

information and empirical data be made available. This expanded informational foundation would afford a more comprehensive latitude for nuanced analysis and interpretation. It is therefore acknowledged that the stance of Cambodia toward either the US or China in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict is inconclusive.

### **6.11. Myanmar**

The political landscape in Myanmar is divided between the Military Junta, which took over in February 2021, and the National Unity Government asserting position against the coup. As expected, these two opposing sides have opposing stances toward crisis. The Junta has openly and explicitly supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine and offered the country as a base for Russian businesses to access Asian markets (*VOA*, 25th February 2022). Clearly, this bold move by the junta is bypassing the sanctions forwarded by the US and favors Russia – the main arms sponsor of the Junta (*The Straits Times*, 25th February 2022).

China's strategic partnership with Russia has been utilized to achieve political goals in Myanmar including the efforts to counter western sanctions, support democracy and human rights, and prevent international involvement in Myanmar's periphery (Tower, 2022). The National Unity Government and its supporters, on the other hand, supports Ukraine and views the conflict as a reflection of their current situation. Their stance aligns with the US, but their visibility is difficult to discern due to the country's current domestic political landscape (*The Diplomat*, 11th March 2022).

Overall, although there is an un-discountable reality that Myanmar has been divided due to its present situation, the existing entities vying for superiority have not failed to express their stance towards the conflict.



**Figure 1** ASEAN Members' Stances towards Russo-Ukrainian Conflict



## 7. Conclusions

This paper presented the delicate balancing actions undertaken by ASEAN member nation-states toward the Russo-Ukrainian crisis alongside the US-China politico-economic rift on the issue, and beyond. SEA governments' responses to the conflict have displayed varying patterns that are reflective of the region's diversity yet interwoven political systems, economic interests, international linkages, and historical ties. Moreover, the rivalry between the US and China has, to some extent, shaped the varying responses of the SEA states in the absence of a solid stance from the ASEAN as a regional bloc. The extent and strength of the US and China's influence are clearly evident in the individual SEA nation-states' actions, responses, and positions over the conflict which were earlier defined as a form of: (1) Hardline Response, (2) Measured Diplomacy, (3) Neutrality, and (4) Affirmative Endorsement of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

## Notes

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