

Indonesian President Joko Widodo Wades into Russia-Ukraine War Mire

But Indonesia leader's back-to-back meetings with Putin and Zelensky more about saving G20 Bali summit than conflict mediation

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*For all of the rhetoric, the underlying reason for Indonesian **President Joko Widodo's** venture into world diplomacy was more about trying to save the G20 summit in Bali next November and address a growing world food crisis than any overly-ambitious mission to try and end the war in Ukraine.*

It says a lot about Widodo that he would go to such lengths, but the summit has come to symbolize a major milestone in his presidency which he hopes will bring the added bonus of more foreign investment to an economy battered by the Covid-19 pandemic.

While nothing of genuine substance came from his two back-to-back meetings with Russian **President Vladimir Putin** and Ukrainian **President Volodymyr Zelensky**, pulling off a peace-making miracle was hardly on the cards as the war rages on into its fifth month.

The president has shown little interest in foreign policy before now unless it pays economic dividends, but his efforts to salvage the G20 has seen Indonesia forced into playing a more constructive role on the world stage rather than acting as a mere bystander.

Widodo may have been stung by a comment from legislator **Effendi Simbolon**, a member of his ruling Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle (PDI-P), who told him last April he should be more proactive and not simply act as an "event organizer."

Widodo renewed his invitation to Zelensky to attend the G20 meeting, which he may only do so remotely, and carried a message from the Ukrainian president to Putin, the contents of which were not disclosed.

His talks in Moscow mostly appeared to center around the invasion's impact on energy and food prices, telling reporters that the new harvest in Ukraine would leave 77 million tonnes of wheat trapped in the embattled country's storage facilities.

In that, Widodo may be able to claim at least some credit for helping push a United Nations-brokered effort to reopen a trade corridor through the Black Sea, currently sealed off by Russian navy vessels and Ukrainian defensive mines.

As Widodo flew to Moscow on June 30, Russia claimed it had ended its occupation of strategic Zmiinyi (Snake) island as a gesture of goodwill, but Putin has told the UN he will only allow the safe passage of Ukrainian grain if the West lifts its sanctions.

That was described by one US official as "extortion diplomacy" and there was no immediate sign the withdrawal from Zmiinyi will lead directly to an agreement. Ukrainian officials instead insisted their forces pushed the Russians off the island.

Captured by the Russians last February, the rocky outcrop guards the approaches to Odessa, Ukraine's largest deep-sea port which normally handles 40 million tonnes of cargo a year, or 65% of its trade.

Widodo has a stake in freeing up wheat shipments. The longer the war drags on, the greater the danger that a shortage of flour will compel local firms to raise the politically-sensitive price of instant noodles, a hugely popular Indonesian staple.

Image on the right: Ukraine's wheat crisis is having inflationary ripple effects in Indonesia. Image: Twitter



Widodo's government has only recently faced protests over a war-related increase in the domestic price of palm oil, which led to a brief export ban on the commodity and the removal of trade minister Muhammad Lutfi in a June 16 Cabinet reshuffle.

Kremlin officials indicated the Moscow talks touched on the prospect of more Russian wheat exports to Indonesia, which last year amounted to only 2,955 tonnes, compared to the three million tonnes imported from Ukraine, partly to make up for an Australian shortfall.

Russia and Ukraine account for a third of the world's wheat exports and Ukraine alone grows enough of the grain to feed 400 million people. But Moscow's blockade means Kiev can only move two million tonnes a month, 60% less than usual.

Officials say a fifth of Ukraine's grain elevators have either been damaged in the war or are

now in Russian-occupied territory, while a backlog of 20 million tonnes of last season's harvest remains trapped in storage just when farmers are bringing in the winter crop.

As an invited guest at the G7 summit in Germany's Bavarian Alps, Widodo got a taste of what he might expect at the G20 – if it goes ahead – with US **President Joe Biden** and allied leaders focusing squarely on Ukraine and the impact of sanctions on Russia.

The Indonesian government has condemned the war, but in walking a fine diplomatic line it has refused to dissuade Putin from showing up for the Bali gathering, which in a worst-case scenario could lead to a boycott by a majority of the group's pro-Western members.

Although Moscow was part of what was then the G8 when it was formed in 1997, it was suspended indefinitely following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and ultimately announced its permanent withdrawal three years later. That is unlikely to happen with the G20.

Widodo feels the need to step carefully, not only because of Indonesia's historic non-aligned status, but also because many conservative Muslims support Russia – a consequence of the West's perceived hostile attitude towards the Islamic world.

But critics point to Jakarta's initial response to the invasion, which avoided naming Russia as the invader and called on the parties to pursue a "peaceful resolution through diplomacy," as if Ukraine was a willing participant in the war.

"A generous interpretation of the mission would define it as an exemplar of Indonesia's cherished 'independent and active foreign policy,'" wrote retired diplomat David Engel, head of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's Indonesia program.

"Jakarta has never tired of reprising the 'independent' or non-aligned part of this phrase from the moment Russian troops began their brutal rampage," he said, pointing to the visit to the two warring capitals as corresponding to the "active" part of the doctrine.

Most analysts believe Putin will stay away from the summit and Zelensky has said he won't attend if the war is still on. That rules out any chance of face-to-face peace negotiations in Bali, particularly when the Russian president's ultimate objectives are still unknown.

According to news reports, Widodo told Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi during a meeting on the sidelines of the G7 that Putin would not be coming either. But Moscow said a decision had still not been made.

Diplomats are now more optimistic the summit will go ahead intact, with new Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese reversing predecessor Scott Morrison's position and saying he will go to Bali without any conditions attached.

Other G20 countries appear to have changed their stance as well, notably Germany, whose chancellor, Olaf Scholz, the host of this year's G7, telling German television: "There is a common conviction ... that we don't want to torpedo the G20."

The head of the 27-nation European Commission, **Ursula von der Leyen**, even went further, saying she did not rule out sitting down with Putin. It was important, she said, "to tell him to his face what we think of him."

Widodo was positioned front and center in the official G7 photograph, standing between Scholz and Biden, who at one point hugged the Indonesian leader in a gesture the Jakarta media saw as recognition of his new world stature.

Former Australian ambassador to Jakarta **John McCarthy** says if Putin does make an appearance in Bali, it will take considerable skill on the part of the Indonesians to ensure the meeting stays on track and doesn't collapse into acrimony.

That may be put to the test on July 7-8 when the G20 foreign ministers, apparently including Russia's Sergey Lavrov, gather in Bali's heavily-guarded Nusa Dua tourist haven to lay the groundwork for the 17th summit of the West's economic powerhouses.

An Indonesian Foreign Ministry spokesman says it is still not clear whether Lavrov will be able to attend, but if other G20 preparatory meetings are any guide, many of the ministers will simply walk out when his turn comes to speak.

Putin's flying visit to Turkmenistan on June 29 was his first overseas trip since the start of the war, but the prospect of walking into a near-empty room in Bali will not appeal to someone now widely labeled as a war criminal.

A Russian missile strike on a central Ukrainian shopping mall, which killed 18 people on the second day of the G7 meeting, is being seen as further evidence Moscow is deliberately targeting the civilian population in an effort to break its spirit.

Aside from his almost abnormal fear of catching Covid, there may be another important reason for Putin wanting to stay at home. As economic sanctions begin to bite, he may fear that any extended absence could lead to a palace coup.

Although he had little to show for his efforts at shuttle diplomacy, Widodo's final call on the United Arab Emirates was aimed at extracting a renewed promise from President Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan to help finance the US\$32 billion plan to move Indonesia's capital from Jakarta to Kalimantan.

Maritime Coordinating Minister Luhut Panjaitan flew from Jakarta to Abu Dhabi to prepare for the visit, seen as yet another indication of Widodo's determination to get the ambitious project off the ground before his second term ends in 2024.

The government has often claimed the UAE is ready to provide \$20 billion in investments, which would be channeled through the Indonesia Sovereign Wealth Fund. It would fill a financing hole left by the withdrawal of Japan's Softbank earlier this year.

More than the G20 summit, the new capital, to be known as Nusantara, is a potentially key part of Widodo's legacy-building, cementing his place in the history books and serving to rebalance the archipelago's development away from the dominant island of Java.

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Featured image: Indonesian President Joko Widodo and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky at a recent official meeting. Image: Supplied

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