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Understanding Indonesia's Response to Russia's war in Ukraine: A Preliminary Analysis of the Discursive Landscape

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This article maps the Indonesian discourses on Russia's war in Ukraine. Using the logic of poststructuralism, this article argues that the discursive structure of the official, popular, and academic discourse actually limits the potential for pro-Ukraine policies and constrains the policy options into a hesitant and cautious approach. At the same time, assuming foreign policy as a discursive practice, the hesitant practices strengthened the discourse about neutrality by allowing the popular discourse, which is primarily anti-Western, pro-Putin (due to his hypermasculine and strongman image), and susceptible to Russian propaganda, to be amplified by the expert's discourse who is mostly sympathetic to the Russian position.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, war, Indonesia, discourse, policy practices.

Introduction

This paper is a preliminary effort to understand the main discourses about Russia's war in Ukraine in Indonesian politics and whether it impacts Indonesian foreign policy practices. Using poststructuralism and discourse analysis to understand foreign policy, I tried to map the existing discourses, from the official and wider academic discourse to the societal discourse, such as social media narratives regarding the war in Ukraine.

When Russian President Vladimir Putin declared the so-called "special operation" in Ukraine on 24 February, the new stage of the war began. As a direct continuation of the Crimean annexation, Russian incursion into Donbas, and the ongoing war in Donetsk and Luhansk since 2014, the current stage of open war has been going on for more than 100 days, without any clear indication when it

will stop. It has created many refugees in the surrounding countries while pushing the world into a food crisis.

The war has been perceived differently across the globe. Most Western countries are united in condemning, giving sanctions to Russia, and helping Ukraine with humanitarian and military aid while pushing for Ukraine's EU candidacy. Meanwhile, the rest of the world has a more diverse view, from Singapore, which supported the sanction, to China, which plays safe, and to Iran, which wholeheartedly supports Russia.

As the current holder of the G20 presidency, Indonesia responded in a very hesitant and cautious way. President Jokowi initially published a statement on Twitter asking both sides to stop the war. Then, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs published an official statement condemning the war without mentioning Russia. At the UN forum, Indonesia supported the initial General Assembly resolution condemning Russian action. However, the government abstained in a later resolution suspending Russia from the Human Rights Council. At the societal level, most surveys and analysts have argued that Indonesian society tended to be more sympathetic toward Russia, especially on social media. Although pointing to the silent majority, the latest in-person survey by Saiful Mujani Research Consulting still shows a very active and loud minority on social media being pro-Russian. Meanwhile, academics and experts are divided, with more pro-Russian op-eds and analyses being published that strengthened the pro-Russian public narrative.

This paper is divided into two main sections to understand this ambiguous and messy situation. The first section will discuss the importance of discourse in understanding foreign policy, and the second is the empirical findings, which are divided into three main issues: the official discourse, the societal, and the experts.

The importance of discourse in foreign policy analysis

Holzscheiter (2014) argues that discourse is the space where human beings make sense of the world and attach meaning to the material world. It is expected to be structured in a binary oppositional term and limit what could be said and done

(Miliken 1999, p.229). As Hansen (2016, p.96)) has argued, “foreign policies are dependent upon particular representations of the countries.” In this case, it is essential to see how Russia and Ukraine are represented in the domestic discourse in Indonesia, whether one is considered as opposed to the other in a binary term, and whether some narrative is forbidden to be said (especially by the official discourse). This mapping of discourses is essential since it actually represents and informs how Indonesians view the world and how Indonesia would act in foreign policy.

Furthermore, as Hansen (2006) also argued, to understand foreign policy, we need to look at several intertextual levels of discourses, from the official (either from the President or the Minister/Ministry of Foreign Affairs), wider debate (primarily the academic and experts’ debate), and the more popular representations from the public and media. It resonates with what foreign policy analysis scholars such as Hudson and Day (2020) and Neack (2019) have argued about the need to integrate many levels of analysis. Therefore, this project tries to integrate more elite-based arguments which focus on the officials and elites, with the popular-based arguments focusing on the public discourse in social media.

Using Waeber’s (2002) argument that discursive structure puts limits on the possible foreign policy practices, this paper argues that Indonesia’s ambiguous and hesitant response to the war in Ukraine is because of the possible policy choices (such as supporting Ukraine symbolically, giving sanctions to Russia, or even criticizing Russia directly and openly) were limited by the existing discourse on Russia and Ukraine. The public, media, and academic discourses, which are most sympathetic towards Russia, do not allow the government to pursue a different direction, even if they wanted to. Nevertheless, understanding foreign policy as a discursive practice, as Hansen (2016) mentioned, means that we consider the possibility that policies are part of the effort to reproduce the existing discourse. It means that the ambiguous governmental response to the war, already being limited by previously existing discourses about Russia/Ukraine and how Indonesia should act, is strengthening the discursive structure and producing a weaker position for the Indonesian government amidst the humanitarian crisis.

The findings: A preliminary map

Official discourse

The initial governmental response can be interpreted from Jokowi's tweet on 24 February 2022. He said, "stop [the] war; war brings misery to mankind and puts the whole work at risk." He repeated this call when he was interviewed on 9 March 2022 by Nikkei Asia. Even in June, the same narrative was used by Jokowi when he was interviewed by CNBC, saying that "we want the war in Ukraine to be stopped." Jokowi's initial comment and the unwillingness to mention Russia while portraying the war as the responsibility of all parties is strengthened by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement on 25 February. The statement echoed the unwillingness to mention Russia as the aggressor and repeated the stance of asking "all parties" to stop the conflict and enmity. It is clear that even while condemning the action of violating other countries' territory, the official discourse did not want to put Russia or Ukraine in an aggressor-victim axis. Even when confronted with the Bucha tragedy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson, Teuku Faizasyah, on 7 April, only mentioned the need for an independent investigation because outsiders do not have clarity regarding the actual situation. It reaffirms the hesitancy to condemn and criticize Russia directly. Supporting the initial UN General Assembly votes condemning the war but abstaining when the votes are about suspending Russia from the Human Rights Council is another indication of this neutrality discourse.

Another indication of this "neutral" and "non-aligned" discourse can be seen in how Jokowi invited both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the G20 Summit in Bali this November. I had argued before that it is a buying-time strategy. Indonesia hopes a ceasefire will happen before the summit in November, making the summit an ordinary meeting not focusing on the war in Ukraine. After all, the government still hopes that G20 will be a successful summit as a legacy for the Jokowi administration. Inviting both leaders will lessen the pressure and criticism toward Indonesia. The initial decision to keep the invitation to Putin has been criticized by many Western countries. However, following US President Joe Biden's advice to invite Ukraine, Indonesia finally decided to invite Zelenskyy. Inviting both of them, especially

since there are still several months before the summit, is a way to delay the final decision and hope the situation will change.

Another way to interpret this double-invitation strategy is to see this as another way for Indonesia to be independent and walk a fine line between global powers. As Ripsman and Levy (2008) argued, buying time and appeasement can be a strategic balance-of-power calculation, not just wishful thinking. This tendency to be neutral between blocs or to keep distance between great powers can be traced back to the Indonesian foreign policy doctrine of independent and active foreign policy (Hatta 1953). Evan Laksmana (2017) previously called this essential principle in Indonesian foreign policy a “pragmatic equidistance,” engaging with one power while maintaining autonomy and keeping equal balance with the others. However, Laksmana (2017) actually only focused on the balance between China and the US, not Russia. Nevertheless, the long history and tradition of Indonesian strategic culture create fear of interference by other countries, leading to wariness of great power politics in the region (Sulaiman 2016). By invoking this long-standing principle, the official discourse conforms to the existing discursive structure while also avoiding potential criticisms from what Scobell (2014) called the vanguard or keepers of strategic culture.

However, this ambiguous response has prompted many criticisms, arguing that Indonesia only acted as a fence-sitter or had no strategic doctrine. Nevertheless, one narrative is significant in understanding Indonesia’s discourse: territorial integrity. Even from the beginning, the official Ministry statement put territorial integrity in the first part of the statement. Jokowi also mentioned it again on 16 June, highlighting the importance of territorial integrity and sovereignty in an interview with CNBC. This is a crucial topic for Indonesia, which already had problems regarding territorial integrity in East Timor, Aceh, and Papua, while also losing the Sipadan-Ligitan Islands to Malaysia in 2002 and having a dispute with China in Natuna Island. In that regard, the logical move would be for Indonesia to hold the principle and criticize Russia for violating the principle. Nevertheless, what happened was a disjointed official discourse with two primary and opposite narratives: that we do not want to call out Russia

because we do not want to play this great powers politics; and yet, we want to reiterate that territorial integrity is essential, and the violation cannot be accepted.

To understand why this ruptured discourse occurs, we need to look at the other level: society and the experts.

Societal discourse

A lot has been said about the societal discourse in Indonesia regarding Russia's war in Ukraine. In social media, many Indonesians expressed support for Russia while using this husband and wife analogy to weaken the Ukrainian position and portray Russia positively (Al-Jazeera, 19 March 2022). Social media analysis by Evello showed that in March, most Indonesian users on Instagram and TikTok supported Russia. Meanwhile, the in-person survey by SMRC found that only 20% actually support Russia.

The first thing to note concerning the societal discourse is that not many Indonesians follow foreign affairs. Based on the latest Lowy Institute Survey, only 17% of Indonesian follow news from abroad. However, the SMRC survey also shows that most respondents know about the war in Ukraine. It says two things about the current situation in society. The first is the absence of credible knowledge regarding Russia, Ukraine, and the current war. The government's ambiguous position did not help since it created this information vacuum. Unfortunately, this vacuum is being filled by pro-Russian experts and disinformation, which then creates the second issue: namely, the firm opinion of those online media users, propagating what they think they know (albeit it came from a disinformation campaign)

It is more important to understand the societal discourse on how they perceive Russia, Ukraine, and the war. As I have explained in another article, there are several main themes of the societal discourse. The first is the solid anti-Western narrative. This is not new in Indonesia since Mujani (2005) already mentioned it before in the context of the war on terror. This trend is also not unique since many other developing countries have experienced similar narratives. For example, Loh and Mustaffa (2022) reported that in Malaysia, the

same and dominant anti-Western discourse could be found, ranging from NATO's fault in its expansion to Russia's territory to similar *whataboutism* related to the US's invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq or the West's neglect of Palestine.

In this discourse, Russia is seen as an anti-Western power challenging the Western hegemony. By portraying the war as a regular conflict between NATO or the West and Russia, it is easy to reposition Russia as an anti-Western force. Furthermore, Russia's image in Indonesia is always related to the history of the Soviet Union. One central theme that repeatedly occurs in the narrative dimension about Russia in the mind of Indonesian elites and scholars is the nostalgic view of history. For example, then-Ambassador to Russia, Hamid Awaluddin (2010a), mentioned his memory of the historical narrative under the New Order, where Russia was always connected to communism, military (with the symbol of 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). Then-Deputy Ambassador Agus Srijono (Kompas, 28 November 2009) also highlighted this "honeymoon and low points" when he compared the period of 1950-1965 with 1966-1991. According to the previous Ambassador, Wahid Supriyadi (2018), this period between 1950 and 1965 could be considered the "golden age of the Indo-Russia relationship." As Suryakusuma (2020) mentioned, for many Indonesians (especially the older generations), this nostalgic view of the Soviet Union still lingers.

By tying the narrative about Russia into its temporal identity (Soviet Union), the discourse portrays Russia as a great power with immense capability. Then-Ambassador Awaluddin (2010a) chose to highlight the memory of Yuri Gagarin, Soyuz, and the Soviet's outer space mission as reminiscent of the golden era of the Soviet Union. Ambassador Supriyadi (2018) underlined the Soviet's contribution to the infrastructure projects in Indonesia during Sukarno's years, including the National Monument, the National Stadium, the Monument of Hero (Tugu Pahlawan), the Statue of Youth, and the Krakatau Steel plant. The troubled history of communism is suddenly forgotten, as we could see the continuous efforts from the Indonesian policymakers to argue that it is essential to forget the Soviet's communist past and that Russia is different from the Soviets. The

problem arising from that stance is it underlined the binary nature of identity formation. By saying that “Russia is no longer communist” or “ideology no longer matters” (as then-Ambassador Awaluddin and Deputy Ambassador Sriyono emphasized in their articles in 2009 and 2010), elites inadvertently show the connection between the current “Russia” and the Soviet “communist past.”

This discourse portraying Russia as a great power (and a continuation of the Soviet Union) and as a hero to a developing country is problematic since it neglects the collective trauma of Russian imperialism and colonialism in the post-Soviet spaces. Many countries in the region have suffered from Russian brutality. For example, Estonia and Latvia suffered from the intense “russification” from sending many ethnic Russian workers to those countries to the mass deportation in 1941-1951. Even more so, after their independence, the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) kept being influenced and manipulated by Russia (Ciziunas 2008). However, this insensitive discourse explains why many Indonesians still feel that Russia is a friend, being completely unaware of the imperial legacy of Russia.

I would argue that this also connects to the disinformation campaign by the Russian government regarding the brotherhood between Russia and Ukraine. This is not a new campaign by the Russian government. For example, the then-chairperson of the State Duma’s Committee on Security and Fighting Corruption, Irina Yarovaya, said that the Russian-Ukrainian brotherhood is an “it is deep blood, spiritual and historical connection, and no one can change that” (TASS, 21 August 2015). Even Putin himself argued last year (12 July 2021) that Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian are one people. Many scholars criticized this issue and debunked it, including a renowned Ukrainian historian Serhii Plokhy in his interview with the New Yorker. However, the notion that Russia and Ukraine are one nation with a similar language is still present for many Indonesians.

Another aspect is the popularity of Putin due to his hypermasculine image. A social media analysis by Centrius showed that Putin’s masculinity played a role in driving the societal support from Indonesians. For example, more than half of Indonesian social media users supported Russia because Putin is “brave” to fight against the West. The researcher argued that Putin’s image of traditional

masculinity is connected to the Indonesian perception of a strong leader who wears a military uniform while acting as the father of the nation. It also resonates with Ismail's (2022) argument about militarised masculinity creating the basis for Putin's supporters in many countries, including Indonesia. Putin's strong man image also echoes Indonesian domestic political discourse. Prabowo Subianto's popularity in the 2014 and 2019 elections is related to the idea that Indonesia needs a strong leader like him to safeguard and protect the country (Rakhmani & Saraswati 2021). In 2018, Gerindra politician Fadli Zon argued that Indonesia needs a leader like Putin, who is "brave, visionary, smart, and authoritative."

Expert's discourse

As I have argued elsewhere, many op-eds and statements by academics and public intellectuals in Indonesia were mostly either sympathetic towards the Russian position or advocating hesitancy, caution, and neutrality, which is an indirect way that actually supports the current status quo: the de facto Russian invasion and occupation of some of Ukraine's territory. It is also illuminating that experts can influence societal discourse due to the government's ambiguous position and the society's lack of knowledge and interest in the region of Eastern Europe. For example, a popular video by Connie Bakrie was seen more than 3 million times, even though it advocates for a pro-Russian position. Several op-eds in Kompas and Media Indonesia, for example, are more sympathetic towards Russia, centered on the idea that this war is all about NATO and the West provoking Russia to attack Ukraine. It can range from saying that Russia is trying to "teach a lesson to NATO and the US," blaming US hegemony and NATO expansion, or at the very least saying that the "Russian position is understandable" and comparing it to Cuba in 1962. Another example, while commenting on Indonesia's abstention in the UNGA resolution, Universitas Indonesia's IR professor Evi Fitriani argued that the war is not about Ukraine but about NATO using Ukraine to fight Russia. A similar motion was made by a European Studies expert from Gadjah Mada University, Muhadi Sugiono, stating that Ukraine's insistence on joining NATO is the main reason for Russia's invasion. Meanwhile, others, such as former Ambassador Darmansjah Djumala, who became an IR

professor in Bandung, portrayed Ukraine as a small country with no choice but to “dance between two lions.”

What is more interesting about this discourse is that it actually shows a lack of expertise in Eastern European studies. The issue of Russia and Ukraine is seen through the prism of Russia, the aftereffect of the domination of Russian graduates in the field of Russian and East European Studies in Indonesia. There are only two programs in Indonesia: one in Universitas Indonesia in Jakarta and the other in Universitas Padjajaran, Bandung. There is no East European Studies program with lecturers and professors who either initially or at least graduated from the countries in the region, such as Ukraine, Latvia, Belarus, Estonia, and others. This situation, which not only happened in Indonesia, has already resulted in a worldwide call to decolonize Russian studies (Kassymbekova 2022). This dominance of Russian graduates in East European Studies affected how Indonesian society still falsely perceives that Russians and Ukrainians are brothers with similar languages, akin to Indonesia and Malaysia. For instance, Russian Studies expert from Padjadjaran University, Supian, argued that this is a conflict between brothers and should be dealt with internally. A similar notion was stated by Ahmad Fahrurodji from Universitas Indonesia in a webinar on 24 February, the first day of the war. It also directly follows Putin’s repeated propaganda about the Russia-Ukraine brotherhood, not only in his essay in 2021 but can be traced back at least also in 2014 during his Crimean speech.

This lack of knowledge pushed many experts to fall back on the prevalent but flawed explanation of John Mearsheimer (2014). Mearsheimer’s argument has been heavily criticized, which basically put the blame squarely on the West and NATO for the 2014 crisis in Crimea and Donbas while overlooking the tendency of Russian imperialism and identity. Mearsheimer made similar claims now (Chotiner, 2022) in response to the current war. Adam Tooze (2022) criticized the article for omitting the moral consequences of war. Meanwhile, Paul Poast (2022) made a very informative rebuttal on Twitter to explain that even though Mearsheimer’s 2014 article is faulty, realism can still be used to explain what happened in Ukraine. Furthermore, as Kazharski (2022) argued,

Mearsheimer's (and Stephen Walt's) neorealist logic is faulty since it downplayed the role of Putin's ideology and propaganda in Russia's domestic context.

Unfortunately, many Indonesian experts used Mearsheimer's argument to explain Russia's invasion without reflecting on what Mearsheimer may have mistakenly argued. For example, an article by former Indonesian Ambassador to Russia, Wahid Supriyadi (Supriyadi, 2022), was logically derived from Mearsheimer's idea, and it arrives at a problematic policy proposal, such as the inclusion of Ukraine in the Eurasian Economic Union. Another consequence is the push for Ukraine to be a neutral country (Djumala, 2022), following Mearsheimer's advice, without asking the Ukrainians what they want. In short, Indonesian scholars and experts also fell victim to this idea of "westsplaining Ukraine" (Smoleński & Dutkiewicz, 2022), using a Western understanding of Ukraine and then using it for our viewers. What is interesting is that in the previous years, there have been some efforts to discuss the possibility of an Indonesian IR perspective ("Menbangun Perspektif Indonesia", 2021). However, when the issue of Ukraine arises, the expert community quickly leans back and depends on the Western perspective, which brings a bigger question: clearly, Russia is seen as some anti-Western entity, but what about Ukraine? Is Ukraine seen as part of the West? Russia? Or something in-between?

A limited and early conclusion?

In official discourse, the long-tradition of non-aligned principles and the historical doctrine of "independent foreign policy" limit the government's pursuit of pro-Ukrainian policies. Even if the government wants to listen to much pressure from the West, it is more challenging to appeal to the public, which has already exhibited the strong societal discourse-based also on the long history of anti-Westernism and non-interference from external actors. What the government does is a balancing act between the principle of territorial integrity and neutrality. Another way to interpret the official discourse is that the government is pragmatic, with little at stake in terms of military threat.

The societal discourse is connected to the history and Indonesian people's views of Russia and Ukraine. In the issue of history, Russia is seen as this anti-Western force, whereas Ukraine is seen as the weak puppet of NATO. At the same time, many admire Putin for his hypermasculine image, while Zelenskyy is criticized for being a clown. It could be that it criticizes Indonesia's president, as the Centrius team has argued (2022). However, it could also be read as an aspiration of what kind of leader the people want.

The academic and expert discourse is focused on the issue of the West and NATO, similar to the societal discourse. As I have argued earlier, due to the lack of knowledge about the region and the governmental hesitancy, experts play a role in constructing the societal discourse. It strengthened the existing discursive structure related to how Indonesia views itself and how it sees others while at the same time limiting the pragmatic options of the government.

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