



CSIS COMMENTARIES

CSIS Commentaries is a platform where policy researchers and analysts can present their timely analysis on various strategic issues of interest, from economics, domestic political to regional affairs. This commentaries serves as a medium for experts to disseminate knowledge and share perspectives in two languages – Bahasa Indonesia and English, enabling a diverse readership to engage with the content. Analyses presented in CSIS Commentaries represent the views of the author(s) and not the institutions they are affiliated with or CSIS Indonesia. Please contact the editorial team for any enquiries at publication@csis.or.id

CSIS Commentaries CSISCOM00826

April 10th, 2026

Normalising War: The Dangers of “Reality on the Ground” for Indonesia

Radityo Dharmaputra

Senior Researcher, the Centre for European and Eurasian Studies; Lecturer at the Department of International Relations, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya

Four years after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the global conversation is gradually shifting from condemning aggression to managing “realities on the ground”. As new crises dominate international attention, this change in language risks weakening the principles that middle powers like Indonesia depend on.

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the largest military attack on a European state since the Second World War. The images were unmistakable: armoured vehicles crossing international borders, missiles and drones striking major cities,

and millions of civilians forced to flee their homes.^{1,2,3} Governments reacted with shock and many described the invasion as a turning point for the international order.⁴ Commentators warned that territorial conquest had returned to Europe and that the post-Cold War assumptions about sovereignty were suddenly under strain.⁵

Four years later, the war continues and Russia still occupies parts of Ukrainian territory.⁶ Yet the global conversation has begun to shift. Ukraine now competes with other crises for international attention, and the world's political agenda has become increasingly crowded. In Indonesia, public debate is dominated by domestic politics, economic pressures, the ongoing violence in Gaza and the subsequent Board of Peace debate.^{7,8,9,10} Tensions in the Middle East have escalated further after the United States and Israel carried out strikes against Iranian targets that reportedly killed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, drawing global attention toward another regional war.^{11,12}

In this crowded environment, Ukraine increasingly feels distant to many observers. That reaction is understandable because prolonged wars inevitably exhaust public attention even in regions directly affected by them.¹³ The greater danger four years on, however, is not simply fatigue with the war itself but a more subtle form of conceptual fatigue.¹⁴ As the conflict drags on, the language used to describe it has quietly begun to change. What was once widely recognised as a clear violation of sovereignty is now frequently discussed in technical terms such as frozen conflicts, ceasefire arrangements, or the need (especially for Ukraine) to

¹ BBC News. "Why Is Russia Invading Ukraine?" <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60596629>.

² CBS News. "Russia Launches Missile Attack on Kyiv." <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ukraine-news-russia-war-kyiv-missile-attack-putin-crimea-bridge/>.

³ International Organization for Migration (IOM). "Ukraine Internal Displacement Report: General Population Survey Round 19." January 2025. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/ukraine-internal-displacement-report-general-population-survey-round-19-january-2025>.

⁴ Institut Montaigne. "A New Order: There Can Be No Turning Back." <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/new-order-there-can-be-no-turning-back>.

⁵ Fazal, Tanisha M. "The Return of Conquest?: Why the Future of Global Order Hinges on Ukraine." *Foreign Affairs* 101, no. 3 (2022): 20–27. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27196676>

⁶ Al Jazeera. "Mapping Russian Attacks and Territorial Gains Across Ukraine." February 24, 2026. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/24/mapping-russian-attacks-and-territorial-gains-across-ukraine>.

⁷ Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM). "Indonesia's Democracy Faces Serious Challenges." <https://ugm.ac.id/en/news/indonesias-democracy-faces-serious-challenges-says-ugm-sociologist/>.

⁸ Friawan, Deni. "Indonesia's Recent Economic Development and Outlook 2026: Stability Under Strain, Risks on the Horizon." CSIS Commentaries. <https://www.csis.or.id/publication/indonesias-recent-economic-development-and-outlook-2026-stability-under-strain-risks-on-the-horizon/>.

⁹ The Jakarta Post. "US and Israel Launch Strikes against Iran." February 28, 2026. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2026/02/28/us-and-israel-launch-strikes-against-iran.html>.

¹⁰ Julianto, Farhan. "Indonesia: The Board of Peace – Promises and Realities." CSIS Commentaries. <https://www.csis.or.id/publication/indonesia-the-board-of-peace-promises-and-realities/>.

¹¹ The Jakarta Post. "US and Israel Launch Strikes against Iran." February 28, 2026. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2026/02/28/us-and-israel-launch-strikes-against-iran.html>.

¹² Daou, Marc. "Iran Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei Dies." France 24. March 1, 2026. <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20260301-iran-supreme-leader-ayatollah-khamenei-dies-killed>.

¹³ Holesch, Adam. "War Fatigue Survey Results." European Values Center for Security Policy. <https://www.eu-values.eu/blog/war/fatigue/security/surveyresults>.

¹⁴ Holesch, Adam, and Benjamin Martill. 2026. "War Fatigue? The Politicisation of the Ukraine War." *Journal of European Integration* 48 (2): 167–90. doi:10.1080/07036337.2026.2615100.

acknowledge “realities on the ground.”^{15,16,17} This shift may appear modest, but language often shapes the political boundaries of what policymakers believe is possible.

Normalisation of the War

One of the most important developments over the past four years is the normalisation of the war itself. Strategic debates now revolve around potential ceasefire lines, territorial arrangements, or pragmatic compromises that could reduce the level of violence. The longer the war continues, the easier it becomes to treat it as a durable geopolitical condition rather than as an ongoing violation of international law.^{18,19,20}

I argue that this adjustment reflects a broader pattern in international politics. When wars persist long enough, the urgency that once surrounded them fades and policymakers begin to adapt their expectations to the situation they face. What began as an extraordinary crisis eventually turns into a problem that governments try to manage rather than fundamentally challenge. The language of crisis management then begins to replace the language of accountability.

This continuing normalisation also creates precedents. When territorial control achieved through force persists for years, pressure begins to grow to treat that control as a political reality that must eventually be recognised. Proposals then appear suggesting territorial swaps or permanent occupation as part of a negotiated settlement.^{21,22} Time blurs the original legal clarity and what once appeared as a straightforward act of aggression slowly becomes reframed as a complicated territorial dispute that requires compromise from all sides (though mostly, the Ukrainians were asked to compromise).²³

¹⁵ George Beebe and John Mearsheimer, "Debate: Is a Peace Agreement in Ukraine Possible?," Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, YouTube video, February 19, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CuMGIRo3TMA>.

¹⁶ Samuel Charap, Joe Haberman, Katherine Anna Trauger, Benjamin Sakarin, and Scott Savitz, *Guidelines for Designing a Ceasefire in the Russia-Ukraine War: Best Practices, Lessons Learned, and the Role of Technology*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2025, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3987-1.html.

¹⁷ Sputnik News. "Russia Launches Offensive in Dnepropetrovsk Region." June 8, 2025. <https://sputniknews.in/20250608/ukraine-to-face-new-reality-on-ground--russia-launches-offensive-in-dnepropetrovsk-region-9255230.html>

¹⁸ Zois Berlin. "Ceasefire Lines: Everyday Life, Security, and Spaces of Engagement in War." <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/ceasefire-lines-everyday-life-security-and-spaces-of-engagement-in-war>

¹⁹ Japan Times. "Russia-Ukraine Peace Talks Focus on Territory." March 1, 2026. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2026/03/01/world/politics/russia-ukraine-peace-talks-territory/>.

²⁰ Responsible Statecraft. "Ukraine Neutrality and Peace." <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/ukraine-neutrality-peace/>.

²¹ Reuters. "Putin Open to Territory Swap in Ukraine Deal." December 26, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-indicated-russia-could-be-open-territory-swap-part-ukraine-deal-kommersant-2025-12-26/>.

²² New York Times. "Ukraine-Russia Peace Talks Consider Demilitarized Zone." February 18, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/18/world/europe/ukraine-russia-peace-talks-demilitarized-zone.html>.

²³ The Guardian. "Trump Urges Zelenskyy to Get a Deal Done with Russia." March 6, 2026. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/mar/06/ukraine-war-briefing-trump-urges-zelenskyy-to-get-a-deal-done-with-russia>.

Elements of this shift are already visible in policy debates among several middle powers. At the 2023 Shangri-La Dialogue, Indonesia's then-defence minister Prabowo Subianto proposed a peace initiative that included an immediate ceasefire, the establishment of demilitarised zones, and United Nations-supervised referendums in contested territories.²⁴ While framed as a pragmatic attempt to stop the war, critics noted that such proposals implicitly treat territories seized through force as subjects of negotiation rather than as violations that must first be reversed.^{25,26}

This shift is visible not only in academic debates but also in diplomatic discourse among several middle powers. India has repeatedly emphasised the need for dialogue and negotiations between the "parties concerned" to end the war.²⁷ South Africa and Brazil have similarly called for a rapid cessation of hostilities and a political settlement.^{28,29} Brazil's president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has argued that a military solution is impossible and that negotiations must address the concerns of both Russia and Ukraine. Proposals supported by China and Brazil have called for freezing the conflict as a basis for negotiations.³⁰

Multilateral diplomacy reflects the same steady shift. Early United Nations General Assembly resolutions condemning the invasion received overwhelming support, with 141 states voting in favour in March 2022.³¹ Four years later, however, the diplomatic landscape appears more fragmented. A February 2026 UN General Assembly resolution supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity received 107 votes in favour but also 51 abstentions, including from Indonesia, India, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.³² More strikingly, the United States also abstained, arguing that certain formulations might complicate ongoing negotiations to end the war.³³ These positions do not necessarily signal support for Russia, but they illustrate how the international conversation is gradually shifting from condemning aggression toward managing the consequences of a prolonged war.

²⁴ The Jakarta Post. "Prabowo's Ukraine Proposal." June 6, 2023.

<https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2023/06/06/prabowos-ukraine-proposal.html>.

²⁵ Simon Hutagalung, "Indonesian President-Elect Prabowo's Proposal for Ending Russo-Ukrainian War," *Kyiv Post*, June 11, 2024, <https://www.kyivpost.com/opinion/34098>.

²⁶ Radityo Dharmaputra, "Menakar Proposal Indonesia untuk Perdamaian Rusia-Ukraina," *Kompas.id*, June 11, 2023, <https://www.kompas.id/artikel/menakar-proposal-indonesia-untuk-perdamaian-rusia-ukraina>.

²⁷ Anadolu Agency, "World Expects Deal to End Russia-Ukraine War: Top Indian Diplomat," Anadolu Agency, February 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/world-expects-deal-to-end-russia-ukraine-war-top-indian-diplomat/3488699>.

²⁸ BBC News. "Sudan Conflict: What Is Happening in Sudan?" <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-65951350>.

²⁹ Reuters. "Brazil's Lula, Ukraine's Zelenskiy Discuss Russia Conflict." September 24, 2025.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/brazils-lula-ukraines-zelenskiy-discuss-russia-conflict-un-sidelines-2025-09-24/>.

³⁰ <https://www.gov.br/planalto/en/latest-news/2024/05/brazil-and-china-present-joint-proposal-for-peace-negotiations-with-the-participation-of-russia-and-ukraine>

³¹ UN News, "General Assembly Resolution Demands End to Russian Offensive in Ukraine," March 2, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113152>.

³² United Nations, "Eleventh Emergency Special Session Resumes Four Years after Russian Federation Invasion of Ukraine," GA/12752, February 24, 2026, <https://press.un.org/en/2026/ga12752.doc.htm>.

³³ Tammy Bruce (U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations), "Remarks at a UN General Assembly Emergency Special Session on Ukraine," United States Mission to the United Nations, February 24, 2026, <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-general-assembly-emergency-special-session-on-ukraine-2/>.

The New Language of "Reality"

In this context, the phrase "reality on the ground" has become increasingly common in discussions about Ukraine. The Russian President Vladimir Putin even stated that he wants Ukraine to "acknowledge reality."³⁴ The phrase sounds realistic and pragmatic, and it is often presented as a neutral description of the military situation. In practice, however, it carries important political implications.

"Reality on the ground" refers to territorial control established through force, and when that control becomes the starting point for diplomacy, the burden of adjustment subtly shifts. Instead of focusing on reversing the violation, diplomatic discussions begin with the assumption that the outcome of aggression must somehow be accommodated. The consequence of this new language is very clear. A smaller power, such as Ukraine, has to accept that they are "losing" and that accepting the new reality might be beneficial for them.^{35,36}

This logic tends to favour great powers because states with overwhelming military capabilities possess the ability to seize territory and maintain control long enough for the situation to be reframed as an enduring geopolitical reality. For middle and smaller powers, the implications are far more serious. If violations of sovereignty can be accepted as "new realities," the norm against territorial conquest weakens and sovereignty becomes less a matter of legal principle and more a matter of military capability.³⁷ In such an environment, middle powers may find themselves compelled to accept outcomes largely determined by stronger states.

The growing acceptance of these "realities" is often justified through the language of realism. Analysts sometimes argue that acknowledging the balance of power simply reflects a pragmatic understanding of international politics. Several neorealists such as Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer keep suggesting that Ukraine needs to negotiate with Russia and maintain neutrality; otherwise, either Russia will win or the war will keep going.^{38,39} Reducing realism to the passive acceptance of power risks turning analytical insight into strategic resignation.

A similar tendency appears in discussions about other ongoing conflicts. In debates surrounding the war in Gaza, some Indonesian officials have suggested that the violence cannot end immediately and have pointed to declining casualty figures as signs of slow but

³⁴ Tetyana Oliynyk, "Putin Claims That He Wants Ukraine to 'Acknowledge Reality', Not Surrender," *Ukrainska Pravda*, June 20, 2025, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2025/06/20/7518026/>.

³⁵ Michael C. Desch, "Ukraine Is Losing the War," *Foreign Affairs*, February 26, 2026, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/ukraine-losing-war>.

³⁶ Robert A. Pape, "The Price of Peace in Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, February 16, 2026, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/price-peace-ukraine>.

³⁷ Tanisha M. Fazal, "Conquest Is Back," *Foreign Affairs*, March 21, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/conquest-back>.

³⁸ Stephen M. Walt, "Liberal Illusions Caused the Ukraine Crisis," *Foreign Policy*, January 19, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/19/ukraine-russia-nato-crisis-liberal-illusions/>.

³⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I4n7JcmQfbc>

steady improvement.⁴⁰ Critics argue that this kind of framing risks sanitising ongoing destruction by presenting reduced intensity as progress rather than insisting on an immediate end to the violence.⁴¹ Whether intended or not, such language reflects a broader diplomatic habit in which prolonged wars are discussed in terms of managing their escalation rather than confronting the violations that produced them in the first place.⁴²

Implication for Indonesia and the Other Middle Powers

For Indonesia, these questions are not abstract. Indonesia is not a military superpower; thus, it has consistently supported an international order built around sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the peaceful settlement of disputes. These principles have shaped Indonesia's diplomatic identity since the early decades of independence and remain central to its approach to international law and multilateral cooperation. If those principles erode, middle powers such as Indonesia will face a far more uncertain strategic environment in which political outcomes are increasingly determined by raw power rather than by shared rules.

Indonesia faces its own challenges related to maritime sovereignty, particularly around the North Natuna Sea where Chinese coast guard and fishing vessels have repeatedly entered waters that Indonesia considers part of its exclusive economic zone under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).⁴³ Jakarta has consistently rejected China's "nine-dash line" claims precisely because they rely on historical assertions rather than recognised legal principles under UNCLOS.⁴⁴ If the international community gradually accepts the idea that territorial control created through force or coercion can become political "reality," it would weaken the very legal framework that Indonesia relies upon to defend its maritime rights.

Indonesia cannot determine the outcome of the war in Ukraine, and it does not need to produce a comprehensive peace proposal. The more immediate question concerns the type of international order Indonesia helps to normalise through its diplomacy and its public discourse. Indonesia's official positions in international forums have generally supported Ukraine's territorial integrity, yet discussions within the country sometimes reflect the language of geopolitical adjustment. When analysts and policymakers begin emphasising the

⁴⁰ Antara News. "Seskab: Penghentian Konflik dan Korban di Gaza Tidak Bisa Seketika." <https://www.antarane.ws.com/berita/5458039/seskab-penghentian-konflik-dan-korban-di-gaza-tidak-bisa-seketika>.

⁴¹ Middle East Monitor. "Indonesia's Cabinet Secretary Is Sanitising Genocide in Gaza." March 7, 2026. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20260307-indonesias-cabinet-secretary-is-sanitising-genocide-in-gaza/>.

⁴² Middle East Monitor. "Response to Mr Zulfikar and Ms Aryanti: Palestinian Lives Matter." March 10, 2026. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20260310-response-to-mr-zulfikar-and-ms-aryanti-palestinian-lives-matter/>.

⁴³ Reuters. "Indonesia Says Chinese Vessel Driven Away After Disrupting Energy Survey." October 24, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-says-chinese-vessel-twice-driven-away-after-disrupting-energy-survey-2024-10-24/>.

⁴⁴ Kemlu RI. "Keterangan Pers tentang Kerja Sama Maritim RI-Tiongkok." <https://kemlu.go.id/berita/keterangan-pers-tentang-kerja-sama-maritim-ri-tiongkok-dalam-pernyataan-bersama-ri-tiongkok>.

need to “accept realities,” the signal that emerges can become ambiguous about Indonesia’s long-standing commitment to sovereignty as a universal principle.⁴⁵

Even in this environment, middle powers are not without influence. They can defend the principle of territorial integrity consistently across different regions, avoiding the temptation to treat sovereignty as relevant in some conflicts while ignoring it in others. They can continue investing diplomatic energy in institutions that reinforce these principles, recognising that multilateral forums and international law remain important instruments for states that lack overwhelming military power. They can also exercise greater caution in adopting language that quietly legitimises territorial conquest, since phrases such as “adjusting to realities” steadily reshape expectations about what the international community is willing to tolerate.

Recent conflicts in different parts of the world have exposed serious inconsistencies in how international law is applied. Many observers in Indonesia highlight the contrast between global responses to Ukraine and to Gaza or other crises in the Middle East, and those frustrations are widely shared and valid.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, inconsistency does not make the principle of sovereignty less important. If anything, selective enforcement increases the need for countries to defend the principle itself rather than allowing it to weaken through steady neglect.

Concluding Remarks

Four years after Russia’s invasion, fatigue is understandable and the temptation to normalise the war is strong. As new crises emerge and dominate the international agenda, policymakers increasingly seek ways to stabilise conflicts rather than to confront their origins. The risk is that territorial conquest slowly becomes accepted as an unfortunate but manageable geopolitical fact. Once that shift takes hold, the barrier against similar actions elsewhere becomes weaker.

Indonesia cannot end the war in Ukraine, but it still faces a quieter strategic choice. The question is whether Indonesia contributes, even unintentionally, to an international environment in which territorial conquest is gradually absorbed as geopolitical reality. Wars eventually end, but the precedents they leave behind often shape international politics for decades.

CSIS Indonesia, Pakarti Centre Building, Indonesia 10160

Tel: (62-21) 386 5532 | Fax: (6221) 384 7517 | csis.or.id

Please contact the editorial team for any enquiries at

publication@csis.or.id

⁴⁵ Cakrawarta. “Eropa Timur dan Ujian Realisme Geopolitik.” <https://www.cakrawarta.com/eropa-timur-dan-ujian-realisme-geopolitik.html>.

⁴⁶ Tempo. “Standar Ganda AS terhadap Gaza dan Ukraina.” <https://www.tempo.co/internasional/standar-ganda-as-terhadap-gaza-dan-ukraina-apa-saja--83421>.