FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 08.07.2022 | Hans Mathieu

Indonesia: a new mediator between Russia and Ukraine?

Indonesia tries to play the role of mediator between Ukraine and Russia — to preserve its neutrality and save its G20 presidency

Last week, Indonesian president Joko Widodo travelled to Kyiv and Moscow to mediate between the warring parties. The official aim of the trip was to persuade Russia and Ukraine to urgently seek a peaceful solution to the conflict – or to at least convince them to restart grain exports.

With an estimated 30 per cent share of global wheat exports, the two countries are among the largest grain exporters in the world; in addition, Russia is one of the most important exporters of fertiliser. The interruption in grain exports caused by the war has been a key factor in the price hikes affecting grain and basic foodstuffs around the world.

Apart from its impacts on supply chains and global market prices for many raw materials and products, the war in Ukraine has also intensified the conflict between different political systems, heightening tensions between China and Russia on the one hand and the West on the other.

Indonesia's foreign policy

For Indonesia and President Widodo, this diplomatic mission's primary focus was therefore on the conflict's consequences for security in South-East Asia and the Asia-Pacific region and its impact on Indonesia's current, one-year G20 presidency. Jakarta has traditionally pursued a policy of non-alignment and sought to avoid allying itself with one particular global power. As a nation of almost 280 million people, the largest country in South-East Asia and the region's only G20 member state, Indonesia does have some foreign policy clout. It also aims to be a leading player within the ASEAN regional bloc.

For Indonesia, the G20

Indonesia's foreign policy interests centre on

presidency is both a recognition of the country's importance and an opportunity to achieve positive outcomes in key policy areas.

the maintenance of a rules-based world order that limits global and regional powers' possible courses of action. Accordingly, Jakarta has criticised Russia's invasion of Ukraine, denouncing it as a breach of international law. During the United Nations vote on the war, however, Indonesia abstained – and it has declined to join in with Western sanctions. By demonstrating neutrality, the country's leadership is ensuring its hands are not tied. In security policy terms, the conflict's impact on the Asia-Pacific region relates primarily to how it will influence China's position. There are, for instance, concerns around the lessons and conclusions Beijing will draw with regard to Taiwan – specifically, if and when China will decide to annex Taiwan by force.

In this context, the increasing attention given to Indonesia and South-East Asia in Western countries' strategic and security policy thinking in recent years is certainly welcome. Not least because Indonesia, in particular, hopes to win new concessions in trade and development from both sides, without having to align itself with one or the other. At the same time, there are concerns that the US's security initiatives in the region could drive China to respond to perceived Western threats in much the same way Putin has – possibly leading to a preventative attack on Taiwan.

Indonesia's G20 presidency

Indonesia assumed the G20 presidency in December 2021 and will hold it for one year. The G20 summit in Bali from 15 to 16 November 2022 will be its highlight and end. For Indonesia, the G20 presidency is both a recognition of the country's importance and an opportunity to achieve positive outcomes in key policy areas. This is illustrated by the summit's official priorities of 'global health architecture', 'digital transformation' and 'sustainable energy transition'. In line with its overarching motto of 'Recover Together, Recover Stronger', Indonesia is hoping Western nations and China will grant increased funding and technology transfers in these core areas to developing countries – and especially to middle-income countries such as Indonesia itself.

Initially, it seemed the summit might fall victim to the war in Ukraine, with several Western countries demanding Russia or specifically Putin be excluded and threatening to boycott the summit should he attend. For

Indonesia, that was unacceptable because uninviting Putin would have meant acceding to Western pressure, taking the West's side, and running the risk of other countries – China in particular – staying away. The summit would thus have been a failure from the start, and would probably have had to be cancelled.

As for their trip to Moscow and Kyiv, Widodo and Foreign Minister Marsudi's stated aim was to persuade Russia and Ukraine to restart grain exports on humanitarian grounds.

Indonesia responded with a diplomatic offensive led by foreign minister Retno Marsudi and President Widodo himself. For instance, Widodo invited the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky to attend the summit, thus ensuring both sides would be represented. His appointment as one of six 'champions by the Global Crisis Response Group set up by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, meanwhile, enables Widodo to respond with humanitarian missions to the global cost-of-living squeeze. As a result, Indonesia has been able to maintain its neutral stance while increasing its global influence.

In the process, Widodo has been able to boost his own political standing, both on the international and domestic stages. The latter matters to Widodo because he is unable to run again in the 2024 vote and wants to at least influence the choice of his successor. This is important if he is to guarantee the continuation of his flagship policies, among them the relocation of the capital from Jakarta on the island of Java to a site on the northern island of Borneo.

Indonesia's charm offensive

As for their trip to Moscow and Kyiv, Widodo and Foreign Minister Marsudi's stated aim was to persuade Russia and Ukraine to restart grain exports on humanitarian grounds – ideally as part of an imminent end to hostilities, be it via a ceasefire or even a peace treaty. Widodo will likely have argued, at least vis-à-vis Putin, that – should he refuse – the Russian president could force countries that have hitherto remained neutral to change their stance and perhaps sign up to sanctions. Russia would thus run the risk of becoming increasingly isolated and losing its influence in world politics.

Neither Putin nor Zelensky have so far been moved by these arguments. The initial objective of Russia's war in Ukraine was to swiftly seize Kyiv and install a loyal puppet regime. Having failed to do so, Russia is now aiming to take control of the Donbas region and the entire southern

Ukrainian coast. Only once he has achieved these goals might Putin be open to negotiating a ceasefire or peace treaty and, even then, he may well demand that Ukraine doesn't ally itself with the West and, instead, forgoes NATO and EU membership.

From what we know so far, a Russian pledge to increase fertiliser exports seems to be all that Widodo's trip has yielded.

For its part, Kyiv's declared objective is to liberate the Donbas region from Russian forces. Ukraine would probably accept the ongoing Russian occupation of Crimea but insist on Western security guarantees, such as a continuation of the EU accession process. Ukraine's ability to hold out, however, will be critically dependent on continued Western support and, in particular, on further shipments of arms.

Hence, there is currently little prospect of an end to the war. As far as the resumption of grain and fertiliser shipments is concerned, there may potentially be solutions that don't require a cessation of hostilities, such as a unilateral increase in Russian exports and the creation of a Ukrainian export corridor via Odessa. Whether Putin would agree to the latter is an open question, however; he would probably only do so in return for far-reaching concessions from Ukraine and the West. From what we know so far, a Russian pledge to increase fertiliser exports seems to be all that Widodo's trip has yielded.

President Widodo's attendance at the G7 summit at Schloss Elmau can also be viewed in the same context. Here, one of the aims was to reach agreement – behind the scenes – on what Widodo could offer to Putin and Zelensky. Of greater importance to Widodo, though, was persuading the G7 states to drop demands for Putin to be excluded from the G20 summit and securing confirmation of their attendance even without such an exclusion. By all accounts, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier had, during his state visit to Indonesia a week and a half ago, already informed Widodo that Chancellor Olaf Scholz would indeed be attending the G20 summit. The other G7 countries are now likely to follow suit.

If they do, President Widodo will have achieved his most important objectives: he will have enhanced Indonesia's position in world politics, retained its ability to negotiate with both sides in the global inter-system conflict, and ensured the G20 summit on home soil will still go ahead.



Hans Mathieu

Jakarta

Hans Mathieu heads the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's office in Indonesia.
Previously, he headed the FES office in Mexico.

-