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Setbacks for Moscow, Progress for Kyiv: The Russia-Ukraine War and its Impact on the ASEAN, G20 and APEC Summits

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The Russia-Ukraine conflict complicated the preparations for, and hosting of, three major back-to-back international summits in Southeast Asia in November: the ASEAN Summits in Phnom Penh (11-13 November); the G20 in Bali (15-16 November); and the APEC Leaders' Summit in Bangkok (18-19 November). In this picture, Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen (C) speaks during a press conference at the conclusion of the 40th and 41st Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summits in Phnom Penh on 13 November 2022. Photo: Tang Chhin Sothy/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Russia-Ukraine War complicated but did not derail the ASEAN, G20 and APEC summits in Southeast Asia.
- The host nations stood their ground and refused to heed calls from Western countries to exclude Russia. All three meetings were a qualified success thanks to skilful diplomacy.
- President Putin did not travel to Southeast Asia due to a series of humiliating military setbacks in Ukraine and to avoid being shunned by other leaders.
- The language of the final summit statements was highly critical of Russian aggression in Ukraine.
- The ASEAN Summit was a success for Ukraine as it acceded to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and strengthened relations with Cambodia.

INTRODUCTION

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has impacted the countries of Southeast Asia in many ways. The most important, and damaging, ones have been in economics. The rising price of energy, food and other commodities has lowered GDP growth forecasts and slowed the region's economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Kremlin's invasion has undermined the rules-based international order, further aggravated US-China tensions and inserted another wedge issue in ASEAN unity.¹ The conflict has forced regional states to reassess their defence and arms procurement policies, particularly those that have purchased military hardware from Russia.² Myanmar's tightening ties with Russia have the potential to worsen the country's civil war.

The conflict also complicated the preparations for, and hosting of, three major back-to-back international summits in Southeast Asia in November: the ASEAN Summits in Phnom Penh (11-13 November); the G20 in Bali (15-16 November); and the APEC Leaders' Summit in Bangkok (18-19 November).

The three summits tested the ASEAN countries' convening power and their ability to resist calls from outside the region to disinvite Russia. That none of the events were derailed, and final statements were issued, is a testament to the hosts' diplomatic skills in navigating complex geopolitical tensions. However, the events also underscored their limited ability to influence the dynamics of the conflict.

For the combatants themselves, the meetings provided important opportunities to lobby participating countries and articulate their competing narratives. Ukraine was able to advance its agenda and interests in Southeast Asia, especially at the ASEAN meetings. However, for Russia, the summits highlighted the difficulties the invasion has created for Moscow's diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific region, including in its relations with traditional partners.

THE RUN-UP TO THE SUMMITS

In the immediate aftermath of Russia's attack on Ukraine, the viability of the three summits was called into question. Some Western leaders declared that it could not be "business as usual" in multilateral forums which included Russia, and even raised the prospect of boycotting the meetings if Russian officials were invited.³ As the first major in-person summits to be held in Asia since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Cambodia, Indonesia and Thailand had a great deal at stake ensuring that the meetings took place without incident. More importantly, they felt that because there were many pressing global problems that required international cooperation to address, multilateral processes should not be held hostage to the Russia-Ukraine War.

Accordingly, on 4 May, the foreign ministries of the three countries issued an unprecedented joint press release. The statement emphasised the importance of maintaining ASEAN centrality through “constant engagement based on the principle of equal mutual respect and interest”, the important role the G20 played in facilitating a “strong and inclusive [economic] recovery for all” and the need for APEC to “accelerate regional economic integration to achieve shared prosperity”. The hosts declared they were “determined to work with all our partners and stakeholders to ensure a spirit of cooperation, as we in Southeast Asia continue to strengthen ASEAN centrality, credibility and stability in our regional and global endeavours”.⁴ Cambodia, Indonesia and Thailand stood their ground, arguing that it was neither in the interests of the region nor in their power to exclude certain countries. Invitations were thus issued to Russia by the three states. However, to assuage Western discomfort, Indonesia also extended an invitation to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to attend the G20.

By mid-year, the threat of a boycott had receded, but the preparatory meetings highlighted how the war had impeded multilateral processes that involved Russia. In July, for instance, the G20 foreign ministers and G20 finance ministers held separate meetings in Bali. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov attended the former in person, but walked out of the meeting following withering criticism of the invasion from his Western counterparts.⁵ No joint communique was issued. Russia’s finance minister, Anton Silvanov, attended the latter meeting virtually, and although it too ended without a communique, Indonesia issued a chairman’s statement which noted that “many members” had condemned the war while noting one member believed sanctions had added to existing economic challenges.⁶

In the run-up to the three summits, much of the media coverage centred on which leaders would attend, especially Russian President Vladimir Putin. While the Kremlin had accepted the invitations to all three events, it remained non-committal on whether Putin would attend in person. It was widely assumed that Moscow would make a last-minute decision, and that his attendance would depend on how Russia’s armed forces were faring in Ukraine. By late October, it had become clear that Putin would not attend the summits but this was not confirmed until 7 November.⁷ The Kremlin was always concerned about the poor optics of Putin being ostracized by other world leaders at the summits (as he had been at the G20 summit in Brisbane in 2014 a few months after Russia had annexed Crimea). Putin may also have weighed the personal risks to his own position while travelling overseas, though the prospects of a palace coup were always remote. But the deciding factor was a series of disastrous setbacks for Russia’s armed forces on the battlefield in the face of a successful Ukrainian counter-offensive. Most significantly, on 11 November, Russian occupation forces retreated from the strategic city of Kherson, the only major city captured by the Russians since the invasion and which in September the Kremlin had declared Russian territory “forever”.⁸ As a result, Putin did not participate in any of the three summits, not even virtually. However, his absence may well have come as a relief to the hosts as it spared them the potential headache of having Putin in the same room as other leaders opposed to the war.

THE ASEAN SUMMITS

No matter how the war was going in Ukraine, it was always highly unlikely that Putin would have travelled to Phnom Penh. This was for two reasons.

The first is Putin's lack of interest in the annual East Asia Summit (EAS). Since Russia joined in 2011, Putin has only attended once in person (in 2018 in Singapore) and twice virtually (in 2020 and 2021). Putin, it seems, is only interested in attending multilateral forums in which Russia can exert real influence, such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. The presence of the US and China at EAS tends to overshadow Russia.

ASEAN has always viewed Putin's participation in the EAS as a yardstick of how serious Russia is about its dialogue partnership with ASEAN, especially as the member states regard it as the key forum for leadership-led dialogue on the major issues facing the region. Putin's absence will reinforce the belief among some ASEAN members that Moscow does not see relations with the bloc as a high priority.

The second reason is Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's vehement opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Hun Sen has called it "an act of aggression", and a "grave breach of the UN Charter" which threatens "the foundation of international order".⁹ Cambodia co-sponsored the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution condemning Russia's invasion on 2 March.

Hun Sen has not only denounced Putin's invasion but has also thrown his political support behind Ukraine. In a telephone call with President Zelenskyy on 1 November, Hun Sen condemned Russian aggression and supported the Ukrainian leader's request to address the ASEAN meetings virtually. However, Zelenskyy was unable to do so because the ASEAN members could not reach a consensus.¹⁰ Reports suggest that Myanmar, which has pursued closer relations with Russia since the February 2021 coup,¹¹ was the only ASEAN member to oppose Zelenskyy's request.¹²

According to the chairman's statement of the EAS issued by Cambodia, "most" of the EAS countries had condemned the "aggression against Ukraine", called for an immediate end to the war and the non-use of nuclear weapons.¹³ However, in a concession to Russia's concerns about NATO expansion, including Ukraine's possible membership of the alliance, it also noted the "view that the root cause of the situation in Ukraine should be addressed and the legitimate concerns of all countries must be taken into consideration". But this phrase was of little consolation to Moscow.

Speaking at a press conference after the EAS, the head of the Russian delegation, Foreign Minister Lavrov, objected to the "absolutely unacceptable language regarding the situation in Ukraine". Lavrov also accused the West and its allies of "militarising" the Indo-Pacific region with the aim of "containing" Russian and Chinese interests, and establishing "inclusive structures" that undermined ASEAN centrality, including the 2021 Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) technology-sharing agreement. Russia and China were, he argued, the only two major powers still supporting ASEAN centrality.¹⁴

For Ukraine, the ASEAN Summits were a diplomatic success. Although Zelenskyy was not able to address the meeting, Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba attended as a guest of Cambodia. Most significantly for Ukraine, Kuleba signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) which enshrines the principles of friendly and peaceful relations among member states, including respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, and which is open to accession by countries outside the region (Ukraine became the 50th country to accede to the TAC). Ukraine had only applied to join the TAC in June, so its accession in November clearly indicated that ASEAN had fast-tracked the approval process. Although the ASEAN member states have taken different positions on Russia's invasion, the bloc's rapid approval of Ukraine's application was a gesture of political support for Kyiv.

In a wide-ranging interview with a Cambodian media outlet, Kuleba called Ukraine's accession to the TAC "a big political achievement".¹⁵ He thanked Cambodia for its support at the UNGA and for offering to send de-mining trainers to Ukraine. He announced that the two countries had agreed to establish embassies in each other's countries. Kuleba also held bilateral meetings with his counterparts from Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. He urged the ASEAN countries to condemn Russia's invasion, not only because it was an attack on Ukraine, but also the UN Charter and international law, adding "I'm confident that none of the ASEAN countries is interested in seeing any country following the pattern of behaviour of Russia here in Asia".¹⁶

THE G20 SUMMIT

From February onwards, Indonesia had repeatedly argued that the G20 was an economic forum that should not be politicised by the war in Ukraine, and that the participants should focus their attention on post-pandemic economic recovery. However, among the three hosts, Indonesia went the furthest to try and bridge the gap between Western countries and Russia. In June, President Joko (Jokowi) Widodo himself travelled to Kyiv and Moscow to personally deliver invitations to Zelenskyy and Putin.¹⁷ Yet Jakarta was under no illusions how difficult it would be to bridge the gap between the two opposing camps. Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi admitted that Indonesia's presidency was "among the most difficult, or even the most difficult to date of all G20s because of the geopolitical issues, economy and others".¹⁸ Jokowi was clearly passionate about the necessity for the G20 to achieve concrete results. In his opening address he warned "If the war doesn't end, it will be difficult for the world to move forward" and that the G20 "must be the catalyst for inclusive economic recovery".¹⁹

President Zelenskyy addressed the G20 leaders by video, prompting Lavrov to walk out. Although a final statement was not expected, the G20 was able to issue a Leaders' Declaration largely thanks to the behind-the-scenes diplomacy of Indonesia and India.²⁰ Moscow could not have been pleased with the language of the declaration. It referenced the UNGA resolution of 2 March which "deplores in the strongest terms the aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine" and added "Most members strongly condemned the war in Ukraine and stressed it is causing immense human suffering and exacerbating existing fragilities in the global economy." In reference to Russian threats to use nuclear weapons, the declaration stated

“The use or threat to use nuclear weapons is inadmissible.” And in a push back to Jokowi’s plea not to politicise the summit, it recognised that while the G20 was not a forum to resolve security issues “we acknowledge that security issues can have significant consequences for the global economy”.²¹ In response to the declaration, Lavrov accused the West of just that: politicising the G20.²²

In addition to the harsh declaration, Russia failed to find support for its military operation in Ukraine from two of its closest partners, China and India. Although both countries have tried to maintain a neutral but sympathetic stance since February, it is becoming clearer that both countries are increasingly dissatisfied with Putin’s war. The White House reported that at a meeting between US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping, the two leaders had expressed their opposition to the use or threat to use nuclear weapons.²³ President Xi also warned against the “weaponisation” of food and energy (but expressed opposition to unilateral sanctions).²⁴ Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi reiterated his call for a “return to the path of ceasefire and diplomacy in Ukraine”.²⁵

The Kremlin was to receive more bad news related to Ukraine as the summit got underway. On 14 November, Zelenskyy made a triumphal visit to the liberated city of Kherson. On the same day, the UNGA passed a resolution calling on Russia to pay reparations to Ukraine for damage to property and loss of life caused by its illegal invasion.²⁶ Three ASEAN states—Myanmar, the Philippines and Singapore—voted in support of the resolution while the other seven abstained. Three days later, a Dutch court sentenced in absentia two Russians and a Ukrainian for their role in the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 with a Russian-supplied missile in July 2014 with the loss of 298 passengers and crew, including 43 Malaysians.²⁷ The G20 meeting itself was interrupted by an emergency meeting of G7 and NATO leaders to discuss an accidental missile strike on Poland.²⁸

Overall, however, despite the problems caused by the war, the G20 was a relative success for Indonesia as agreements were signed on a number of issues, including pandemic preparedness, energy transition and the financial sector.²⁹ It also provided a venue for a cordial meeting between Biden and Xi, which appears to have eased tensions between the two superpowers.

THE APEC SUMMIT

Of the three summits, Putin would most likely have attended APEC had he travelled to Southeast Asia. Russia was a founding member of APEC in 1988, and as president, Putin has attended most of the leaders’ summits. Putin’s participation in APEC summits underscores his transactional approach to the region. He regards it as an important venue to build trade and investment ties with the largest economies in the region, and promote investment in the infrastructure-poor Russian Far East. Putin was proud to host the APEC Leaders’ Summit in Vladivostok in 2012.

Thailand seemed eager to have Putin attend, especially after President Biden announced in late September that he would not participate and that Vice President Kamala Harris would go in his place. On 12 October, seemingly to avoid offending the Kremlin, Thailand abstained on the

UNGA vote which called on member states not to recognise Russia's illegal annexation of four territories in the Donbas.³⁰ In another concession to Russia, Thailand did not invite Zelenskyy to address the APEC leaders. Putin did not attend, however, and Russia was instead represented by the relatively unknown figure of Deputy Prime Minister Andrey Belousov.

As with the G20 summit, the APEC leaders defied expectations and issued a joint statement. And in yet another setback for Moscow, the language in the declaration on the conflict in Ukraine was identical to the G20 statement.³¹

CONCLUSION

The Russia-Ukraine War bedevilled preparations for the three summits in Southeast Asia but did not derail them. The three hosts successfully rebuffed calls for Russia's exclusion, and in the case of the G20, Indonesia was able to assuage Western criticism by inviting President Zelenskyy to address the meeting virtually. But for Russia, the meetings amounted to an embarrassing diplomatic failure. Putin was unable to attend any of the summits due to a series of humiliating military setbacks in Ukraine and the prospect of being marginalised by other world leaders. All three of the summit statements contained language highly critical of Russian aggression. Even China and India issued thinly veiled criticism of the Kremlin's invasion. Ukraine did much better, especially at the ASEAN Summit where, thanks in large part to Cambodia's support, it was able to raise its diplomatic profile with the bloc. Kyiv would also have been satisfied with the references to the conflict in the final statements of the three meetings.

Despite the relative success of the three summits, the ongoing conflict in Europe will continue to pose challenges for multilateral processes in the Indo-Pacific. As the chair of ASEAN in 2023, Indonesia will face many of the same problems it did during its presidency of the G20, and will need to continue to play the role of an honest broker between Russia and the West. India will take over the presidency of the G20 and has been touted as a possible mediator between the two sides. The US will host APEC in 2023 and the Leaders' Summit will take place in San Francisco in November 2023. Given the fraught relationship between the US and Russia, President Putin will thus miss another APEC meeting.

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