

Representatives of the respective countries at the Asean Post Ministerial Conference with Russia in Vientiane, Laos, in July. Asean foreign ministers have been meeting their Russian counterpart at the annual event since Russia was accorded the status of a dialogue partner in 1996.
PHOTO: AFP



Russia is the 11th-largest economy in the world. Its per capita income is US\$14,400, (S\$18,700) which makes it a middle-income country. Russia is Asean's 10th-largest trading partner and 10th-largest investor. In the defence and security arena, Russia is a major arms supplier to Asean countries such as Vietnam and Myanmar. Indonesia, Malaysia and Laos also import some arms from Russia. This is one area where Russia is very competitive.

My overall impression is that Russia has not been a proactive or dynamic player in the life of our region. In spite of this, Asean has accorded it the status of a major power.

Asean has treated Russia with respect and does not regard it as an adversary. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has done considerable damage to its reputation and credibility. Small countries, such as Singapore, which depend on international law and the international rule of law for their survival, see Russia's behaviour as a serious threat to the international legal order. They have joined the great majority of the member states of the UN in condemning the Russian invasion and in demanding an end to the war of aggression and the return to Ukraine of the territories occupied by Russian armed forces.

At the same time, the Asean countries have spoken out against the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza following Israel's response to the Oct 7 attacks by Hamas terrorists. Asean has condemned the attacks against all civilians and civilian infrastructure, and called on all parties to the conflict to abide by international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Some in Asean are disappointed in the US, which supplies Israel with the instruments of war and protects Israel from being held to account for its behaviour. For this reason, some Asean members, especially those with large Muslim populations, have tilted away from the US and moved closer to China and to Russia. This could explain Prime Minister Anwar's recent overtures to China and Russia.

THIN ON SUBSTANCE

In conclusion, I would say that Asean is more important to Russia than Russia is to Asean. The fact that Russia is invited to Asean's annual summits and other meetings is greatly appreciated in Moscow at a time when it is being boycotted by the US and Europe. However, the relationship is more optical than substantive.

The reality is that the Asean-Russia relationship is thin on substance. Russia is underperforming in trade, investment, tourism, education and technology. If Russia does not try harder to improve the situation, it will be viewed by Asean as a free rider.

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What to make of Asean's ties with Russia

Russia has a complex relationship with Asean members. It is not regarded as an adversary, but its invasion of Ukraine has seriously damaged its reputation.



Tommy Koh

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 brought about a paradigm change in Russia's relations with the United States and with Europe.

Today, both the US and Europe view Russia as an aggressor and a threat to peace. Their policy is to isolate and confront Russia.

The West finds it hard to understand why Asean does not support its policy. On Sept 4, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim met President Vladimir Putin in Russia and invited him to attend the Asean Summit to be held next year in Kuala Lumpur. In 2025, Malaysia will be the chair of Asean. It will also be the 20th anniversary of the first Asean-Russia Summit.

The relationship between Asean and Russia began in 1991 when the Russian Federation emerged from the ashes of the Soviet Union. In 1996, Russia was

accorded the status of a dialogue partner. What this means is that, since 1996, Asean foreign ministers have met their Russian counterpart during the annual Asean Post Ministerial Conference.

In 2004, Russia acceded to Asean's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in South-east Asia. The first Asean-Russia Summit was held in 2005, in Malaysia. In 2010, Russia was invited to join the East Asia Summit. In 2016, an Asean-Russia Summit was held in Sochi, Russia, to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the dialogue partnership.

RUSSIA SEEN AS FRIEND, NOT FOE

Asean therefore views Russia as a friend and not an enemy. This is the fundamental difference between the attitude of the South-east Asian grouping and those of the US and Europe.

For this reason, in 2022, when Indonesia was chair of the Group of 20, it resisted Western pressure not to invite Russia to the summit. However, President Putin chose not to attend and

sent his foreign minister to represent him instead.

Russia continues to be invited every year by the Asean chair to attend the East Asia Summit. Russia's seat at the head table has not been removed.

IMPACT OF RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE

Has Russia's invasion of Ukraine affected its relations with Asean? The answer is yes and no. Let me explain.

Two Asean members, Laos and Vietnam, enjoy very close relations with Russia. Asean has not been able to adopt a joint statement to condemn the Russian invasion. At the United Nations, all the Asean countries, except Laos and Vietnam, have voted repeatedly to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

There are three reasons which explain Asean's current approach on relations with Russia.

The first is that Asean is internally divided on the issue, with two of its 10 members pursuing a pro-Russia foreign policy.

The second reason is that Asean

has many interests with Russia, spanning the political and security dimension, the economic and financial sector and the cultural and people-to-people ties. Asean is not prepared to put aside all these domains of interest because of the disagreement about Ukraine.

The third reason is that Asean's foreign policy is to be on good terms with all its major partners. It is also Asean's policy not to take sides in the disputes between and among the major powers. This is not a policy of neutrality; Asean is not neutral because on specific issues it is willing to take a stand, based upon its principles and long-term interests.

RUSSIA'S ROLE IN OUR REGION

Russia is well represented in the institutions of the region. In addition to being an Asean dialogue partner and a member of the East Asia Summit and the Asean Regional Forum, it is also a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum and the Asia-Europe Meeting.

Economically, Russia is the most important member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which is made up of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia. Singapore has a free trade agreement with the EAEU.

Russia hosts the annual Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok. The purpose of this forum is to encourage investment in the development of the eastern region of Russia.