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## Review: Putin, Russia and Kremlin Southeast Asia Futures

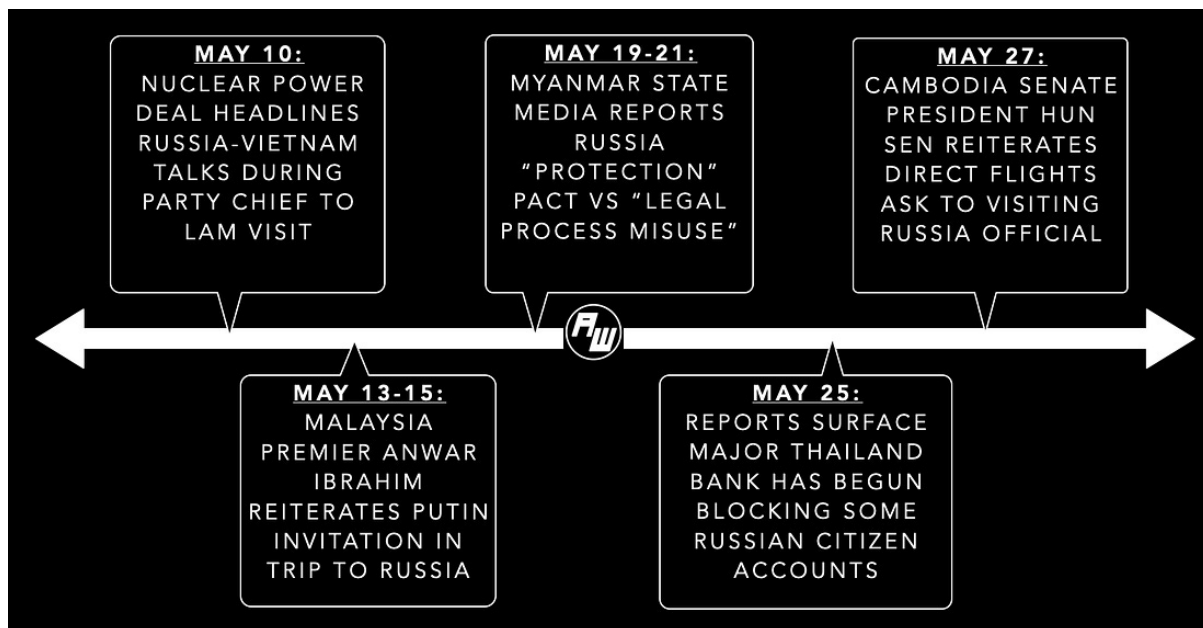


Source: X/@anwaribrahim

### Context

**“[I]t is a major and great prize for the people of Malaysia if we can have President Putin in Malaysia as soon as possible, or at the latest, during the ASEAN Summit in October,”** Malaysia Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim noted following talks with Russia President Vladimir Putin earlier this month<sup>1</sup>. The talks were just one of several datapoints in the Kremlin’s ongoing engagement in Southeast Asia even as it lags other partners on metrics like economic heft and is constrained by challenges elsewhere such as in the Russia-Ukraine war. The focus on Russia’s regional position has also been reinforced by wider dynamics [such as BRICS expansion](#) and Moscow’s evolving ties with other major powers including China and the United States.

### Select Key Recent Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Developments in Russia-Southeast Asia Relations



Source: Graphic by ASEAN Wonk Team

**A new book *Putin's Russia and Southeast Asia* by scholar Ian Storey assesses the future trajectory of Moscow's ties with the region<sup>2</sup>.** The book is a welcome addition to the subject of Russia-Southeast Asia relations that has not seen a major book-length study in decades even amid past contributions from scholars such as Anton Tsvetov and recent books on aspects like Sino-Russian ties such as *Putin's Turn to the East in the Xi Jinping Era* by Gilbert Rozman and Gaye Christoffersen<sup>3</sup>. *Putin's Russia and Southeast Asia* argues that despite Russia's limitations, [its influence in Southeast Asia](#) nonetheless bears watching given historical legacies, global great power attributes and Moscow's role as an "option" amid intensifying major power competition<sup>4</sup>. "The future of Russia's relations with Southeast Asia depends largely on Russia's political and economic development over the coming decades than on the region's future," Storey notes before laying out what to expect in Russia's future Southeast Asia ambitions as well as wider foreign and domestic policy dynamics in areas ranging from nuclear power collaboration to Arctic contestation<sup>5</sup>.

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## Analysis

*Putin's Russia and Southeast Asia* also forecasts the outlook for Russia's foreign and domestic trajectory in the coming years and how it is likely to affect its approach to Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular (see originally generated *ASEAN Wonk* table below for a summary of influence assessments and priority pillars, along with major coming datapoints to watch. Paying subscribers can also read the rest of the "Analysis" section and "Implications" section looking at how these dynamics play out in the future).

**Future Datapoints to Watch in Russia-Southeast Asia Relations, Along with Key Influence Assessments and Major Pillars**



PRIORITY PILLARS	KEY INFLUENCE ASSESSMENTS	MAJOR DATAPPOINTS TO WATCH
DIPLOMATIC	ASEAN DIALOGUE PARTNER STATUS; APPROACH TO REGIONAL SECURITY MECHANISMS; INVOLVEMENT IN GLOBAL INSTITUTIONS; RELATIONSHIP AND COOPERATION WITH OTHER POWERS	NEW RUSSIAN INITIATIVES INCLUDING PERIODIC ASEAN EXERCISES; RUSSIA-CHINA COLLABORATION IN ASEAN AND OTHER FORA; EFFECT OF UKRAINE WAR ON GLOBAL INSTITUTIONS LIKE THE G-20 AND APEC
ECONOMIC	TRADE LEVELS AND KEY EXPORTS; INVESTMENTS INTO SOUTHEAST ASIA; ENERGY COLLABORATION; OUTER SPACE COOPERATION; TOURISM NUMBERS	EFFECT OF POST-UKRAINE WAR SANCTIONS; LEGACY ROLE OF RUSSIA STATE-OWNED ENERGY FIRMS (E.G. GAZPROM; ROSNEFT); NEW NUCLEAR POWER AGREEMENTS AMID SHIFTING REGIONAL ENERGY MIX (E.G. ROSATOM); THE ARCTIC AND NORTHERN SEA ROUTE
SECURITY	ARMS SALES (OFTEN HEAVILY SUBSIDIZED); HIGH-PROFILE COMBINED MILITARY EXERCISES; EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGES; NAVAL PORT CALLS; HOSTING SECURITY EVENTS	DEFENSE SPENDING; POWER PROJECTION CAPABILITIES INCLUDING VIA PACIFIC FLEET; DISTRIBUTION OF GLOBAL ARMS EXPORTS AND DEFENSE SALES AFTER UKRAINE WAR DECLINE (INCLUDING INDIA-RUSSIA BRAHMOS MISSILE); PARTICIPATION AT SHANGRI-LA DIALOGUE (BANNED SINCE UKRAINE INVASION)

Source: *Putin's Russia and Southeast Asia*; Table by ASEAN Wonk Team

**The book's approach has a mix of strengths and limitations.** A key strength is its clarity. Storey very clearly specifies his argument at the outset that Russia's limited capabilities do not qualify it as a "great power" in Southeast Asia and have been undermined by the Russia-Ukraine war despite past efforts to raise its profile that largely peaked in the late 2010s<sup>6</sup>. The argument is explored through nine main chapters that address Moscow's regional role (Chapters 2-5) and its approach in specific sectors and countries (Chapters 6-10)<sup>7</sup>. The latter half of the book in particular is a valuable contribution given that assessments of Russia's aggregate regional presence often belie the reality that its influence is limited to specific countries (like Vietnam or Myanmar) or particular domains (such as arms sales). That said, the book is also not without its share of limitations which Storey himself is candid about. The Russia-Ukraine war skewed the shape of what Storey initially intended to be a broader study of Russia-Southeast Asia ties in the 21st century. Additionally, much of Russia's domestic politics is rather opaque beyond Putin's dominance and hard to evaluate definitively, despite Storey's repeated trips to the country that lasted into the years before the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War. That said, the book arguably more than makes up for these limitations with extensive fieldwork in the region assessing Moscow's influence covering major Southeast Asian capitals as well as Storey's own wide-ranging and longtime geopolitical expertise on subjects such as China and the South China Sea that allow him to contextualize Russia's presence both across time and alongside other powers<sup>8</sup>.



## Implications

**Looking ahead, *Putin's Russia in Southeast Asia* sees more challenges than opportunities for Moscow in its regional engagement.** Despite some legacy defense ties, historical links, and

periodic opportunities in countries like Myanmar, Storey argues that Russia's geoeconomic engagement is likely to remain limited, while the geopolitical gaps between it and other top-tier powers in Southeast Asia is likely to grow even further<sup>9</sup>. As the book notes, Moscow has never constituted more than 1 percent of trade with the ten existing ASEAN member states, and a detailed examination of areas like defense exercises shows that these remain largely small-scale despite the headlines that they generate. Periodic advances on initiatives like ties between ASEAN countries and the Eurasian Economic Union or the role of Russian energy companies in the South China Sea are likely to merely paper over the cracks of Moscow's influence in Southeast Asia rather than constituting strategic shifts away from this wider reality. Similarly, tactical changes seen in a Russia-Ukraine war negotiated settlement or Trump-Putin summit diplomacy are likely to coexist with strategic continuity in the Kremlin's major objectives, including deepening ties with like-minded regimes in China and North Korea and subverting democracies in Europe and beyond. Any effort to reinforce Russia's position in Southeast Asia will also be limited by a gloomy outlook on economics and demographics given the country's aging population, restricted immigration and deep fossil fuel dependence<sup>10</sup>.

**A more interesting but difficult question to answer is how the Kremlin can better manage what might be termed as its own “capacity-influence gap” beyond Putin’s reign.** While few would argue with Storey's portrayal of Russia's position in Southeast Asia as deeply challenged, candid conversations with officials who closely measure the traction of Moscow's regional efforts also indicate its reliance on tools like media disinformation and choreographed sectoral advances in select countries have at times allowed it to, as one source put it, “overperform” its capabilities and Putin's strategic disasters like the Ukraine War. How a post-Putin Russia may fare in this domain is also unclear. To be sure, that question may be a long way off. Storey assesses Putin is more likely to die in office or stage manage a transition than being ousted by a coup or revolution anytime soon, and, in any case, constitutional changes mean he can in theory stay on as president until 2036 (a feat which, if achieved, would make him the longest-serving Russian leader since Josef Stalin and just shy of the tenure of Catherine the Great)<sup>11</sup>. Still, given Putin's outsized role in Russia's worldview in recent years and the ebbs and flows of Southeast Asia's historical importance to the Kremlin, how a post-Putin Russia may interact with the region and the world for the rest of the 21st century remains at best an open question. As Storey himself notes in one of the concluding pages of the book: “Forecasts about Russia's trajectory have often been wide of the mark...because prognosticators are prone to underestimating Russia's resilience in the face of adversity.”<sup>12</sup>



1

See: Kremlin, “Press Statements Following Talks with Prime Minister of Malaysia Anwar Ibrahim,” May 14, 2025.

2

Ian Storey, *Putin's Russia and Southeast Asia: The Kremlin's Pivot to Asia and the Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2025)

3

See: Anton Tsvetov, “Vietnam-Russia Relations: Glorious Past, Uncertain Future,” in Le Hong Hiep and Anton Tsvetov (eds), *Vietnam's Foreign Policy Under Doi Moi* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2018); and Gilbert Rozman and Gaye Christoffersen (eds), *Putin's Turn to the East in the Xi Jinping Era* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

4

*Putin's Russia and Southeast Asia*, pp. 5-18.

5

Ibid, pp. 463.

6

Ibid, pp. 18-19.

7

Ibid, Chapters 2-10.

8

The five capitals were Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam.

9

Ibid, pp. 463-465.

10

Ibid.

11

Ibid, pg. 460.

12

Ibid, pg. 458.

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