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# Reviving the Jakarta Informal Meeting

A Case for Indonesia to Mediate Ukraine and  
Russia

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## AIIES COMMENT

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### Introduction

On June 3, 2023, Indonesia's current President and former Minister of Defense, Prabowo Subianto, announced what was then misunderstood as the Indonesian government's five-point peace plan for Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine. He proposed a ceasefire and the creation of a demilitarized zone while deploying the UN peacekeeping troops. He also recommended pushing back the positions of Russian and Ukrainian troops by 15 kilometers, forming a monitoring force covering countries agreed upon by both parties, and holding a referendum under the UN's watch on contested territories. While Moscow was sympathetic toward that plan, Kyiv called it as sounding more like a Russian plan than an Indonesian one. Western media also derided the plan after it turned out that Subianto had neither informed Indonesia's then President, Joko Widodo, nor the Indonesian foreign ministry before proposing it.<sup>1</sup>

Regardless, Ukrainian Ambassador to Indonesia, Vasyl Hamianin, met Subianto not long after that proposal and stated that Subianto's clarification regarding it was satisfactory.<sup>2</sup> In June 2024, Subianto even met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who called for Indonesia's support toward Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and expressed his interest to deepen cooperation with ASEAN so that Ukraine can become a Sectoral Dialogue

Partner for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).<sup>3</sup>

Radityo Dharmaputra, an Indonesian international relations expert from the University of Airlangga, criticized Subianto and his team for their lack of understanding of the present war between Russia and Ukraine. Dharmaputra argued that, to begin with, proposing a ceasefire without any security guarantee was impolitic, as there was nothing to prevent Russia from continuing to attack Ukraine during it. He also deemed the proposal to push troops back 15 kilometers ineffective, as it would still leave Russian forces within Ukraine's territory. Even the suggestion regarding a UN peacekeeping force would likely go nowhere according to him since Russia is a permanent member of the UN Security Council and could easily veto it. The referendum is considered by Dharmaputra to be even more inexpedient, so he suggested several avenues that Indonesia could pursue instead to address the conflict. Among them are creating a special team to handle the ongoing war and its aftermath and facilitating communications between Kyiv and Moscow.<sup>4</sup>

### Do Ukraine and Russia Even Want to Negotiate?

It should be noted that, in July 2024, Ukrainian think tank Razumkov Center released the result of a survey conducted for Ukrainian online newspaper Dzerkalo Tyzhnia. The survey revealed that 44% of Ukrainians in areas behind the frontline consider it time for Kyiv and Moscow to begin talking in an official capacity. While 21% of Ukrainians remain undecided, 35% still think there is no reason to begin peace talks with Russia.

The result of the survey also showed that 83% of respondents do not wish to see the Ukrainian troops withdrawing from those parts of the Kherson, Luhansk, Donetsk, and Zaporizhia regions, which are not under control of Russia. Furthermore, 84% oppose surrendering these territories to Russia, and 77% do not support lifting all Western sanctions against Russia.<sup>5</sup> On August 19, 2024, after Ukraine's successful attack on Russian territory in Kursk, it was reported that Kyiv considered drawing from the model of the Black Sea grain deal in 2022 to jumpstart peace talks via intermediaries without communicating with Russia directly. In the Black Sea grain deal itself, Ukraine negotiated with Türkiye and the UN, who in turn negotiated with Russia. It was a temporary success, and the corridor functioned for a year.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, on September 5, 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Russia was prepared for talks with Ukraine and suggested that India, Brazil, and China could mediate the talks between Moscow and Kyiv.<sup>7,8</sup> With the two sides showing some degrees of willingness to negotiate, how does Indonesia fare as a potential mediator?

### **Why Indonesia Should Mediate**

Recently, the names of six countries have been circulating as potential mediators for the conflict between Russia and Ukraine: Austria, Hungary, China, Brazil, India, and Türkiye. Peter Rough, director at the Center on Europe and Eurasia at the Hudson Institute, a think tank in Washington, D.C., stated that while Austria could indeed serve as a host for talks, given Vienna's status as a UN capital, it might struggle to shape the discussions meaningfully, as he viewed Austria as too small a country with little to offer substantively.

Rough also stated that Türkiye could host talks only with strong American and European involvement, while Hungary as a mediator would be an unacceptable choice for Kyiv since Kyiv and Budapest are quarreling with each other and Budapest itself is close to Moscow. Concurrently, Zelenskyy has criticized Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, for meeting with Putin on July 8, 2024, the very same day a children's hospital in Kyiv was hit by a Russian missile. Zelenskyy has also called the Brazil-China joint six-point peace plan proposed

for Ukraine in May 2024 to be destructive. Furthermore, China is a close partner of Russia, to the point where even Zelenskyy himself has questioned China's self-proclaimed neutrality in the war.

In addition, Vuk Vuksanovic, an associate at the London School of Economics think tank LSE IDEAS, asserted that the US will never let China have what he called the "glory of a peacemaker". His opinion seems to be confirmed by retired US Army Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson, who argued that Washington would not permit any of the countries in question to act as peace brokers before the U.S. elections. After the election, however, if Moscow is willing, Washington may engage in mediation with assistance from Türkiye, India, or Switzerland. Wilkerson suggested that countries the US would deem acceptable to act as a peace broker prior to the election - as long as the US can be a solid presence in the background - are Brazil, Mexico, New Zealand, and Indonesia.<sup>9,10,11</sup> This is an opportunity that Indonesia has to seize.

Jakarta has a history of successfully mediating conflicts, such as the Cambodian-Vietnamese war and the Thai-Cambodian border dispute.<sup>12</sup> Both Widodo and Subianto, on separate occasions, have declared that Indonesia is willing to mediate between Kyiv and Moscow and have even met with Zelenskyy and Putin directly.<sup>13,14</sup> Widodo was actually the first Asian leader to travel to both Kyiv and

Moscow, meeting with their respective leaders to urge a cease-fire in 2022. His trip secured a grain corridor from Ukraine and resumed fertilizer exports from Russia. Indonesia also successfully hosted the G20 Summit in November 2022 after withstanding the Western pressure to disinvite Russia from the Summit, inviting Zelenskyy to attend it, and the Summit itself even surprisingly produced a joint declaration.<sup>15,16,17</sup> In short, Indonesia is a viable candidate to be a mediator between Kyiv and Moscow. One way to do it is by bringing JIM back.

### **Reviving JIM and Preparing the Shuttle Diplomacy Team**

JIM itself refers to a series of informal meetings held by Indonesia between 1988 and 1990 to mediate between conflicting groups during the Cambodian-Vietnamese war that threatened Southeast Asian stability back then, especially since the conflict started in the 1970s and millions had already been killed at that point.

Other ASEAN member states trusted Indonesia to act, so, then Indonesian Foreign Minister, Mochtar Kusumaatmadja, decided to perform what is known as shuttle diplomacy. It is a diplomatic practice where an intermediary who shuttles back and forth between disputants carries on negotiations between nations. By playing center between Vietnam and Cambodia, Indonesia managed to get every party involved in the bloodshed to attend JIM I in July 1988, JIM II in

February 1989, and JIM III in February 1990. Eventually this led to the Cambodian-Vietnamese war ending with the signing of the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements.<sup>18,19</sup>

So, what made JIM different from every other peace talk? A key challenge to address during the conflict was the existence of four opposing factions that divided Cambodia unwilling to communicate with one another. Indonesia subsequently decided to introduce an element of informality. This was first suggested by former Indonesian Ambassador to Egypt, Fuad Hassan, who was then in the research department of the Indonesian Foreign Ministry. He advised Indonesia to invite each faction individually and house them in a holiday bungalow complex on a Bali beachfront, at that time owned by the state-owned oil company of Indonesia, Pertamina.

The idea was for any faction who was interested in talking with another faction to inform Indonesia, who would then facilitate a meeting without pre-conditions. The plan was eventually implemented not in a Balinese bungalow, but in the vast colonial-era mansion known as the Bogor Palace for JIM I, located just right outside Jakarta.<sup>20</sup> The meeting itself was not styled as an official meeting, but as a cocktail party. Kusumaatmadja mentioned that foreigners in Indonesia commonly liked the cocktail party format, especially since people can mix and mingle informally on such an occasion.<sup>21</sup>

JIM was an unorthodox way for sure, but the result is real and tangible, and Indonesia could repeat this as a mediator between Ukraine and Russia. After all, Indonesia has no shortage of bungalows or buildings that can be used to house both parties and Indonesia successfully hosting the 2022 G20 Summit proved that Indonesia could be trusted with the security for both Ukrainian and Russian representatives. The cocktail party format could make its return as well, and Indonesia being an intermediary means it could facilitate either Ukraine or Russia when any of the two feels like having a meeting without pre-conditions. Also, since Australia actually attended JIM II, Jakarta can also consider facilitating Washington in case the US would want to be a background presence in the JIM revival.

**There must never be any criticism ever again of an Indonesian plan looking more like a Russian plan.**

Of course, it goes without saying that this is not all fun and games. Indonesia must first employ shuttle diplomacy to Ukraine and Russia to get them to come to Indonesia. Ergo, if Indonesia is truly serious about being a mediator for Ukraine and Russia, Subianto, his foreign minister pick, Sugiono, and the special shuttle diplomacy team that will handle the negotiations must be proactive in their actions and thorough with their preparations. One mantra the Indonesian shuttle diplomacy team

must repeat is that there must never be any criticism ever again of an Indonesian plan looking more like a Russian plan. Just because Russia and Indonesia are on friendly terms with each other does not mean Indonesia should be unwary about Russian strategies. Thereby, the Indonesian JIM team must make sure their members are completely cognizant of the narratives and dynamics around the current Russian war against Ukraine.

Firstly, the JIM team must accept that Russia still enjoys a fairly good reputation among the majority of Indonesian citizens due to their strong image-transforming effort.<sup>22</sup> The JIM team must therefore recognize the Russian influence in the media environment of the archipelago and examine how Russia's disinformation procedure works in Indonesia.<sup>23</sup> This is important for shielding themselves from disinformation, accurately monitoring the progress of the war to anticipate as many variables as possible that may affect the talks, and avoiding potential pitfalls from the Russian narrative in order to maintain impartiality and fairness in their mediation.

Secondly, since there is a scarcity of Eastern European experts in the archipelago, the JIM team must gain a deep understanding of Russia's imperialistic ambitions.<sup>24</sup> In addition, Edward M. Lfft, a distinguished visiting fellow with the Hoover Institution, has highlighted several core areas that must be addressed in a negotiation between Kyiv and Moscow. They include territorial

issues, particularly regarding Crimea and the Donbas and the issue of Ukrainian accession into NATO and the EU. Notably, Russia never really seemed to be against Ukraine joining the EU and this must be considered as a silver lining.

Other areas Indonesia must also take into account include reparations that Russia will have to pay to Ukraine, the war crimes that are well documented, and how to negotiate a durable settlement, particularly in light of Russia's poor track record of compliance with agreements, such as the Kremlin's blatant violation of the Budapest Memorandum of December 5, 1994.<sup>25</sup> This is all essential in order for the JIM team members to discipline themselves and produce accurate ideas during the talks. Lastly, a topic the JIM team has to master is Russia's irredentism, not only in Ukraine, but also in countries such as Georgia and Moldova to broaden the team's horizons if need be.<sup>26,27</sup>

Thirdly, the JIM team must carefully appraise the timing to begin their shuttle diplomacy. The Head of Ukrainian Defence Intelligence, Kyrylo Budanov, has

mentioned that Russia plans to win the war against Ukraine by the end of 2025 or early 2026 at the latest. Apparently, Russia will have to contend with challenging and mounting financial, socio-political, and economic problems converging from summer 2025 onwards while also having to mobilize a greater number of troops.<sup>28</sup> With this timing now being known, the JIM team should ideally begin their shuttle diplomacy with both Kyiv and Moscow before the summer of 2025 arrives to prepare the scene for serious negotiations.

### Old Memories, New Motivation

Interestingly, Ukraine was among the first countries to recognize Indonesian independence in 1946 after the Netherlands's demand that the topic of Indonesia's independence could only be allowed to be discussed in the UN if at least one UN member endorsed it.<sup>29</sup> In fact, Ukraine's 1946 endorsement and support for Indonesia ended up being pivotal for Indonesia's independence movement in the UN back then.<sup>30</sup> Russia itself, then as the head of the

USSR, spearheaded a movement that criticized the Dutch attempt to retake control of Indonesia from 1945 to 1947. The USSR then de facto recognized the independence of Indonesia in 1948 and opened diplomatic ties with Indonesia and supported the archipelago's entry as a member of the UN in 1950.<sup>31</sup>

With Subianto wanting Indonesia to become a bigger player on the global stage after his presidential inauguration on October 20, 2024, the stage is set for Indonesia to act with respect toward Ukraine's sovereignty and with amicability toward Russia by becoming a mediator for them both.<sup>32</sup>

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