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Putin's Visit to Vietnam: Adding Pressure on ASEAN's Autonomy?

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SYNOPSIS

Russian president Vladimir Putin's recent visit to Vietnam underscores Moscow's intent to break out of its international isolation in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, including by making further inroads into Southeast Asia as a whole. What does this effort mean for Southeast Asia and ASEAN? Will ASEAN's autonomy face greater stress?

COMMENTARY

Russian president Vladimir Putin made a state visit to the Vietnamese capital in June 2024, right after his trip to North Korea. During his Hanoi visit, Putin said that [enhancing Russia's strategic partnership](#) with Vietnam was one of Moscow's priorities, and the two sides [signed 11 memoranda](#) for collaboration in areas like civilian nuclear projects and education.

Isolated amid Russia's war with Ukraine and slapped with an International Criminal Court [arrest warrant](#), Putin appears to be ramping up his country's engagement with countries that are not Western aligned, including those in Southeast Asia, as a way to break Moscow's isolation. Indeed, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam, all of which have excellent relations with Russia, would naturally have Moscow's attention. Such moves by Moscow to step up its engagement have geopolitical implications for Southeast Asia and ASEAN.



Russian president Vladimir Putin and Vietnamese president To Lam at a reception following Putin's state visit to Vietnam, June 2024. Putin's visit reflects Russia's attempt to strengthen relations with non-Western-aligned countries and break out of isolation since its invasion of Ukraine. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Russian Strategy and “Indivisible Security”

However, there is a notable lack of an overarching Russian strategy towards Southeast Asia. In comparison, the United States and China have more developed strategies, even if they still lack substance. The United States and some of its allies have their respective Indo-Pacific strategies, while Washington has also shown a renewed economic focus in the region through its Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). China, for its part, has its Belt and Road, Global Development, and Global Security initiatives, as well as its broad concept of a “community with a shared future for mankind”.

Russia has announced no such declaratory strategies. At the very most, it has expounded on “indivisible security”. The concept emphasises that the [“security of any state is inseparable from others in its region.”](#) As a term, it has been used in numerous European documents, but its meaning remains open to interpretation. While Russia has taken it to mean that NATO expansion must not affect Russia’s core security interests without Moscow’s consent, others, particularly former Soviet states, take it to mean that they have the sovereign right to develop their own independent security postures.

Putin has used the phrase to [justify Russia’s invasion of Ukraine](#), claiming that Kyiv’s potential entry into NATO was an unacceptable security threat to Moscow. China, which has increasingly drawn closer to Russia in a [“no limits”](#) strategic partnership, has also [used the term](#), including it within its concept paper on the [Global Security Initiative](#).

Russia’s Increasing Footprint in Southeast Asia

Moscow is attempting to use Southeast Asia as one of its springboards to break out of its international isolation. Vietnam is probably the most consequential among Russia’s three main Southeast Asian partners. With an economy significantly [larger than the economies of the other two countries](#), Vietnam holds relatively greater influence regionally. This status makes Hanoi – which already has long-standing defence ties with Moscow, including [military assistance](#) that dates back to the Cold War era – a natural target for Russian engagement.

Nonetheless, commentators have generally viewed Vietnam's international posture as one of "[bamboo diplomacy](#)", a pragmatic approach to keep the country's relations with all major and middle powers balanced and neutral, regardless of where the latter stand on the ongoing major power rivalry. Indeed, Vietnam [reaffirmed](#) its comprehensive strategic partnership with the United States just one day after the conclusion of Putin's visit and [hosted](#) a senior official from the US State Department shortly thereafter. Hanoi's neutral stance could partially explain why Putin visited Vietnam: Russia still has its work cut out to convince Vietnam to fully join its camp rather than play all sides.

The other two ASEAN countries with close ties to Moscow – and less so with the West – are Laos and Myanmar. In May 2024, Lao president Thongloun Sisoulith [visited](#) Moscow and met with Putin, who stressed that fostering a strategic partnership with ASEAN remained a major Russian foreign policy priority. Most of all, Myanmar, whose military government faces similar international isolation since the 2021 coup and is under pressure from armed ethnic organisations, has [drawn closer](#) to Russia.

Russia has even helped China step up pressure against the Philippines. In response to Washington's deployment of the Typhon weapon system in the Philippines, Putin issued a [warning](#) to smaller states against "turning into America's satellite states or face the risk of countermeasures."

What This Means for Southeast Asia

However, Moscow's heightened attention to Southeast Asia is not tantamount to a full-blown Russian return to the region as a fellow major power like China or the United States, especially with Russia's [trade](#) with Southeast Asia remaining relatively minuscule compared with that of [China](#) or [the United States](#).

However, Russia's increasing focus on Southeast Asia must be considered in tandem with China's efforts at building its geopolitical influence in Southeast Asia. Both Beijing and Moscow are demonstrating a front of solidarity against their common adversaries, especially the United States, while using common narrative instruments like "indivisible security" to signal their opposition and gain support from ASEAN members.

When considered collectively, Russia and China do appear to be gaining modest ground in Southeast Asia. Countries like Malaysia and Thailand have joined Indonesia in signalling their interest in [joining BRICS](#) – the group of emerging economies comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. ASEAN is also seeking greater interaction with the [Eurasian Economic Union](#) – a group of Central Asian economies widely seen as led by Moscow. Also, some ASEAN countries, including [Malaysia](#), [Indonesia](#), and [Thailand](#), have underscored their commitment to improve relations with Russia. Meanwhile, Washington's IPEF has struggled to make [headway](#) in Southeast Asia.

In the context of the China-US rivalry in Southeast Asia, an added Russian presence may buttress Beijing's already extensive influence in the region vis-à-vis Washington. Such influence would further impact the ability of Southeast Asian countries, as well as ASEAN, to maintain their neutrality and autonomy.

Given their similar interpretations of “indivisible security”, Beijing and Moscow see any US attempt to bolster its relations with any Southeast Asian state as undermining their own security. China, faced with numerous territorial disputes, particularly in the South China Sea, could use the concept to condemn US support for the Philippines as well as US engagement of Vietnam and other ASEAN states as infringing on Beijing’s sovereign rights. As can be seen in Putin’s warning to the Philippines, Russia often lends support to China where their interests intersect. The Russian and Chinese navies often conduct joint drills in the West Pacific, the most recent cases being a Russian corvette joining the Chinese navy in conducting [training exercises](#) in the Philippine Sea, as well as [joint naval exercises](#) in waters off southern China.

However, such a China-Russia “tag-team” does face diverging interests. For instance, Vietnamese oil companies are involved in joint ventures with their Russian counterparts, drilling in areas within the South China Sea claimed by both Hanoi and Beijing. In Myanmar, while Russia fully supports the military government, China-Myanmar relations are underpinned by [mutual suspicions](#), with Beijing [maintaining engagement](#) with the armed ethnic organisations near the Chinese border. Even so, these differences are likely to be swept under the rug by both China and Russia, as long as both countries focus their attention on their common adversaries.

An Increasingly Divisive Geopolitical Landscape in Southeast Asia

ASEAN will face an increasingly divisive geopolitical environment, with Russia’s attempts to “return” to the region. “Indivisible security” could be used as a principle by both Beijing and Moscow to pressure Southeast Asian countries against moving closer to the United States and its allies, shrinking ASEAN’s room for manoeuvre and undermining its autonomy. To be fair, the United States does take similar actions, as demonstrated by its [criticism](#) of Vietnam for welcoming Putin.

However, if Vietnam’s “bamboo diplomacy” is anything to go by, ASEAN is likely to maintain its strategy of balancing its relations with all major powers even as the pressure to choose sides continues to mount. In this regard, ASEAN’s continued even-handed and balanced engagement with external parties, including those seen as neutral like India, should be welcomed.

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