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No. 3/2022 | March 2022

The Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Implications for Thailand and ASEAN

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The Russia-Ukraine conflict has escalated to a very dangerous point when Russia decided to carry out its so-called “a special military operation to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine” on 24 February 2022. However, such a narrative of the conflict is seen by most of the rest of the world, particularly the U.S. and its alliance, as an act of aggression and a full-scale military invasion into another sovereign state.

What has led to such a decision? As argued by Henry Kissinger in his article on “How the Ukraine crisis ends” in the Washington Post 2014 and John Mearsheimer in his talks on “Why is Ukraine the West’s fault?” in 2015, the root causes of the conflict emerged from Russia’s never-let-go of the expansions of NATO and EU eastwards and Russia’s biggest concern and worries about NATO’s attempts to grant Ukraine a membership. For Russia, Ukraine’s becoming a NATO

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member poses a direct and fundamental threat to Russia's national security and undermines its core strategic interests.

Another root cause, as argued by President Vladimir Putin in his remarks on 24 February 2022, is that since 2014 (when the Ukrainian crisis took place after the annexation of Crimea to Russia and the rise of separatism in Donbass), the Ukrainian government, influenced by the far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis, supported by NATO member countries, has been conducting anti-Russia policies towards a Russian minority and Russian citizens in Ukraine. These policies to which the Western countries have closed their eyes, as accused by Russia, include the genocide and massive human right violations.

One clear picture the Russia-Ukraine conflict has projected is that there are real power struggles between great powers in the European continent. On one hand, even though the conflict is presented by Ukraine, it is de facto that Ukraine is backed by the U.S., who has been conducting the containment policy toward Russia in Europe. On the other hand, there is Russia, who is seen by the U.S. as a declining power after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. Therefore, it is not wrong to say that the Russia-Ukraine conflict is a rivalry between the U.S. and Russia.

With Russia's military operation in Ukraine, it is showing the world, especially the U.S., that the U.S. unilateral world principle does not apply to Russia and Russia stands ready to defend what it truly considers its core strategic interests. For Russia, losing Ukraine to the U.S. through NATO will reaffirm its status as a declining power and the acceptance of the U.S. hegemony in the world, which would allow the U.S. to do whatever and whenever it wants, especially in such regions as the North Caucasus and the Central Asia that Russia considers them as its direct spheres of interests and influences.

Russia is paying a very high price for its military operation in Ukraine as it is being imposed a large scale of sanctions that surpass political and economic aspects. Currently, Russia is ranked the most-sanctioned country in the world, bypassing Iran and North Korea. Are these tougher sanctions effective enough in putting pressure on Russia to stop its military aggression, considering previous sanctions on Russia over the Crimean crisis in 2014? Eight years have passed since Russia has annexed Crimea and Russia incontrovertibly will never let the region go. So, the answer to this question is already self-responded.

Or would these sanctions even drive Russia further to adopt more hardcore approaches in dealing with the issues that concern its strategic interests and national security, considering a large number of nuclear warheads and missiles Russia possesses? The answer to this question could be arrived at by taking into consideration a series of Russia's actions toward Ukraine for the past eight years after it has annexed Crimea in 2014, the outcomes of which has led to aggressive military alternatives and confrontation.

In addition, the sanctions on Russia would drive Russia establish even closer ties with China, which could help reinforce China's power in the world. The Sino-Russian ties can eventually reformulate a new world order, clearly dividing the world's great powers into two major blocs, namely the U.S.-led bloc and China and Russia-led bloc. This notion has an element of possibility as we have witnessed that since 2014, Russia has been emphasizing the Asia pivot foreign policies by prioritizing the consolidation of its relationships with China and seeking to expand more cooperation with other Asian states.

Russia's efforts to strengthen close ties with China and other Asian countries are not pointless as demonstrated by the result of the vote for the non-binding draft UN resolution on Ukraine on 2 March 2022, affirming Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity.

While 141 UN member countries, including Thailand and seven other ASEAN member countries voted for the draft resolution, 35 countries abstained from the vote. These abstentions came from such major players in international and regional affairs as China and India, with two ASEAN member countries, Laos and Vietnam, also abstained.

From the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the following reflections are suggested. Firstly, rivalries among great powers exist and will get even more tense. Secondly, small states will likely be hurt and damaged more from great powers' rivalries, if they miscalculate their moves. Thirdly, it is clear that Russia will not allow the U.S. to exercise hegemony on its doorstep and will stand ready to use force to defend its core strategic interests even if it has to pay a very high price. And lastly, with massive sanctions Russia is facing, there is a possibility of reshaping a new world order that would deeply divide great powers into two main blocs: the U.S. versus China and Russia.

Thailand and ASEAN are unlikely to escape from these geopolitical and geoeconomic rivalries between great powers in the region. And it is likely that these rivalries will be even more strained and could escalate to an armed dispute. This scenario is not far from reality as the world has seen how Russia resorts to the use of force to achieve its ultimate goals and to settle an issue that concerns its core strategic interests.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has already testified to the fact that taking side with one particular great power will not benefit any small state as great powers will calculate their own interests before others. When the Russian military established its presence in Ukraine, neither the U.S. nor any NATO member country was willing to commit troops to a battle. This situation is likely to leave Ukraine with very little option but to accept Russia's demands that include the change of Ukraine's Constitution to enshrine neutrality and not to join NATO, acknowledgment of Crimea as a territory of Russia, and recognition of Luhansk and Donetsk as independent states.

History has already proved to be right for those conducting a more balanced approach of foreign affairs in relation to great powers' rivalries. Thailand is a good case-study for this approach. With a very wise foreign affairs strategy of King Chulalongkorn the Great, who visited Russia in 1897, the two countries' relations had been consolidated and prosperous more than any time in the Thai-Russian history. A photo of King Chulalongkorn the Great and Tsar Nicholas II sitting side by side helped uplift Thailand's image in the international arena as an equal partner to a great power in Europe. This subtly helped Thailand achieve its ultimate goals as to remain the only sovereign state in Indochina during the colonial period.