

Non-Western Responses to Russia’s War in Ukraine: Learning from Indonesia

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Abstract: Using Indonesia, one of the leading voices in the so-called Global South, I trace the diverse narratives of non-Western elites on interpreting the war in Ukraine, the relationship between Russia and the “non-Western” world, and the NATO factors. The lack of knowledge about Russia and Ukraine, coupled with the strong anti-Western sentiment, has created a more pro-Russian sentiment in the Indonesian narratives about the war. This tendency was made stronger by the postcolonial thinking in Indonesian elite discourse, creating an ‘understander’ narrative rooted in the local postcolonial history instead of being driven by external, material factors.

Keywords: Indonesia, Global South, pro-Russian narrative, Russia’s war in Ukraine, postcolonial thinking

Russia’s war against Ukraine, which turned into a full-scale invasion on February 24, has created diverging responses from many parts of the world. Most Western countries responded similarly: through strong condemnation, imposing sanctions, and supporting Ukraine with humanitarian and military aid (Green 2022). However, as Angela Stent (2022) argued, there is a new division between “the West” and “the Rest.” The so-called non-Western countries varied greatly in response to the Russian invasion (EIU 2022). Some, like Singapore and Japan, strongly condemned Russia and supported the sanctions. Others, especially from the Global South like China, India, and Brazil, played a pragmatic game and tried to be in the middle and neutral while sometimes profiting from the war itself. Meanwhile, countries like Syria and Iran continuously supported the Russian position.

Under this context of pragmatism and neutrality of the Global South, Indonesia’s position is an interesting case study. As the holder of the 2022 G20 Presidency, Indonesia is considered one of the leading voices of developing countries (Sundari 2022). Nevertheless, many analysts have argued that Indonesia’s position on the war remains hesitant and cautious (Engel 2022; Sulaiman 2022; Wicaksana 2022). Indonesia voted to condemn the invasion in the UN General Assembly, both on Resolution ES-11/1 in March condemning the invasion and asking for the complete withdrawal of Russian forces (UN News 2022) and

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Resolution ES-11/4 in October condemning the Russian annexation of the four Ukrainian territories (BBC 2022). Indonesian President Joko Widodo was also the first Asian leader to visit Kyiv and Moscow, trying to facilitate peaceful negotiation (Dharmaputra 2022a). At the same time, Indonesia refused to mention the perpetrator of the invasion in its official statement, abstained on the UNGA resolution ES-11/3 that suspended Russian membership in the Human Rights Council, and played a double strategy of inviting both Presidents Putin and Zelenskyy to the G20 Summit.

These governmental efforts to be neutral and play both sides run against the societal discourse, which tends to be more sympathetic towards the Russian position. Several other commentaries and research have shown that Indonesian public opinion tends to support Russia and criticize Ukraine and the West, especially in social media (Dharmaputra 2022b; Strangio 2022). However, the latest Lowy Institute survey (Bland, Laksmana, and Kassam 2021) has shown that the Indonesian public trusts the government or listens to the so-called “experts” in foreign affairs. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on the academic community and experts and see how they framed Russia’s war in Ukraine to understand the logic behind Indonesia’s position.

The Experts’ Narratives

First, it should be noted that by “experts,” I focus my analysis on public statements made by scholars from universities and think tanks, either in the form of written op-eds in national media, oral statements in interviews or podcasts, and being quoted by the media. I also chose the early days of the war (February – April 2022) since those months are when many experts in Indonesia focus on the war itself, not relating it with other issues such as G20 Summit.

It is also essential to highlight the other contexts of the lack of knowledge about Eastern Europe in Indonesia. It is usually studied as part of the study about Russia, and at the moment, there are only two Russian Studies programs in Indonesia (Harbani 2022). Sometimes, it is studied as part of European Studies, either in a research center such as the National Research and Innovation Agency (which has one center for area studies about Europe) or in research communities such as Indonesian Community for European Studies. In this case, logically, Ukraine is seen from the point of view of Russia or the EU but not from its own Ukrainian perspective.

Unsurprisingly, most analysts tend to be sympathetic toward Russia. The most common narrative in the expert discourse is that this war is not between Russia and Ukraine but between Russia and NATO. The argument usually highlights that NATO and the US provoked Russia by expanding its membership to Eastern Europe; therefore, the Russian position is understandable (Sahide 2022; Saragih 2022; Januar 2022). By doing so, these strands of experts normalize the invasion in the public discourse. In a survey conducted by the major survey agency Saiful Mujani Research Consulting (SMRC 2022), while criti-

cizing the war, most of the public agreed that this war was NATO's fault. It is strikingly similar to the discourse in Japan (Hosaka 2023; this volume) and Brazil (Tabosa 2023; this volume), whereby NATO is considered the main villain.

The second argument usually portrays Ukraine as a small state between great powers (Alhadar 2022; Djumala 2022; Munjid 2022). This line of thought stresses the similar position of Indonesia and Ukraine, as Indonesia is also located between great powers like the US and China. Therefore, they proposed the logic of neutrality, stating that this war is inevitable and that to solve it, Ukraine should surrender, be neutral, and abolish its vision of joining the EU and NATO. Again, this proposition is similar, especially with the Brazilian discourse of neutrality and equilibrium (Tabosa 2023; this volume). However, the Indonesian discourse stretches the narrative further by arguing that Ukraine (and, to some extent, other post-Soviet countries) must be neutral. It resonates with what Andrey Makarychev argued as "utopian neutrality" and "Russia's neighbors as the grey area of security vacuum" (Makarychev 2023b; this volume).

The third argument continues the first, but it underlines the importance of Russia balancing the West (Bakrie 2022a). Instead of promoting that the "Russian response" is understandable, this line of thought stretches it further to argue that the war is necessary to balance the world system that the West has dominated for so long. Although the proponent of this view is limited to a few experts, this is the one argument that gained traction with the Indonesian public due to its connection to the anti-western and pro-Islamic popular discourse, amplifying the narratives of the already pro-Russian public (Dharmaputra 2022b).

The Possible Reasons

There are several reasons why these tendencies to normalize war and to argue that Russia's position is understandable occur in Indonesia. I have argued elsewhere (Dharmaputra 2022c, 2022d) that there are two main reasons: the lack of academic knowledge about Ukraine and Eastern Europe and the popularity of John Mearsheimer's neorealist approach. These reasons, especially the supremacy of neorealist thinking, seem to be prevalent in many other countries, including Visegrad countries and Japan (see Kazharski 2023 and Hosaka 2023, this volume). I would now add that Indonesia's unique post-colonial situation could also factor in this war normalization tendency.

At the beginning of this article, I mentioned that Indonesians lack knowledge about Ukraine and Eastern Europe and only see this region from the Russian point of view. Earlier in the war, many Russian experts in Indonesia wrote that this war was "a conflict between brothers and should be dealt with internally" (Fahrurudji 2022; Maulana 2022). A written piece by another Russian expert, Sari Gumilang, living in Belgorod at the time of the war, closely resembled the usual Russian propaganda: that this was not war but a special operation, that there was no invasion, that Putin adheres to the principle of ter-

ritorial integrity of former Soviet states, and that this operation only happened because of the genocide in Donbas (Gumilang 2022). Even just five days before the war, there was one popular article made by one Indonesian student, Syauqy Arinal Haqq, living in Kazan, Russia, explaining that Russia felt betrayed and that all these talks about invasion were just western propaganda and that Russia would not invade Ukraine (Haqq 2022). The public accepted all these narratives readily, lacking knowledge about the actual relationship between Ukraine and Russia. Therefore, the public trusted these so-called Russian experts, especially since they graduated from and lived in Russia, giving them the authority to talk about it. It was made even worse by the popular pro-Russian messaging in Indonesian social media, likening the war to a conflict between husband and wife and persuading people to support Russia's position (Nugroho 2022).

Many other IR scholars supported these popular pro-Russian messages due to the lack of knowledge about Eastern Europe (which prompted the tendency to follow the explanation of the so-called Russian experts) and the popularity of Mearsheimer's neorealist argument. Many Indonesian scholars often cite Mearsheimer's 2014 article as they try to explain the reason behind this invasion (see, for example, Kusumawardhana 2022). IR professors from two of the most prominent universities in Indonesia consistently argued that this war is NATO's fault, citing Mearsheimer again (Evi Fitriani, in *Kumparan News* 2022; Muhadi Sugiono, in *Dzulfaroh* 2022). Even worse, many former ambassadors-turn-experts also used Mearsheimer's argument as the basis for their offered solutions, leading to a flawed logic. For example, the former Indonesian Ambassador to Russia, who is now a visiting professor at one Russian university, argued that Ukraine needs to be neutral to end the war. Afterward, Ukraine should join Eurasian Economic Union so Russia can help with the post-war reconstruction (Supriyadi 2022).

This brings me to my last point: the prevailing post-colonial narratives in the academic community and society. The strong anti-Western sentiment in Indonesian society, as seen in response to this war (Dharmaputra 2022b), was already apparent since the US started the war on terror in 2001 (Jones 2003). This is similar to other post-colonial countries like Malaysia (Loh and Mustaffa 2022). However, what was missed by many analysts is that anti-American and anti-Western tendency also occurs in the academic community.

Consider, for example, the role played by the famous intellectual Connie Bakrie. She is, until now, the leading proponent of the pro-Russian narratives in Indonesia. She was frequently invited to a popular podcast (usually viewed by millions) by the host Helmy Yahya, and she was even invited to the last Valdai Discussion Club meeting in October and the Asian Conference on Valdai Club in December. Her thoughts, as seen from her podcast (Bakrie 2022b), follow the narrative that as a former western colony, Indonesia should be suspicious of the West and NATO, should openly support Russia's effort to balance the global order, and Putin is similar to Indonesia's first president who was the famous anti-colonial leader Sukarno. Bakrie also pushed the narrative that as a founding member of the non-aligned movement, Indonesia should help end the discrimination against Russia and try to balance the world (Asatunews 2022). This usage of the "non-aligned move-

ment" history was also apparent in the more popular discourse. For example, former leftist activist-turn-politician Budiman Sudjatmiko consistently argued that Western countries could not dictate Indonesia's position and that, as a non-aligned country, Indonesia should be able to forge its own position (JPNN 2022).

Another post-colonial tendency in the Indonesian context is to see Russia as a sort of anti-colonial power that helped Indonesia during the struggle against the Dutch in the 1950s and as a good friend of Indonesia. The tendency to equate Russia and the Soviet Union is already problematic, but this nostalgic view of history is apparent in Indonesian elites and the academic community (Dharmaputra 2022d). For example, the Russian military help, with the AK-47 and Russia's help to the Indonesian military forces in West Papua, and the myth about KGB related to espionage, secret police, and coup d'état, were frequently glorified (Awaluddin 2010). Indonesia has a troublesome history with espionage, secret police, and coup, especially in the Suharto era. Whereas the CIA is seen as a meddling foreign institution that organized a coup to topple the central government (see Bevins 2017), KGB is seen as a more benevolent and powerful agency. Russia is seen as a great power with immense capability, which always helps Indonesia. The Soviet's contribution to the infrastructure projects in Indonesia, such as the National Monument, the National Stadium, the Monument of Hero, the Statue of Youth, and the Krakatau Steel plant, was always connected to Russia (Supriyadi 2018).

Therefore, it is easier to argue that Russia is the good actor being betrayed by the colonial West rather than explaining to the academic community and the public that Russia is the perpetrator of aggression. Many efforts to give a counterargument and to portray Russia as the villain was met with heavy criticism and personal attack. For example, senior diplomat (and former Indonesian Ambassador to the US) Dino Patti Djalal was bullied by social media users due to his cautious position regarding the Indonesian President's visit to Kyiv and Moscow (Fitriana 2022). He was quite critical regarding the visit, asking the President to ask Putin to stop, and has been using his Twitter platform to promote a pro-Ukrainian position while criticizing Russia.

Conclusion

Indonesian government's hesitant and cautious policy regarding current Russia's invasion of Ukraine, not entirely unique if we compare it to other Global South countries, can be seen as uniquely Indonesian once we delve deeper into the academic and public discourses. Indonesian experts, being already constrained by the lack of knowledge about Ukraine and Eastern Europe, either tend to follow the propaganda of many Russian experts or pave their own views by using the neorealist logic of John Mearsheimer, arguing that this is NATO's fault and that Indonesians should try to understand the Russian position. Stemming from the historical narratives of post-colonial Indonesia that portray Russia as an anti-colonial power, and the anti-western sentiment in the society, these discursive structures limit the governmental option to either openly condemn Russia or support Ukraine

allowing the government to push its neutral and pragmatic position. It shows the power of knowledge production in society and its effect on policymaking.

Interestingly, at the moment, the socialization in the Valdai Club does not seem to have a significant effect. For the previous years, the Indonesian representative in the Valdai Club meeting was the former Indonesian Ambassador to the US, Dino Patti Djalal, who has been a strong pro-Ukrainian voice. The last Valdai Club meeting invited Connie Bakrie, who already espouses a pro-Russian narrative before the meeting. In that sense, unlike in Japan (see Hosaka 2023; this volume), the dominant narrative in Indonesia is not yet driven by the socialization effect of Valdai but by the local and historical narrative as a former colony.

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