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The Russia-Ukraine War: Lessons for Southeast Asia

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SYNOPSIS

What are the repercussions of the Russia-Ukraine war for Southeast Asia and what are the lessons learned? This paper addresses these questions, including the kind of military reforms that Southeast Asian militaries could embark on, implications for the future of Russian arms sales to the region, and whether Southeast Asian nations will go beyond their mostly guarded responses to the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

COMMENTARY

The Russo-Ukrainian war has several possible ramifications for Southeast Asian militaries. In the first place, the war demonstrates the reality that conventional conflict is not beyond the realm of impossibility. This is a particularly important point as policy elites in some Southeast Asian nations have come to believe that wars — or at least large-scale conventional wars — are no longer fought between civilised nations, and that while peace may not necessarily be taken for granted, there is still the expectation that diplomacy and rationality in international relations would ultimately prevail.

If conventional conflicts like the Russia-Ukraine war are both conceivable and even likely, then regional governments must increasingly prepare for them in terms of building up their military defences. This is particularly critical in Southeast Asia since the chances of a regional conflict — over competing claims in the South China Sea or involving a spillover from a Chinese invasion of Taiwan — appear to be more, rather than less, likely.



The dismal performance of Russia's military in the war has impacted Russian arms sales, such as the proposed SU-35 purchases by Indonesia. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

The Need for Military Reforms

Correspondingly, the war has direct repercussions on how regional militaries might pursue war planning, military missions and procurement. In particular, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict could spur increased defence spending and accelerate and expand procurement plans — from fighter jets to missile defence.

Given the effectiveness (on both the Russian and Ukrainian sides) of armed drones, regional militaries should pay special consideration to expanding their use of such weapons in future wars, as well as developing doctrines, training and tactical capabilities to counter unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and unmanned aircraft systems (UAS). Other game-changing weaponry worth considering include smart weapons (powered by artificial intelligence), cyberwar capabilities, and perhaps even hypersonic weapons. Such acquisitions, of course, are subject to enduring budget constraints, shortfalls in training and staff proficiencies, and the need to rethink doctrine and strategy.

Finally, the Russia-Ukraine war also demonstrates the importance of possessing more flexible command and control structures, particularly when future forces are likely to be operationally more mobile, agile, and rapidly deployable.

This is a particular challenge for Southeast Asian militaries, which tend to be dominated by manoeuvre-based ground forces and which still lack jointness and agility. The over-centralisation of command and control on the Russian side proved to be disastrous, while Ukraine's successful efforts to blunt the Russian offensive and then to mount its own counteroffensive were empowered by the ability of Ukrainian

commanders on the ground to make quick and independent decisions that would best achieve mission objectives.

Impact on Russian Arms Sales to Southeast Asia

The Russo-Ukrainian war has undercut Russian arms exports to Southeast Asia. Russia used to be the leading arms seller to the region, although 80% of these transfers went to just one country, Vietnam. Nevertheless, Russia filled critical defence needs for other regional militaries, such as supplying fighter aircraft and man-portable air-defence and anti-tank missiles to Malaysia and Indonesia, and helicopters to the Philippines and Thailand.

Russian arms sales to Southeast Asia were on the decline even before the Russo-Ukrainian war. In part, this was due to the United States' *Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act* (CAATSA), which threatens penalties against countries that buy weapons from Moscow, while seeking to stem growing competition from new arms suppliers, such as China, Turkey and South Korea. At the same time, the poor performance of Russian weaponry in the Russo-Ukrainian war has raised concerns in many Southeast Asian nations — even Vietnam, albeit behind closed doors — over the quality and effectiveness of Russian weapons.

Consequently, many countries in the region have already cancelled planned purchases of Russian arms. These include Indonesia's cancellation of a planned purchase of SU-35 fighter jets worth US\$1.14 billion and the Philippines' withdrawal from a US\$250 million contract to acquire MI-171 military helicopters. Vietnam, meanwhile, has paused new arms purchases, in part due to a domestic anti-corruption crackdown, but also because Hanoi is increasingly concerned about Moscow's ability to fulfil orders amid international sanctions. At the same time, Southeast Asian militaries are looking to diversify their arms imports, buying weaponry from not only the West but also China, Israel and South Korea.

Will Southeast Asia Continue to Oppose Russian Aggression?

It may be difficult for Southeast Asian nations to continue to oppose Russian aggression against Ukraine. Most voted in favour of UN resolutions condemning Moscow for its invasion, but few have signed onto any sanctions against Russia. In Vietnam, for example, pro-Russian attitudes are common among more conservative and older generations, many of whom used to study, work and live in Russia, and people with former affiliations with the Vietnamese military and public security sectors; these groups are still grateful for the Soviet Union's assistance to North Vietnam during the war against America and see Russia as a longstanding and trusted friend of Vietnam. Many of them also support President Vladimir Putin, who in their belief could restore Russia to its greatness and play an important role in reviving Vietnam-Russia relations.

Indonesian domestic politics and the current economic situation could make it more difficult for Jakarta to sustain opposition to the Russian war in Ukraine. Anti-Western sentiments, mixed with pressures from pro-Russian and hard-line Islamist groups, combined with a worsening post-pandemic recovery (especially when it comes to food

and energy supplies), have pressured President Joko Widodo to improve relations with Moscow.

Finally, when it comes to weapons procurement, Southeast Asian nations may find it hard to resist the appeal of Russian arms deals, which often come without political strings and with innovative payment schemes. Some, particularly Vietnam, may find it impossible to replace Russia as an important, perhaps even essential, arms supplier. Moreover, Western states may refuse to sell advanced arms, while at the same time internal politics may make it hard for Southeast Asian nations to consider buying arms from certain countries. Malaysia, for example, will always be sceptical of Western arms suppliers, who may be reluctant to offer their latest and best military systems. Russia, on the other hand, has been willing to allow Malaysia to pay for its major purchases with commodities, particularly palm oil — a mode of payment very few other sellers are prepared to consider.

In sum, the Russo-Ukrainian War is a clear indicator of the need for Southeast Asian militaries to reform their doctrine, strategies and force structure. On the political side, it is apparent that most countries in the region will be reluctant to sanction Russian aggression.

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This is the second of two papers based on presentations and discussions held during a workshop organised by the Military Transformations Programme titled “Future Conflicts — Lessons Learned from Ukraine”. The workshop was focused on the strategic and operational implications of the Russo-Ukrainian war for militaries in the Asia-Pacific and how it might shape the character of future conflict in the 21st century, particularly, how the war is changing attitudes towards forms of modern warfare, emerging technologies, and defence innovation, what lessons countries in the region might draw from this conflict, and how they might subsequently reorient their militaries in preparation for likely future wars.