

Singapore's Position on Ukraine, "Business As Usual with Russia", Realigns with ASEAN

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Although Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong initially backed the West's position on Ukraine, even going against every other member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) by imposing US-led sanctions on Russia, he is retracting on his initial position now. He recently said: "We are not hostile to Russia, for us Russia is not an enemy."

At the beginning of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, Singapore followed the US and announced the imposition of sanctions against Moscow.

Explaining his motives, Lee Hsien Loong said: "We go on principles rather than sides, so we have to follow the principle and be consistent and stand by it." He even cited how Singapore took a similar stance when the US invaded Grenada, sidelining the fact that the two conflicts are completely unrelatable and incomparable.

More than a year has passed since the beginning of the special military operation and there have been many changes in the perception of Asian politicians about the conflict. Speaking recently at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore's flagship public research and education think tank, Singapore's Minister of Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam noted the behaviour of the US and Western countries.

"The West and NATO, in my view, were not uninvolved bystanders who had no role to play in the current situation," he said. The minister added: "Whatever the case, Ukraine is the unfortunate victim, and its people are paying a terrible price."

The minister also highlighted that the expansion of NATO to Eastern Europe was contrary to the promises made by Washington to Moscow during the dissolution of the Soviet Union and that it poses a threat to Russia's security. Shanmugam also recalled the hypocrisy of former

European leaders, such as French President François Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. It is recalled that the latter even admitted that the Minsk agreement was never with the intention of peacefully resolving the conflict but to instead to buy time for Ukraine to increase its military capabilities.

The truth is that ordinary citizens of Southeast Asia do not care much about what is going on in Europe. Singapore was the only exception in Southeast Asia, and in fact most of the non-Western world, in the sense that it took a clear position on the situation in Ukraine and imposed sanctions on Russia.

In [a survey conducted](#) in February, it was clear that the majority of Southeast Asian residents felt that “Ukraine’s problems are not our business and we will not interfere”. This accounted for 60% of Thai residents surveyed, 54% of Malaysian residents, 48% of Indonesian residents and 44% of Singaporean residents. In Laos, only 14% of respondents stated that they were concerned about the war in Ukraine.

Former Singapore Foreign Minister George Yeo expressed this sentiment:

“No one in Southeast Asia wants to get involved in the war, it’s far away and not of strategic importance to us.”

Although Singapore has imposed sanctions on Russia, the island country has not completely terminated its cooperation with the Eurasian Giant. The sanctions concern sectors like the export of military-technical products to Russia and banking services.

As is the case with other countries, Singapore-Russia cooperation is flourishing in other sectors, such as petrochemicals. In 2022, the amount of Russian oil that Singaporean ports received was more than the previous year. According to local media data, this received oil is processed and then re-exported to other countries, such as Vietnam.

This is effectively in line with ASEAN’s policy towards Russia – business as usual. Some other ASEAN state leaders may have made damning statements, such as Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, who was quick to call Russia’s military operation an “act of aggression” and an “invasion.” However, during the recent ASEAN Summit hosted by Cambodia in November 2023, he offered to mediate peace talks between Russia and Ukraine.

Even if Hun Sen was personally outraged by the special military operation, state-to-state relations continued as normal, as did economic relations. In fact, the Cambodian foreign affairs ministry [said](#) in a statement that it “categorically dismissed” Cambodia’s designation as a “military supporter of Ukraine” on a list that had been published by a Telegram channel, with Russia then offering to provide weapons to the country.

Although Singapore is unlikely to remove the sanctions anytime soon, there is a clear regret that it acted rashly and out of line with all of its neighbours. None-the-less, economic relations are continuing as normal with the exception of sanctioned sectors. As Loong said in a recent interview, and perhaps with greater clarity since 2022, Singapore is a “small” country and “does not play a role in determining the world’s political destiny,” which is why the country’s leadership seemingly regrets acting out of ASEAN norms.

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