

Book Review: Storey, I. (2025). *Putin's Russia and Southeast Asia: The Kremlin's Pivot to Asia and the Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War*.

ISEAS. ISBN: 9789815306439. 503 pages.

Michael Kleinod-Freudenberg^{a*} 

^aIndependent researcher

*corresponding author: michael.kleinod@posteo.de

Received: 6 October 2025 / Accepted: 21 October 2025 / Published: 27 October 2025

Kleinod-Freudenberg, M. (2025). Book review: Storey, I. (2025). *Putin's Russia and Southeast Asia: The Kremlin's pivot to Asia and the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war*. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies*, 18(2), H1-H4.

"I highly commend Russia's role as a pillar of peace and stability in today's turbulent world" (Sisoulith, 2025), said Lao President Thongloun Sisoulith on 29 July 2025 in the *Vientiane Times*, and most Western observers could only scratch their heads. The statement came just weeks after Ukraine's secret service had suggested that Russia might try to draw Lao troops into its war in Ukraine, seemingly supported by the concurrent tightening of Lao-Russian military cooperation and visits of the Lao president and foreign minister to sign various cooperation agreements, including on "peaceful atom" ("Rosatom, Laotian Industry", 2025) and trade. What is going on in Russia–Laos relations, even country experts wondered. And what are Russia's ambitions in Southeast Asia more generally? Until Putin's invasion of Ukraine, Russia's role in the region was so marginal that it barely registered on analysts' radars. The war and its global repercussions, however, suddenly pushed the matter into much sharper focus.

In this context – where research is sparse, but interest is high – Ian Storey's *Putin's Russia and Southeast Asia* (2025) arrives like a stroke of luck. Storey, a Senior Fellow at the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore and co-editor of *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, offers an exceptionally timely, comprehensive, and lucid account of Russia's relations with ASEAN as a whole and with each of its member states. He addresses the glaring research gap regarding Russia–ASEAN relations right at the beginning, noting that "[n]o single-authored or co-authored English-language book" on the matter "has been published since 1992" (p. 2), when Bilveer's *Moscow and Southeast Asia since 1985* came out. Storey engages with more recent edited volumes and articles – including Rozman and Christoffersen (2024) on East and Central Asia; Sumsky and associates (2012), Chufirin and Hong (2007), and Tsvetov (2016) on ASEAN; Tsvetov (2018) on Vietnam; Ostrovenko (2004) on Thailand; Muraviev and Brown (2008) on Indonesia; and Tan (2024) on Singapore. For readers who find President Thongloun's words baffling, the book provides a sobering reminder that Laos is not alone: Across Southeast Asia, and the Global South more generally, assessments of Russia tend to be more lenient than in the West.

As Storey writes in the introduction, Russia–ASEAN relations are generally complex and ambivalent: While Russia is not a great power in the region, it remains “an additional, albeit limited, hedging option in the competition among the major powers”, whereas Russia, in turn, is seeking to “raise its game in Southeast Asia to reduce its dependence from China” (pp. 18–19). Ukraine’s invasion increased Russia’s dependence on China, however, and has “impaired its longstanding economic prospects and, hence, its interest and standing in the region” (pp. 19–20). Drawing on published reports and fieldwork in various ASEAN states, the author presents his material in a consistent, accessible manner, much like in his earlier work, *Southeast Asia and the Rise of China: The Search for Security* (2011). Storey opens each chapter with a concise historical and strategic overview before moving into specific issues, illuminating the commonalities and differences among ASEAN and its member states in their respective relations with Russia.

The introduction (Chapter 1) alone offers a solid grasp of the subject. It explains “hedging” as a shared ASEAN foreign-policy approach – balancing between major powers – and uses it to illuminate why Russia is perceived regionally as a useful, if secondary, player in navigating U.S.–China competition. This logic underlies the successful application of Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia to become partners of the intergovernmental BRICS grouping in 2025, with Indonesia granted full member status, despite the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Chapter 2 traces post-Soviet Russian foreign policy towards the region from the Yeltsin era to the present, focusing on the “Turn to the East” of the 2010s. Storey notes that turning toward Asia during tensions with the West is a recurring theme in Russian history, but that from the early 2010s, scholars began urging a more holistic reorientation in line with global power shifts. Unlike the Obama administration’s “Pivot to Asia”, Russia’s pivot sought cooperation with China rather than its containment. This policy accelerated after the annexation of Crimea and the escalation in Ukraine, broadening beyond China.

Chapter 3 examines Russia’s relations with East and South Asian states – China, Japan, the Koreas, and India – before it turns to key arenas of the Russia–ASEAN engagement. Here, Storey addresses Russia’s complex bilateral relationships, examining in each case the effect of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on past relations. The attack led to a “quasi-alliance” (p. 75) with North Korea and an overall strengthening of relations with China and India (though not without frictions), but shattered ties with Japan and South Korea. In Southeast Asia, responses varied between sanctions in Singapore and endorsement in Myanmar, but by 2024, “the Putin regime had escaped outright condemnation and economic sanction” (p. 93) overall thanks to the neutrality of most states in the region. Chapter 4, still on the regional level, covers economic relations, showing Russia’s modest trade and investment figures, yet noting potential frictions with China over oil and gas reserves in the South China Sea. Chapter 5 maps political dimensions, from Soviet–ASEAN ties to Russia’s present-day role, highlighting its limited influence overall but greater relevance in security cooperation, such as its participation in the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus and the 2021 ASEAN–Russia Naval Exercise. Chapter 6 focuses on “defense diplomacy”, particularly arms sales. Here, Storey underscores the importance of Russian military technology in the region, with some states – Laos among them – almost entirely dependent on Russian equipment.

The next four chapters delve into bilateral relations with ASEAN members starting with the mainland countries. Chapter 7 covers Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; Chapter 8 addresses Thailand and Myanmar; Chapter 9 turns to the insular countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei; and Chapter 10 to Singapore, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste. Each chapter traces ties from the Soviet period to the present, including responses to the Russia–Ukraine war.

Particularly striking are the sections on Myanmar, where Russia backs the junta; on Laos, arguably Moscow's closest regional partner today; and on Indonesia, whose current engagement with Russia builds on early Soviet support for Sukarno. Storey notes that Indonesia's political involvement in the Ukraine conflict – such as President Jokowi's "peace mission" – has been driven not least by domestic concerns like food security, since the war had, "as in many countries [...] exacerbated food and energy prices" (p. 379).

The conclusion (Chapter 11) zooms out again, judging Russian gains in the region since the 2010s as "tenuous and ephemeral" (p. 457), while reaffirming that Russia remains an important hedging option. Few ASEAN members have openly condemned the invasion of Ukraine, partly due to anti-colonial sentiment toward NATO's eastward expansion and perceptions of Western double standards, such as regarding the invasion of Ukraine vis-à-vis the interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Gaza. Even Singapore, which imposed sanctions in 2022, has since increased its crude oil imports from Russia.

Storey closes with a careful but well-supported forecast: Moscow's influence is likely to remain modest, though arms sales and military cooperation will keep it relevant. Even among its closest partners – Vietnam and Laos – other relationships (with the U.S. and China, respectively) will probably take precedence. Nonetheless, Laos is expected to retain Russia as its primary defense partner in the near term.

After reading the book, President Thongloun's praise of Russia quoted above appears less surprising and more comprehensible. Facing growing dependence on China, cuts in Western aid (including USAID's withdrawal), and drawing on long-standing historical ties with Moscow, Laos's recent rapprochement – however ill-timed to Western eyes – is far from inexplicable. Moreover, Storey's framework helps explain why other ASEAN members, too, tend toward pragmatic engagement with Russia despite the Ukraine war.

Putin's Russia and Southeast Asia stands out as the most up-to-date and comprehensive account of its subject, offering scholars a well-structured vantage point for their own further investigation. The book's overview style, based on a policy analysis approach, naturally comes with its own limitations due to its focus on elite politics and official announcements. Historians might at times wish for even more historical depth. But it is for the country specialists to delve deeper from here into local perceptions and politics, or further country-specific ways of engaging with Russia. For example, what might be the conditions for potential recruitment (or not) of Southeast Asians into the Ukraine war, as seen from North Korea, India, or Nepal? Regarding Russia's tightening relations with energy-producing Laos in particular, it might be worthwhile to consider the potential of cryptocurrency mining and trade as a way to bypass international sanctions.

Accessible yet deeply researched, Storey's work fills a significant gap in the literature. Its clear prose and systematic structure make it equally suitable for undergraduates, specialists, and policy practitioners. The well-organized chapters, detailed index, and extensive bibliography invite both sustained reading and targeted consultation. In an era of shifting geopolitical alignments, it provides an essential guide to understanding how Southeast Asia, and the Global South more broadly, perceive and engage with Moscow – which will help to see a bit clearer next time when Russian and Lao militaries find occasion to cuddle like they just did: at the joint military exercise LAROS, held in September 2025 at the Army Officer Academy in Laos' Khammouane Province, under the theme "Standing shoulder to shoulder. Fighting for peace and security".



REFERENCES

- Bilveer, S. (1992). *Moscow and Southeast Asia since 1985: From U.S.S.R. to C.I.S.* Singapore Institute of International Affairs.
- Chufrin, G., & Hong, M. (Eds.). (2007). *Russia-ASEAN relations: New directions*. ISEAS.
- Rosatom, Laotian Industry and Trade Ministry sign roadmap on peaceful atom for 2025-2026 (2025, July 31). *Interfax*. <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/113004/>
- Rozman, G., & Christoffersen, G. (Eds.). (2024). *Putin's "Turn to the East" in the Xi Jinping Era*. Routledge.
- Muraviev, A. D., & Brown, C. (2008). *Strategic realignment or déjà vu?: Russia-Indonesia defence cooperation in the twenty-first century*. Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University. <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/4e1b1a47-a0ab-4103-8e11-43b6492ec9fa/content>
- Ostrovenko, Y. D. (2004). Russia-Thai relations: Historical and cultural aspects. *Journal of the Siam Society*, 92, 117-128.
- Sisoulith, T. (2025, July 29). President Thongloun's full article ahead of his visit to Russia. *Vientiane Times*. https://www.vientianetimes.org.la/freefreenews/freecontent_Souk_President_y25.php
- Storey, I. (2025). *Putin's Russia and Southeast Asia: The Kremlin's pivot to Asia and the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war*. ISEAS.
- Storey, I. (2011). *Southeast Asia and the rise of China: The search for security*. Routledge.
- Sumsky, V., Hong M., & Lugg, A. (Eds.). (2012). *ASEAN-Russia: Foundations and future prospects*. ISEAS.
- Tan, S. S. (2024). Singapore's stand on Russia's war against Ukraine: Hobson's choice? *International Politics*, 61(5), 1018-1035.
- Tsvetov, A. (2018). Vietnam–Russia relations: Glorious past, uncertain future. In H. H. Le & A. Tsvetov (Eds.), *Vietnam's foreign policy under Doi Moi* (pp. 141-165). ISEAS.
- Tsvetov, A. (2016). After Crimea: Southeast Asia in Russia's foreign policy narrative. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 38(1), 55-80.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Kleinod-Freudenberg is a sociologist working on the political ecology of Laos, particularly on the socio-ecological implications of ecotourism as well as animism. A current research focus is on the fate of "sacred forests" amid urbanization in Laos.

Contact: michael.kleinod@posteo.de

DISCLOSURE

The author declares no conflict of interest.