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Introduction

On 13 November 2018, President Vladimir Putin arrived in Singapore for what would be his last trip to Southeast Asia before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 and his fateful decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Scheduled to meet Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong the day he arrived, the meeting was postponed after Putin's aircraft had departed late from Moscow.[1] Officially, the flight was delayed because of Putin's "tight schedule". However, the Russian president had a reputation for keeping foreign leaders waiting, sometimes for several hours, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Pope Francis and Queen Elizabeth II.[2] Was his tardiness in Singapore, as some Kremlin observers speculated, a power game designed to impress upon his hosts that he was the leader of a great power on a par with the United States and China?

If so, Putin might be disappointed to learn that, at least as far as the academic literature is concerned, Russia is not considered to be a great power in Southeast Asia. Since the early 2000s, academics working on the International Relations of Southeast Asia have focused on how the region has become the primary theatre of major power competition in the Asia-Pacific, or, as it is more commonly referred to

these days the "Indo-Pacific". In particular, scholars have intensively studied Southeast Asia's multifaceted relations with China, the maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea and how countries in the region attempt to navigate the perils and opportunities of US-China strategic rivalry.[3] Aside from China, Japan's long-standing economic and growing security interests in Southeast Asia have also attracted a good deal of scholarly attention, as has India's expanding engagement with the region.[4]

What about Russia? For the most part, for the past quarter of a century academics working on Southeast Asia have neglected or even ignored the giant Eurasian state. No single-authored or co-authored English-language book on Russia's relations with Southeast Asia has been published since 1992.[5] What literature exists is limited to several edited volumes and a clutch of journal articles.[6] Even the academic literature on Russia's bilateral relations with Southeast Asian states is fairly thin.[7]

Some excellent books have been published on Putin's foreign policy.[8] Yet, Russia's engagement with Southeast Asia—a strategically located region of 11 countries and home to more than 650 million people and one of the world's leading regional organizations, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—barely rates a mention in any of them. For example, Gilbert Rozman and Gaye Christoffersen's in-depth edited volume on Russia's "Turn to the East" includes chapters on China, Japan, the Korean Peninsula, Mongolia and Central Asia, but none on Southeast Asia.[9] When International Relations experts do write about Moscow's engagement with the Indo-Pacific, they invariably do so through the prism of Sino-Russian relations.[10]

The dearth of literature on Russia's relations with Southeast Asia is perhaps not surprising. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, its successor state, the Russian Federation, paid little attention to Southeast Asia. During his nine tumultuous years in office, President Boris Yeltsin never once visited the region, despite ASEAN's invitation to Russia to become a founding member of the security-focused ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1994 and Russia's elevation to full Dialogue Partnership in 1996. A step-change only

occurred after Putin succeeded Yeltsin as president on New Year's Eve in 1999. The new occupant of the Kremlin certainly gave more attention to the region than his predecessor. In his first and second terms as president (2000–8), Putin travelled to Southeast Asia no less than eight times, although his trips became more infrequent in his third, fourth and fifth terms. Nevertheless, during his third term, which began in 2012, his reorientation of the country's foreign policy away from the West and towards Asia, the "Turn to the East", elevated Southeast Asia's salience (at least rhetorically) in Russia's foreign relations, though in practice China remained at the heart of the Kremlin's Asia policy.

Despite Putin's visits and Asian pivot, there is little doubt that Russia has played but a minor role in the international relations of Southeast Asia over the past 25 years. In almost all spheres of activity, from trade and investment to participation in ASEAN-led forums and regional defence diplomacy (apart from arms sales), Russia has played only a bit-part. Russia's soft power in the region is also minimal, especially when compared to other major and even middle powers. Japanese cuisine and manga are enormously popular in the region, and Southeast Asians love to holiday in Japan. South Korea offers K-pop and TV dramas. The United Kingdom is a popular choice for education and tourism, while British media outlets (the BBC, *The Economist*, *The Financial Times* etc.) have a wide readership and English football is avidly followed in many regional states. But Russia's cultural exports tend to be fairly highbrow, such as ballet, opera and classical music, restricting their appeal to a much narrower section of the population. As for foreign languages, younger people in the region want to learn English, Mandarin, Japanese and French, less so Russian. The Russian news station RT (formerly Russia Today) is available on cable networks across Southeast Asia—except Singapore, where it was dropped following Russia's 2022 assault on Ukraine—yet, it cannot compete for viewers with its Western counterparts such as the BBC, CNN and France 24 or with China's CGTN. Moreover, RT does not broadcast in any Southeast Asian language. As for cuisine, one rarely comes across a Russian restaurant in any of the region's ubiquitous shopping malls.[11]

The limited role Russia plays in the economic, political, security and socio-cultural affairs of Southeast Asia explains why, among ASEAN's 11 Dialogue Partners, its status has not been elevated to that of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), despite Russia self-identifying as a great power. A CSP is the highest tier in ASEAN's typology of relations with external partners—Comprehensive Partnership is the lowest followed by Strategic Partnership—and reflects the breadth and depth of ASEAN's relations with its Dialogue Partners. China and Australia were elevated to the CSP tier in 2021, while the United States and India were accorded it in 2022 and Japan in 2023. Russia, on the other hand, struggled to move from a Comprehensive Partnership to a Strategic Partnership. Presumably, it will one day be accorded CSP status so that it is not left behind ASEAN's other Dialogue Partners, yet whether it achieves that before South Korea, the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand remains to be seen.

Russia's relative unimportance to Southeast Asia has been consistently reflected in the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute's annual surveys of elite opinion since 2019. Each of these *State of Southeast Asia Survey Reports* finds Russia trailing far behind the region's other Dialogue Partners in every single index.[12] Given the lack of strong trade and investment ties, Russia's economic standing is particularly miserable. In the 2019 survey, just 0.1 per cent of respondents believed Russia had the most economic influence in the region (on a par with India), compared to 73.3 per cent who chose China, 7.9 per cent the United States and 6.2 per cent Japan.[13] When the same question was asked in the 2020 survey, Russia's score fell to zero.[14] In the 2019 survey, only 0.6 per cent of respondents felt Russia had the most political and strategic influence in the region, compared with 45.2 per cent for China, 30.5 per cent for the United States, 20.8 per cent for ASEAN and even 0.7 per cent for the European Union (EU).[15] When asked "Which country do you think would most likely vie for regional leadership in response to the perceived growing indifference of the United States towards Southeast Asia and ASEAN?", just 2.3 per cent of Southeast Asian elites picked Russia, compared with 74.1 per cent for China and 9.5 per cent for Japan, though Russia was

ahead of India (1.1 per cent). The percentage who thought Russia had the most political and strategic influence in the region dropped to 0.1 per cent in the 2020 survey.[16] It was so low that Russia was removed as a possible response to this question in the 2021 survey and replaced with Australia and South Korea.[17] Of those polled in the 2020 survey, only 2.5 per cent had confidence in Russia's ability to provide leadership to maintain the rules-based international order and uphold international law, compared with 33 per cent for the EU, 24.3 per cent for the United States, 20 per cent for Japan and 5.5 per cent for China. Again, Russia was excluded as an option for this question in the following year's survey.[18]

Russia occupied a more prominent position in the 2023 *State of Southeast Asia Survey Report*, but for all the wrong reasons. After being asked their opinions on Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a massive 82.9 per cent of respondents said they were very concerned or somewhat concerned by the invasion, 58.3 per cent said the conflict had contributed to economic hardship in Southeast Asia because it had exacerbated rising global food and energy prices, and 25.9 per cent felt Russian aggression had eroded trust in the rules-based international order.[19] In the 2024 survey, 39.4 per cent of respondents identified the Russia-Ukraine War as one of the most serious geopolitical concerns for their governments (joint third with global scam operations) behind the Israel-Hamas conflict (46.5 per cent) and China's aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea (39.9 per cent).[20] In the 2024 survey, the conflict remained a major worry due to its continued impact on the cost of living. Some 68.4 per cent of respondents said the war was still causing economic hardship due to increased food and energy prices, up ten percentage points from the 2023 survey.[21]

Why Study Russia and Southeast Asia?

Among the major powers, Russia has the smallest economic footprint in Southeast Asia, the least geopolitical influence and the lowest strategic significance. It is, nevertheless, still a player in the region

and one that has some unique and enduring strengths that make it worthy of study, especially in light of the Russia-Ukraine War and the conflict's impact on global security. There are at least four important reasons why scholars, policymakers and journalists should pay more attention to Russia and Southeast Asia. First, regional perceptions of Russia's global status and the historical legacies of the Soviet Union. Second, Russia's exports to the region. Third, Russia's relatively benign image and Putin's personal standing in the region which stand in marked contrast to Western perceptions. Fourth, Russia's role in regional geopolitics.

Although Southeast Asia's political elites recognize that Russia lacks the economic, diplomatic and military heft of the other major (and even middle) powers in the region, it is still viewed as a global power because of its undeniable attributes. Russia is the largest country in the world, with a total area of 17 million square kilometres spanning 11 time zones and home to 144 million people, making it the ninth most populous state in the world. It is a leading exporter of natural resources, especially oil and gas. It holds a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). It has a vast strategic nuclear arsenal, with 5,500 nuclear warheads, more than any other country. It enjoys technological prowess in key areas such as military hardware, nuclear energy and aerospace technology. Lastly, it wields significant geopolitical influence in important parts of the world, especially Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa. For these reasons, the ASEAN member states invited Russia to join its various forums and become a Dialogue Partner in the early 1990s. Even though Russia's comprehensive national power was at its lowest ebb at the time, its former status as a superpower which had played a key role in regional security during the Cold War was not only still fresh in the minds of Southeast Asians, they also anticipated a time when Russia would rebuild its power and once more play a major role in regional politics and security.

Indeed, Moscow has adeptly used "memory diplomacy" and leveraged respect for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)'s interactions with the region to advance its agenda. Jade McGlynn defined

memory diplomacy as "a form of public diplomacy in which states or political groups try to improve relations and reputations by exporting commemorative practices and historical narratives and by allying their own historical narratives with those of another country".[22] As McGlynn noted, Russia has typically focused its memory diplomacy efforts in Europe, where it emphasizes, through selective interpretation, the decisive role the Soviet Union played in the defeat of Nazi Germany during the Second World War. The importance of the Great Patriotic War, as it is known in Russia, in contemporary discourse cannot be overemphasized. As Angela Stent has argued, "Presenting the Great Patriotic War as the crowning achievement in recent Russian history whose results cannot be questioned has been the foundation of Putin's national narrative."[23] An indication of the value Russia places on its international partnerships can be seen in who is invited to attend the annual Victory Day parade in Moscow on 9 May. That list of attendees includes Vietnamese President Truong Tan Son in 2015, the commander-in-chief of Myanmar's armed forces, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, in 2020 (who seized power less than a year later in a coup) and Lao President Thongloun Sisoulith in 2024. When Putin visited Hanoi in June 2024, he invited President To Lam to attend the parade in 2025, an invitation no senior Vietnamese leader would reject.[24]

In Northeast Asia, Moscow has used convergent narratives about the Second World War to buttress relations with China and elide the awkward memories of Sino-Soviet rivalry in the 1960s and 1970s.[25] Since February 2022, Russia has also used memory diplomacy to condemn Japanese aggression in Asia in the 1930s and 1940s in retaliation for Tokyo's support for Ukraine.[26] This echoes Beijing's form of memory diplomacy. In Southeast Asia, however, it is much harder for Moscow to use World War Two as a diplomatic device since the USSR only entered the Pacific War in its closing stages and played virtually no role in the Southeast Asia theatre. Despite this, as described in Chapter Eight, it has not stopped Russia and Myanmar from manufacturing memories of their common fight against Japan from 1941 to 1945.

More fertile ground for Moscow's memory diplomacy in Southeast Asia is the Cold War, during which the USSR provided considerable support to anti-colonial national liberation movements across the region. As discussed in detail in Chapter Seven, the USSR's critical military assistance to Vietnam and Laos during the Indochina Wars, as well as Moscow's subsequent economic aid in the 1980s, remains the cornerstone of both communist-run countries' relations with Russia. During any high-level meeting between Russian and Vietnamese leaders, Moscow's support for the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and its struggle for national liberation is invariably lauded and Hanoi's gratitude duly expressed. For example, when Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh met Russia's minister of internal affairs, General Vladimir Kolokoltsev, in Hanoi in October 2023, he proclaimed that the Vietnamese people remembered the "wholehearted support provided by [the] Russian people for Vietnam in its struggle for national liberation and reunification in the past and in the national construction and development at present".[27] As Putin showed in June 2024, it is de rigueur for a visiting Russian leader to lay a wreath at the mausoleum of Ho Chi Minh, whose embalmed body Russian technicians have helped preserve.[28] In return, Vietnamese leaders dutifully pay their respects at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow.

Laos also honours the assistance it received from the Soviet Union. In December 2022, a statue of the 30 Soviet pilots killed in the country during the Vietnam War was unveiled in Vientiane. During the ceremony, Russian Ambassador Vladimir Kalinin paid tribute to the "memory of the feat of the Soviet pilots [who] will remain in the memory of the peoples of both countries".[29] When Lao Vice-President Pany Yathotou attended the Eastern Economic Forum (EEF)—Putin's annual symposium in Vladivostok aimed at promoting economic development in the Russian Far East (RFE)—in September 2023, she began her speech by acclaiming the "cooperation we had back in the Soviet era in capacity building and human resources was one of our biggest achievements which deserves a special mention".[30]

Other Southeast Asian states also pay homage to Moscow for its anti-colonial support. In Indonesia, sections of the elite still recall that military assistance from the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s allowed President Sukarno's regime to face down Dutch colonialists, leading to the absorption of Papua.[31] "Today, Russia may not be an important friend, but it is an old friend and should be respected accordingly", a prominent Indonesian intellectual told the author during fieldwork in 2023. Most notably, Sukarno's daughter and former president, Megawati Soekarnoputri, the head of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle—the party of President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo who served from 2014 to 2024—remembers with gratitude the support Moscow gave her father's regime. And when president-elect Prabowo Subianto—who models himself on Sukarno, down to the founding president's clothes—visited Moscow in July 2024, he began his meeting with Putin by thanking Moscow for its military support during the Sukarno era, a moment when the Indonesian Republic was "under threat" adding that "We learn from our parents that we must never forget those who helped us."[32] What little aid Russia gives to Southeast Asia today is often used to keep alive the memory of Soviet assistance, such as the renovation of the Khmer-Soviet Friendship Hospital in Phnom Penh in 2017.[33]

In addition to the support the USSR gave to anti-colonial movements during the Cold War, Moscow also likes to remind Southeast Asians that, in contrast to European countries and the United States, it was never a colonial power in the region. Writing in a newspaper opinion piece on the eve of the ASEAN-Russia Commemorative Summit in Sochi in May 2016, Russia's ambassador to Thailand, Kirill Barsky, crowed "There has never been a war between us, and Russia has never been involved in the enslavement of people of Southeast Asia."[34] Not only is Moscow keen to underscore that it was not a colonial power, but it also likes to highlight the role it played in helping Thailand (known as Siam before 1939) avoid being colonized by Britain and France. During the 1890s, Siam's King Chulalongkorn and Russian Crown Prince Nicholas II cultivated a close relationship.[35] According

to Russian and Thai narratives, after his coronation in 1896, Tsar Nicholas II used his influence with the leaders of Britain and France to convince them not to annex Siam.[36] During the author's fieldwork in Bangkok in 2023, the relationship between the Thai and Russian monarchies was the starting point of nearly every conversation on Thai-Russian relations.

Memory diplomacy has clearly paid dividends for the Putin regime since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War. Gratitude for the Soviet Union's critical support during the Indochina Wars is part of the reason why Vietnam and Laos have refrained from criticizing Moscow and abstained on votes at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) that condemned Russia's invasion. In Indonesia, Megawati Soekarnoputri had nothing but praise for Russia and criticism for Ukraine.[37] In Thailand, the royalist-conservative camp, which supports the monarchy and military intervention in the country's political life, successfully argued that Bangkok should repay Moscow for Imperial Russia's support for Siam's independence by adopting a neutral stance on the Russia-Ukraine War.[38] Moreover, unlike in Europe, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is seldom viewed in Southeast Asia as an act of neo-imperialism. That is mainly because colonialism is perceived as a purely Western European phenomenon, despite Moscow's extensive empire-building activities in Central Asia and Siberia and, after the Second World War, in Eastern and Central Europe.

Russia not only uses memory diplomacy to buttress relations with Southeast Asian states; it also uses it as a stick to beat the United States, especially over America's role in the Indochina Wars and the resulting devastation, including the ongoing problems of unexploded ordinance (UXO) and the environmental and health legacies of the defoliant Agent Orange. When Washington criticized Russia for selling arms to Myanmar in 2019, the Russian embassy shot back that Southeast Asians had "hardly forgotten" the "casualties and destruction" caused by US arms sales to the region over the previous few decades.[39] A year later, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov revealed that members of the Russian Armed Forces (RuAF) had been conducting de-mining operations in Laos since 2018. Pointedly, he reminded his

readers that the UXO problem was "the heritage of US bombardments in 1964–1973".[40]

The second reason why Russia's role in Southeast Asia is worthy of examination is that, despite its small economic footprint, some of its exports to the region are quite important. It is one of the world's largest suppliers of wheat, which is used to produce instant noodles, a staple in Southeast Asia, and sunflower oil, used by many Southeast Asians for cooking. Russia is also the world's largest producer of fertilizers, which are vital in crop production, including rice, another regional staple. Thus, as noted earlier, when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, the impact of the war on global food and energy prices became one of the region's top concerns. Russia was also a major exporter of military hardware to Southeast Asia. In fact, during the first two decades of this century, it was the main supplier of weapons to the region, racking up sales of US$10.8 billion between 2000 and 2020.[41] The United States, the second largest exporter of weapons to the region, boasted sales of US$7.9 billion. Russia's biggest customers were Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and Myanmar. Although Russia's invasion of Ukraine has resulted in a sharp fall in its defence sales to Southeast Asia, several states, chiefly Vietnam and Laos, remain dependent on its defence industrial sector to keep their inventories of Russian-made equipment in working order. This dependency helps explain the strategic importance those two countries continue to place on Russia as an ASEAN Dialogue Partner. In ISEAS's 2024 *The State of Southeast Asia Survey Report*, for instance, elites from the ten member states, when averaged out, ranked Russia as the organization's eighth most strategically relevant Dialogue Partner (out of 11). However, Laotian respondents ranked it third, behind China and the United States. The Vietnamese who were polled rated it fifth, after the United States, China, Japan and the EU.[42]

The third reason Russia's role in Southeast Asia is worthy of more attention is that, compared to poor perceptions of it in Europe and North America, Moscow has a relatively benign image in the region. Despite concerns that its aggression against Ukraine has undermined the rules-based international order, Southeast Asian countries do not

perceive Russia to be a direct threat to their sovereignty or political autonomy. Unlike China, Russia has no territorial or maritime boundary disputes in the region. In fact, several Southeast Asian states, especially Vietnam, rely on Russian military equipment to defend their sovereignty and sovereign rights against China. Unlike the United States, the region's governments do not worry about Russia interfering in their internal affairs through democracy promotion or criticism of their human rights record. On the contrary, several authoritarian governments, namely those of Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar, are very comfortable with a fellow autocratic regime and share Moscow's fears of "colour revolutions", a term for regime change triggered by popular protests. Only occasionally have there been accusations that Russia has used disinformation to influence electoral contests in Southeast Asia.[43]

Russia's image in Southeast Asia's Muslim-majority countries, especially Indonesia and Malaysia, is also quite positive. This is due partly to Moscow's longstanding support for Palestinian statehood, an emotive issue for many Muslims across the region. For instance, according to ISEAS's 2024 *State of Southeast Asia Survey Report*, the Israel-Hamas conflict was the region's top geopolitical concern, especially for respondents from Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia.[44] Often overlooked, after the collapse of the Soviet Empire, Russia remained a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state, home to around 20 million Muslims. In 2003, at Malaysia's invitation, Putin visited Kuala Lumpur specifically to attend that year's Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). There, he argued that "Russian Muslims are an inseparable, full-fledged, and active part of the multi-ethnic and multi-denominational nation of Russia" and that Islam should not be equated with terrorism.[45] Putin's request that Russia be given observer status to the OIC was granted.

Russia's Islamic-friendly image stands in sharp contrast to the United States, which is often perceived in Southeast Asia's Muslim-majority states as being "anti-Islamic", due to the US-led invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, the Trump administration's 2017 travel ban on Muslims and America's long-standing commitment to the security of Israel. As discussed in Chapter Nine, in Indonesia and

Malaysia, the United States has been accused of double standards for condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine while glossing over its own military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq which lacked a strong legal basis. The charge of hypocrisy became even more pronounced because of America's steadfast support for Israel's invasion and destruction of Gaza after Hamas militants launched armed incursions into southern Israel in October 2023. In an opinion piece published in April 2024, Indonesian president-elect Prabowo passionately accused the West of double standards over Ukraine and Gaza:

> When Russia invaded Ukraine, the West led the global campaign of condemnation. It called for the world to denounce Russia in the name of human rights and international law. Today, however, the same countries are allowing yet another bloody conflict, this time in Gaza. How is the destruction of Gaza City less condemnable than the destruction of Mariupol? How is the attack on Bucha worse than the one at al-Shifa hospital? How is killing Palestinian civilians less worthy of denunciation than the killing of Ukrainian civilians?[46]

Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was also a vocal critic of the West's perceived hypocrisy over Ukraine and Gaza. At the EEF in Vladivostok in September 2024, he attacked the West for not doing enough to prevent atrocities from taking place in Gaza. Notably, however, Anwar declined to denounce Russian atrocities in Ukraine, leaving himself open to the same accusations of double standards.

Moreover, in contrast to America's military interventions in the Middle East, the atrocities that the RuAF committed in Chechnya—a Muslim-majority republic in the North Caucasus that tried to secede from Russia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, triggering two bloody wars in 1994–96 and 1999–2009—have been largely forgotten by Southeast Asia's Muslim-majority countries. Yet, it was the Chechen Wars, as well as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015 in support of the regime of Bashar al-Assad, that motivated Islamic extremists such as Chechen separatists, Al-Qaeda and Islamic State to perpetrate a string of deadly terrorist attacks in Russia. These included the 2002 Moscow theatre hostage crisis, the 2004 Beslan school siege, bombings

on the Moscow Metro in 2004 and 2010 (and St. Petersburg in 2017), the 2011 Domodedovo airport bombings, the downing of a Russian commercial aircraft over Egypt in 2015 and the Crocus City Hall attack in 2024 in which 145 people were killed. Moreover, while some Southeast Asian states are quick to criticize America's close relationship with Israel, they are slow to acknowledge Moscow's friendly ties with the Jewish state.

Putin's personal standing in Southeast Asia is also rather positive, in marked contrast to the rest of the world. He is generally admired for his perceived "strongman" image and ability to "stand up" to the West, as well as his support for "traditional" values and anti-liberalism. His strongman credentials go down particularly well in Vietnam and the Philippines, while his anti-"wokeism" resonates in the Muslim-majority states. Famously, a 2017 Gallup opinion poll found that 89 per cent of Vietnamese surveyed had a favourable view of Putin, compared to 79 per cent of Russians! Only 4 per cent of Vietnamese had an unfavourable view of the Russian leader.[47] According to the same poll, 48 per cent of Indonesians had a positive view of him (26 per cent did not), as did 43 per cent of Thais (15 per cent had an unfavourable view) and 47 per cent of Filipinos (versus 27 per cent who did not). In all three countries, Putin's favourability rating was on par or higher than the global average (43 per cent), while his unfavourability rating was far below the global average (40 per cent). The following year, in Vietnam favourable ratings of Putin were 56 per cent, while in Indonesia and the Philippines they were only slightly lower than the global average (35 per cent) at 31 per cent and 30 per cent respectively (in Thailand favourable views of Putin dropped to 16 per cent and unfavourable views rose to 33 per cent).[48] In 2019, the Pew Research Center asked respondents in 33 countries, including Indonesia and the Philippines, about Putin's "ability to do the right thing".[49] In Indonesia, 39 per cent thought he would do the right thing (27 per cent did not). In the Philippines, 56 per cent of respondents believed this was true, the highest percentage in the six Indo-Pacific countries surveyed (India 49 per cent, South Korea 42 per cent, Australia 26 per cent and Japan 25 per cent).

Putin's decision to launch an all-out invasion of Ukraine did not have a major impact on Southeast Asian views of the Russian leader. In fact, a 2023 Gallup survey found that the percentage of Indonesians who had "a lot of confidence" in Putin's ability to "do the right thing" in world affairs actually rose to 43 per cent, up from 39 per cent four years earlier. Only 26 per cent of Indonesians said they did not have confidence in his ability, the lowest among the 24 countries surveyed.[50] In contrast, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is a relatively unknown figure in Southeast Asia. In some countries, the Kremlin's portrayal of him as a puppet of the West and a "clown" (due to his former occupation as a comedian) has taken root. In both Indonesia and Malaysia, Zelenskyy's Jewish heritage has been disparaged.[51]

The fourth reason why this book is important is that it helps us better understand the role Russia plays in the geopolitics of Southeast Asia, even if that role is a relatively minor one. Since the 2010s, the region has increasingly become the primary arena of US-China competition, especially over the South China Sea dispute but also in terms of economic frameworks, technology and defence diplomacy activities. As the old adage goes, Southeast Asian countries do not want to be forced to choose between the United States and China. Instead, they prefer to "hedge". Kuik Cheng Chwee defines hedging as:

> insurance-seeking behavior with three attributes: (a) an insistence on not taking sides or being locked into a rigid alignment; (b) attempts to pursue opposite or contradicting measures to offset multiple risks across domains (security, political, and economic); and (c) an inclination to diversify and cultivate a fallback position.[52]

Rarely, however, do states admit to hedging, preferring to label their foreign policies as "non-aligned", "neutral" or "equidistant".[53] Nevertheless, when it comes to the geopolitical competition between Washington and Beijing, in practice all Southeast Asia countries hedge, to varying degrees. One element of hedging is to maintain strong economic, political and security ties with other major and middle powers, including Japan, India, South Korea, Australia and various European countries. While Russia may not be on par with

these countries economically or militarily, it provides an additional and sometimes useful hedging option for Southeast Asian states, particularly when it comes to supplying military hardware. Membership of the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) grouping can also be viewed as a hedging option, which is why Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam successfully applied to become BRICS Partners in 2024 during Russia's chairmanship (though this had less to do with Russia's chairmanship and more to do with the economic attraction of China). Moreover, Southeast Asians tend not to see Russia as a major factor fuelling the escalating rivalry between Washington and Beijing, despite the tightening of Sino-Russian relations since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In ISEAS's 2023 *State of Southeast Asia Survey Report*, only 5.2 per cent of respondents thought the Russia-Ukraine War would worsen Sino-US relations. However, this perception appears to be changing; it rose to 8.2 per cent in the 2024 survey.

While Russia considers itself to be a peer of the United States and China, and a global "swing state" between them, few Southeast Asians appear to agree. For instance, ISEAS's 2021 *State of Southeast Asia Survey Report* asked respondents which "third parties" ASEAN should seek out to hedge against the strategic uncertainties caused by US-China rivalry. Only 6.1 per cent chose Russia. Admittedly, this was higher than South Korea (3 per cent) and New Zealand (4.7 per cent), but well behind Japan (38.2 per cent), the EU (31.7 per cent) and India (7.5 per cent).[54] When asked which country they would look to as their preferred strategic partner if the United States was perceived as unreliable, only 7.8 per cent chose Russia, higher than India (4.7 per cent) but trailing Japan, the EU and China by some margin.[55]

Yet if Russia can provide Southeast Asians with one more hedging option, what geopolitical benefits does the region provide Moscow? Following the launch of its Turn to the East policy in 2012, the Kremlin pointed to improved relations with Southeast Asia as a way of deflecting criticism that its so-called pivot to Asia was simply a pivot to China. Moscow could also argue that increased engagement with ASEAN was an important component of its Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP),

the Kremlin's response to China's global infrastructure development strategy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The aim of the GEP, introduced by Putin in 2016, was to link Europe and Asia by closer integration of the two regions' multilateral forums. However, it has not been a success, mainly because, unlike the trillion-dollar BRI, it is not underpinned by significant financial resources. ASEAN, moreover, was decidedly lukewarm about a free trade agreement (FTA) with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (the Russian-led customs union of five post-Soviet states) because of thin economic ties between the two organizations, and closer ties with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Eurasian economic and security bloc which includes nine countries (Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India, Pakistan and Iran).

Instead, the real geopolitical payoffs for Russia only became apparent after it invaded Ukraine. In accordance with their non-aligned and hedging behaviours, most Southeast Asian states adopted neutral positions, not wanting to take sides or become entangled in the disputes of the major powers. Astonishingly, at least from a Western perspective, a worldwide opinion poll conducted by *The Economist* in July–August 2024 revealed that over 50 per cent of Indonesians and Vietnamese actually preferred to see Moscow win the Russia-Ukraine War, the highest among the 11 countries in the survey.[56]

Because ASEAN invariably refrains from criticizing the actions of its Dialogue Partners, Russia's invasion of Ukraine did not affect its relations with the organization itself. Except for Singapore, no Southeast Asian state imposed its own sanctions on Russia, perhaps because several Southeast Asian countries have also been hit by US sanctions and embargoes at some point in their history. More than that, Russian narratives that it was provoked into invading Ukraine by the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) found an empathetic ear across Southeast Asia. As noted above, criticism of Russia over its invasion was blunted by accusations of the West's double standards over Ukraine and conflicts in the Middle East. Indeed, one could argue that regional responses to the invasion have been shaped less by pro-Russian sentiments than anti-Americanism.

Perhaps most important of all, Putin's frequent post-invasion interactions with Southeast Asian leaders allowed the Kremlin to boast that Western attempts to isolate Russia internationally had failed. To the contrary, Moscow said, Russia still had plenty of friends, especially in the Global South. Between February 2022 and September 2024, eight Southeast Asian leaders held in-person meetings with Putin: Indonesian President Jokowi in June 2022; the leader of Myanmar's junta, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, in September 2022; Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin in October 2022; Lao President Thongloun Sisoulith in May 2024 and October 2024; Vietnamese President To Lam in June 2024 and Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh in September 2024; Indonesian president-elect Prabowo in July 2024; and Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in September 2024. Only the leaders of Brunei, the Philippines and Singapore refrained from meeting with Putin.

Research Questions, Arguments, Methodology and Structure

When I began work on this book in 2021, I had two main research questions in mind. First, what is Russia's role in, and policy towards, Southeast Asia, and to what extent has Putin advanced its economic, political and security interests in the region since he took power in 2000 and announced his Asia pivot in 2012? Second, how do Southeast Asian countries assess Russia's role in the region? In February 2022, I added a third: How have Southeast Asian states responded to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and what factors shaped their responses? The latter added greatly to the length of the manuscript but made the study timelier and more relevant.

My three main arguments are as follows. First, Russia cannot be considered a great power in Southeast Asia due to its small economic footprint, limited diplomatic influence and lack of power projection capabilities. Nevertheless, its *global* great power attributes are acknowledged by Southeast Asian states that see it as providing an additional, albeit limited, hedging option in the competition among

the major powers. Moreover, Russia continues to count most Southeast Asian states as friends. Second, since the launch of its Turn to the East policy, the Kremlin has endeavoured to raise its game in Southeast Asia to reduce Russia's growing dependence on China. However, although Moscow made some important gains, these efforts peaked in the late 2010s. Third, Russia's invasion of Ukraine increased its dependence on China and greatly damaged its relations with Japan and South Korea. In Southeast Asia, the political fallout may have been more manageable for Moscow, but the war has impaired its long-term economic prospects and, hence, its interests and standing in the region.

In researching this book, I consulted a wide range of primary and secondary English-language sources, including official communiqués and press statements, policy papers, media reports, academic journal articles and books. (For the full list, see the Bibliography.) In addition, between 2022 and 2023, I conducted fieldwork in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, interviewing more than 50 academics, think tankers, researchers, diplomats and journalists. (For a complete list of interviewees, see the Preface and Acknowledgements.)

Including the Introduction (Chapter One), this book consists of 11 chapters. Chapter Two provides the book's foundations by charting the evolution of Russia's post-Soviet foreign policy. It begins with a brief sketch of President Yeltsin's priorities in the 1990s before examining, in more depth, Putin's approach to foreign affairs and how his core beliefs have shaped his worldview and Russia's place in it. It then looks at the souring of relations between Russia and the West and the rationales and critiques of the Kremlin's Turn to the East policy. Chapter Three is devoted to Russia's bilateral relations with the major players in Asia, namely China, Japan, the two Koreas and India. It then examines Russia's interests in Southeast Asia since Putin took office. In particular, it highlights Russia's successes in the region as well as its failures and the impact of its invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The next three chapters examine specific areas of Russia-Southeast Asia relations over the past quarter of a century. Chapter Four

surveys Russia's limited commercial footprint in the region and the prospects for the country's nuclear and space industries, as well as Southeast Asia's interests in the Russian Arctic. Chapter Five turns to Russia's Dialogue Partnership with ASEAN. The Southeast Asia bloc has consistently courted Russia and invited it to participate in its various forums, to which Russia has responded positively. However, the results have been mutually disappointing. Joint action plans have gone largely unfulfilled. Putin has only attended the East Asia Summit (EAS)—the most important of the bloc's annual meetings with its Dialogue Partners—once in person. Russia became more of a disruptive force as its relations with the West deteriorated. The Kremlin's attack on Ukraine was a flagrant violation of ASEAN's founding principles.

Chapter Six considers Russia's defence diplomacy in Southeast Asia. During the 2000s and 2010s, the region bought more arms from Russia than from any other country. Although Vietnam accounted for nearly 80 per cent of the transactions, Indonesia, Myanmar and Malaysia were also importers of Russian-made weapons, especially big-ticket items such as fighter jets. However, after the West imposed sanctions on Russia following its seizure of Crimea in 2014, Southeast Asian states, including Vietnam, began to question its reliability as an arms supplier. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the tightening of Western sanctions and export controls against Russia's defence industrial sector (DIS) only reinforced those doubts. However, while Russia's arms sales to Southeast Asia may have plunged, several countries remain dependent on the country's DIS for spare parts, munitions and upgrades; for example, Myanmar has few other options than to source its military hardware from Russia. This chapter also examines Russia's limited participation in other defence diplomacy activities, including combined exercises, port calls, security dialogues, educational exchanges and United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs).

The next four chapters provide in-depth examinations of Russia's relations with the 11 Southeast Asian countries. For context and to highlight continuities and change, each country section begins with

an overview of bilateral ties during the Cold War before moving on to the post-Cold War era, looking particularly at how relations have developed since Putin took office. These four chapters also provide a detailed examination of each country's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and how the war has affected bilateral relations.

Chapter Seven examines three countries in Indochina: Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Vietnam and Laos remain Russia's two closest partners in Southeast Asia due to Moscow's decisive support for their communist parties during the Indochina Wars and their ongoing dependency on Russia for the upkeep of their Soviet-centric armed forces. Since the onset of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, however, Vietnam has come to question Russia's reliability as an arms supplier and has diversified its procurement policy. The strengthening of the Russia-China strategic nexus has also raised concerns in Hanoi. Nevertheless, because of Moscow's historical support, both Vietnam and Laos refused to condemn Russian aggression against Ukraine. Vietnam even hosted Putin in June 2024, his first trip to Southeast Asia since he visited Singapore in 2018. Chapter Seven ends with an assessment of Moscow's relations with Cambodia. Post-Cold War, Cambodia's relations with Russia have been cordial, though Hun Sen, the prime minister between 1985 and 2023, firmly opposed the Putin regime's invasion of Ukraine.

Chapter Eight turns to the two remaining mainland Southeast Asian countries: Thailand and Myanmar. Close ties between the Thai and Russian monarchies in the late nineteenth century were cut short by the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, and the two countries belonged in opposing camps during the Cold War. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Thailand and Russia established friendly ties, though relations have rarely been close. Bangkok's foreign policy priorities have always been with Washington and Beijing. Thailand adopted a neutral position when Russia invaded Ukraine and appeared more interested in attracting Russian tourists than taking Moscow to task. The chapter then turns to Myanmar, which, once again an international pariah following a military coup in February 2021, has tightened relations with Russia in the hope of securing military support to defeat

its adversaries in the country's civil war and resolve its energy crisis through the provision of oil and even nuclear power.

The following two chapters look at Russia's relations with the five maritime Southeast Asian countries. Chapter Nine examines its ties with the three Muslim-majority states of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. Bilateral ties with Indonesia were close under President Sukarno but much more distant under his anti-communist successor, Suharto. After the fall of Suharto's New Order in 1998, successive Indonesian leaders have looked to Russia for arms to avoid becoming dependent on the United States. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Jakarta adopted a neutral though empathetic position due to a combination of the country's founding foreign policy principles, anti-Americanism and Indonesia's own historical experiences. Indonesia's new government, led by President Prabowo, who took office in October 2024, appears set on forging closer relations with Russia.

For Malaysia, the Soviet Union and Russia have been regarded as useful counterweights to a hegemonic United States. As part of its policy to balance relations with the major powers, Kuala Lumpur has been an important customer for Russia's DIS since the 1990s. Malaysia refused to condemn Russian aggression against Ukraine, even when Russian-backed separatists shot down a Malaysian Airlines flight in July 2014, killing 298 passengers and crew. As with Indonesia, Malaysia also adopted a neutral stance in response to the Russia-Ukraine War, partly due to US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq but also to stay clear of major power rivalry. This chapter ends with a short description of Russia's relations with Brunei.

Chapter Ten is devoted to Russia's engagement with Singapore, the Philippines and East Timor/Timor-Leste. Of all the ASEAN member states, Singapore has always evinced the keenest interest in both the Soviet Union and Russia's economic potential. However, due to the importance Singapore places on international law and the rules-based international order, it took a principled stand against the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine eight years later, condemning Russia by name and imposing financial

sanctions on Moscow in 2022. The Philippines' interactions with Russia have primarily been a function of its relations with its treaty ally, the United States. It has been distant when the alliance is strong but closer when US-Philippines ties were strained, especially during the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte. Chapter Ten ends with a look at Russia's relations with Southeast Asia's newest country, Timor-Leste, and Dili's response to the war in Ukraine.

The book's final chapter summarizes its main findings, assesses Russia's successes and failures in Southeast Asia over the past quarter of a century and recaps how the Putin regime's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has impacted its bilateral relations in the region. It goes on to speculate on what Russia's future might hold and the possible implications for Moscow's relations with Southeast Asia.

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