



Putin's Russia and Southeast Asia: The Kremlin's Pivot to Asia and the Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War

Ian Storey. ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 2024. pp. 525. Notes. Bibliog. Index. Pb. SGD 50.03. ISBN 978 981 5306 43 9

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Book Review

Ian Storey. *Putin's Russia and Southeast Asia: The Kremlin's Pivot to Asia and the Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War.* ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 2024. pp. 525. Notes. Bibliog. Index. Pb. SGD 50.03. ISBN 978 981 5306 43 9

Since the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and especially after the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia's role in Southeast Asia has attracted renewed attention. Despite Moscow's assertiveness and its attempts to engage regional partners, however, few works have examined Russia's regional strategy as a whole. Ian Storey's *Putin's Russia and Southeast Asia* fills this gap with brilliant timing, providing the first comprehensive assessment of Russia's engagement with the region since the end of the Cold War. Storey, a senior fellow at the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute and long-time analyst of Asian security, draws on two decades of research and fieldwork, as well as experience in and on Russia dating back to 1987 (p. xvii). The book is both descriptively rich and analytical, mapping Russia's contemporary relationships with Southeast Asian countries and situating them within the broader context of post-Soviet Russian foreign policy trends. Published as the Russia-Ukraine war enters its fourth year, reshaping Russia's global position, it captures a region recalibrating its diplomacy amid Western sanctions, food and energy disruptions, and intensifying great-power rivalries.

The first chapters provide a concise overview of Russia's post-Soviet foreign policy (pp. 29–41) and its 2012 “pivot to Asia/turn to the East” policies (pp. 42–51). Storey then places Southeast Asia within Russia's wider policies towards East and South Asia. A detailed discussion follows on economic engagement, from oil and gas (p. 116), nuclear diplomacy (p. 124), tourism (p. 130), and space cooperation (p. 137), with the sharp conclusion that Russia remains “a minnow among economic whales” in Southeast Asia (p. 142). Chapters five and six turn to multilateral and defence diplomacy. Storey provides a valuable record of Russia's participation in ASEAN and the East Asia Summit (2011–2024) and monitors the sharp decline in Russian arms sales since 2022 (p. 216). In other dimensions, such as joint exercises or attendance at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Moscow remains “a minor player” (p. 259). Later chapters survey bilateral relations with every Southeast Asian state: from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia to Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste. Storey demonstrates that Russia's engagement is pragmatic

and transactional, driven by arms and energy rather than a grand ideological vision, while instrumentalising “memory diplomacy” in several countries. His conclusion is clear: Russia’s regional influence remains limited, and the war in Ukraine has diminished it further (p. 485).

Two features make the book particularly valuable. First, its regional scope is unique. Previous works have mostly been journal articles focusing on one country¹ or book chapters on Southeast Asia in general,² whereas Storey adopts a genuinely comparative approach, highlighting both similarities and contrasts across the region. Second, the empirical detail is impressive. From trade data and arms sales to high-level visits, Storey draws on official records, statistics, and interviews collected through years of fieldwork. This solid foundation allows him to trace the evolution of Russia’s presence in the region with unusual precision.

Still, the book has limitations. It relies exclusively on English-language materials. In a region where much debate and policymaking occur in local languages, this narrows the analytical depth. Non-English sources could have offered richer insight into domestic perceptions of Russia. Furthermore, adding local scholars’ views, including those based outside national capitals, could offer other perspectives. Storey primarily treats countries as unitary actors and, while he provides clear summaries of official policy, he overlooks internal divisions among elites, academics, and the media that shape attitudes towards Moscow. In countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, pro-Russian narratives circulate widely online, influencing public opinion in ways that formal diplomatic efforts only partly capture.³ In the case of Indonesia, studies already show how competing discourses on Russia reflect deeper ideological and identity divisions.⁴

Another absence concerns the informational and soft-power dimensions of Russia’s regional engagement. Moscow’s influence today extends beyond weapons and energy to propaganda and narrative-building. Russian state (and state-affiliated) media, embassies, and online networks cultivate sympathy for Moscow’s position on Ukraine, portraying Russia as an alternative partner distinct from both the West and China. This dimension, which is central to the post-2022 context, receives only passing mention (for example, pp. 394–395). Integrating it would have linked Russia’s material presence to its ideational reach and influence operations, an area where Southeast Asia offers fertile ground for Russian narrative.

Despite these gaps, this book makes a significant contribution. Storey’s balanced tone and empirical rigour make it an essential starting point for

anyone, academics or policymakers, interested in Russia's Southeast Asia policy. It provides a grounded assessment of what Russia does—and does not—mean to Southeast Asia, offering clarity on a subject too often overshadowed by U.S.–China regional competition. While future research should explore the non-state and digital dimensions of Moscow's engagement, Storey's book stands as the most comprehensive and timely guide to Russia's regional strategy to date.

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NOTES

1. B. Wardhani and R. Dharmaputra, 'Indonesia's Ambivalence in the Russia-Ukraine War: Balancing Equal Sovereignty Norms with a Familial Approach'. *Contemporary Security Policy* Vol. 45. Issue 4 (2024): 627–642. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2024.2397926>.
2. A. Huan and P. Thambipillai, 'Russia and Southeast Asia: The Road Less Traveled', in Gaye Christoffersen (Ed.), *Russia in the Indo-Pacific: New Approaches to Russian Foreign Policy*. New York: Routledge, 2022, pp. 198–221.
3. R. Dharmaputra and M. Mustaffa, 'Courting Southeast Asia: How Russia Exploits Gaps in Western Credibility'. *The Diplomat*, June 21, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/06/courting-southeast-asia-how-russia-exploits-gaps-in-western-credibility/> (accessed 01 October 2025).
4. R. Dharmaputra, 'Non-Western Responses to Russia's War in Ukraine: Learning from Indonesia'. *Journal of Regional Security* Vol. 18. Issue 1 (2023): 59–68. <https://doi.org/10.5937/jrs18-41779>.

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CRedit: **Radityo Dharmaputra**: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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