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ANALYSIS OF US-NATO ENTANGLEMENT IN RUSSO-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT: 'WESTERN AXIS' AN EFFORT TO CONTAIN CHINA IN EUROPE

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**Analysis of US-NATO Entanglement in Russo-Ukrainian Conflict:
'Western Axis' an Effort to Contain China in Europe**

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Abstract

The Ukraine-Russia conflict is a complex one. Some countries intend to defend national interests regarding border areas, energy sources, and international trade routes such as the United States, NATO, and China. The United States-NATO is trying to maintain the status quo over the Euro-Arctic region. Meanwhile, China took advantage of this conflict to expand into the European market. In addition, China has also benefited in the military sector to modernize its military arsenal and cheap energy sources amid the global energy crisis from Russia. Therefore, to help the process of analyzing the issue, this study uses the concept of balancing to see how the US-NATO shapes the perception of threats to China. Henceforth, both know what form of deterrence and containment strategy to employ in their involvement in the Ukraine-Russian conflict, especially to stem China's expansion in the Caucasus and Arctic regions.

Keywords: NATO, US, China, deterrence, containment

Abstrak

Konflik Ukraina-Rusia merupakan konflik yang kompleks. Terdapat negara-negara yang bermaksud untuk mempertahankan kepentingan nasional terkait wilayah perbatasan, sumber energi, dan jalur perdagangan internasional seperti Amerika Serikat, NATO dan Cina. Amerika Serikat-NATO berusaha untuk mempertahankan status quo atas kawasan Euro-Arktik. Sementara itu, Cina mengambil keuntungan dari konflik ini untuk melakukan ekspansi ke pasar Eropa. Selain itu, Cina juga memperoleh manfaat di sektor militer guna memodernisasi persenjataan militernya dan sumber energi murah di tengah krisis energi global dari Rusia. Oleh karena itu, untuk membantu proses analisis isu tersebut, maka penelitian ini menggunakan konsep balancing untuk melihat bagaimana AS-NATO membentuk persepsi ancaman ke Cina. Sehingga untuk selanjutnya, keduanya mengetahui bentuk strategi deterrence dan containment apa yang harus dilakukan dalam keterlibatannya di konflik Ukraina-Rusia terutama untuk membendung ekspansi Cina di kawasan Kaukasus dan Arktik.

Kata kunci: NATO, Amerika Serikat, Cina, deterrence, containment

INTRODUCTION

This research aims to elucidate the reasons behind the entanglement of the United States and *the North Atlantic Treaty Organization* (NATO) in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The disharmony between the two countries began to be recognized when conflicts broke out in

2006 and 2009, caused by rising gas prices in Ukraine, as a result of the election of Viktor Yushchenko—the Pro-Western candidate—to the presidency (Mankoff, 2022). Before that time, both Ukraine and Russia experienced a harmonious relationship in which both countries depended on each other—Ukraine needed Russian gas exports

to meet its domestic demand while Russia turned Ukraine into an *energy transit* towards European countries (Legislation, 1994). Since then, relations between the two countries have been further marked by tensions and border disputes as in the Crimean conflict in 2014, the Sea of Azov conflict in 2018, and Russia's latest invasion of several Ukrainian regions (Luhansk, Donetsk, Mariupol, Melitopol, and Kherson) in early 2022. Amidst these inharmonious events, the presence of NATO and the United States began to be felt during the annexation of Crimea and is still felt today. Therefore, this study will focus on the periodization of the entanglement of the United States and NATO in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine from 2014 to 2022.

The outbreak of the conflict in Crimea began when the Ukrainian Parliament overthrew the government of President Yanukovich on February 22, 2014. There were a series of protests and bloody demonstrations by the opposition, led by Yulia Tymoshenko and her supporters. The demonstrations came after Yanukovich abruptly terminated a trade agreement with the European Union and received a bailout worth \$15 billion from the Government of Moscow (Reuters, 2014). Therefore, it has been alleged that Yanukovich was biased towards Vladimir Putin by some pro-European circles. The decision of the Ukrainian Parliament to overthrow Yanukovich provoked the anger of pro-Russian supporters in Crimea (predominantly comprised of ethnic Russians), as they consequently began to demonstrate in Sevastopol (the capital of Crimea) on February 23, 2014. As shown in a documentary video titled *Crimea: Return to the Motherland*, many protesters from Crimea were subjected to violence by Kyiv nationalists when they attend an anti-Maidan

association in the Capital of Ukraine. Four days after the incident in Sevastopol, unidentified masked troops occupied the Crimean Parliament building in Simferopol and took control of other strategic locations in Crimea (Weaver, 2015). This incident caused a domino effect that eventually led to a referendum for the Crimean people on March 16, 2014. The People of Crimea were given two choices: namely between supporting the reunification of Crimea with Russia as part of the Russian Federation, or supporting the restoration of the status quo of Crimea as part of Ukraine based on the Constitution of the Republic of Crimea in 1992. According to a report published by *The Russian Federation Council for Civil Society and Human Rights*, 96.77% of the votes voted to join Russia (Grant, 2015).

The United States reacted strongly to the actions of the Russian Government, which is accused of having annexed the Crimea region from Ukraine by imposing an illegal referendum. The White House immediately took tough measures such as implementing a *visa ban* as well as imposing severe sanctions against Russia. President Obama also halted diplomatic relations with the Russian Government including suspending the preparatory meeting of the G8 summit in Sochi, Russia, and not sending a presidential delegation to the Paralympics in Sochi. In addition, military action was also taken by the United States by canceling military consultations with Russia and deploying F-16 fighter jets to Poland. In contrast, relations between the United States and Ukraine have grown increasingly strong, marked by the provision of a \$1 billion loan to Ukraine as well as the establishment of missile defense systems in Poland and the Czech Republic to help Ukraine (Calamur, 2014).

The conflict in Crimea has had a major impact on NATO. Indirectly, the conflict has influenced NATO member countries to change the focus of their strategies from territorial defense to overseeing various military commands and global crisis management, including in Ukraine. This new strategy later became the standard by which NATO responded to matters in Crimea as well as Britain, France, Germany, and Turkey (Riza, 2018). Organizationally, NATO has also helped to reform defense institutions. In addition, member countries have supplied large amounts of training to Ukrainian armed forces and have included them in NATO operations (NATO, 2022).

The dispute between Ukraine and Russia continued into November 2018. Russia, at the time, was building a bridge connecting the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea in the Kerch Strait and intercepted three Ukrainian ships. These were the artillery ships Berdyansk, Nikopol, and the Yana Kapa tug. The three ships had previously sailed from Odesa (in the Black Sea) to Mariupol (in the Sea of Azov). The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) argued that the Ukrainian vessels had illegally entered Russian waters and that the crews did not comply with requests from the FSB. Thus, the Russian patrol boat carried out an attack causing damage to the Yana Kapa and injuring 6 Ukrainian navy crew members (Bilyk, 2018).

Predominantly, the policy taken by the United States to respond to cases in the Sea of Azov was divided into two interventions. First, diplomatic intervention consisted of condemnation of Russia's actions. United States State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said that Russia was trying to destabilize Ukraine by disrupting Ukrainian ships. Furthermore, the

Ambassador of the United States for Ukraine, Kurt Volker, paid a visit to Kyiv and expressed Washington's inclination to send *lethal weaponry* to the border of the Sea of Azov (Savilov, 2018). Meanwhile, President Donald Trump also decided to cancel a planned meeting with Vladimir Putin at the G20 summit in Argentina on November 30 (Katz, n.d). The second intervention was for the military to deploy a spy plane (Boeing RC-135V) from Souda Bay, Crete to the Black Sea on November 26 and send a warship (USS McCampbell) to conduct *free navigation* operations in the Sea of Azov (Ayudhia, 2022).

The entanglement of the United States and NATO in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine raises questions about the reasons for the existence of both parties in this conflict. The latest act of the United States is the granting of economic sanctions to Russia, consisting of the removal of all Russian banks from the Swift system and carrying out *a ban* on gas and oil imports from Russia (BBC, 2022) This was done in response to the largest Russian invasion of several regions of Ukraine namely Luhansk, Donetsk, Mariupol, Melitopol, and Kherson in mid-February 2022. Meanwhile, NATO has coordinated with Ukraine to meet their demand regarding the delivery of aid. Each of the NATO member states have sent weapons, ammunition, and various types of light and heavy military armaments, including anti-tank, anti-air, and drone systems. Furthermore, they have also provided financial assistance to the Ukrainian people, including humanitarian assistance for refugees. (NATO, 2022) The Czech Republic became the first NATO country to provide tank assistance to Ukraine. Although the Czech Government did not disclose donations of defense equipment to Ukraine, local media reported that Prague had sent

Soviet-made T-72 tanks and other heavy weapons (DW, 2022). Meanwhile, Joe Biden has finally agreed to the delivery of 31 Abraham M1 tanks to Ukraine. This action was taken by the United States after Germany confirmed to make their 14 Leopard 2A6 tanks available. (Gambino, 2023).

This study assumes that both the United States and NATO are involved in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict due to (1) NATO's concerns about China's presence in the NATO-administered Caucasus and Arctic regions. (2) The United States examines China as a global systemic threat as it expands its territory into Europe. The close relationship between China and Russia juxtaposed to the recent Russian-Ukrainian conflict—China voted to abstain in a vote at the UN General Assembly session blaming Russia for the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine (Magnier, 2022)—further corroborates both assumptions. Previous studies on similar topics—Research from Massaguni Mahfud (Massaguni, 2022) and Lingga Ayudhia (Ayudhia, 2022)—focused the discussion on the effect of EU sanctions against Russia and a provides a descriptive explanation of the involvement of the United States in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. However, this study aims to analyze the causality relationship between the entanglement of the United States and NATO in the conflict.

METHOD

This research is an explanatory study that aims to explain why a phenomenon occurs through several related aspects, through the explanation of causality relationships. This research will look at the underlying motivations of both the United States' and NATO's involvement in the Ukraine-Russia conflict and also what the strategy of the United States and NATO is to execute their ambitions. In addition, this

study will use literature studies as a method of collecting data from various secondary data sources (books, journals, websites official an institution, and newspapers).

Concept of Balancing

This research will use the concept of *balancing* to analyze the causes of the United States and NATO being involved in the Russia and Ukraine conflict as well as the effort both parties have made to meet their respective interests. *Balancing* is a derivative concept of the theory of structural realism developed by Kenneth Waltz. Structural realism provides a different set of ideas when compared to classical realism, which states that it is human nature, and therefore the nature of the state, to pursue power. Whereas, Waltz argues that the international system of anarchy and the distribution of capabilities is what causes the similarity of behavior from the state, namely the pursuit of power (Lobell, 2010) The international system also creates the perception that there is no supreme power other than *superpower* countries, and there is no guarantee that no country will attack other countries. Therefore, John Mearsheimer argued that with the state of the international system of anarchy, it is possible that each country seeks to increase power, at least to protect itself from the attacks of other countries that can occur at any time (Mearsheimer, 2007).Based on Mearsheimer's view, structural realism can be divided into two main ideas, namely offensive realism and defensive realism.

Offensive realism considers that uncertainty over the intentions and actions of other countries is caused by the international system of anarchy. This condition creates a perception that if a country has a large amount of strength and strong security capabilities, then it will tend to be safe. Thus, countries are forced to compete with each other in implementing aggressive policies.

These countries seek to replace the *status quo* of the existing international order, by exploiting the disadvantages of other countries to become a force and weaken opponents of a latent nature. Not only that, but the international system of anarchy also gives rise to a common view between countries, regarding interdependence and vulnerability, so that competition in obtaining a sense of security will continue (Lobell, 2010). This thinking bears a resemblance to a balancing strategy. Balancing is a strategy/policy to counter threatening forces by aligning forces to be equal to those threatening, preventing attacks, or even defeating them (Walt, 1991). The balancing strategy, according to Randall L. Schweller, can be done in two ways, namely *internal balancing* (the individual efforts of threatened countries to mobilize their national resources to match the enemy's resources) and *external balancing* (forming formal or informal alliances aimed at countering coalitions or states of *rising powers*) (Schweller, 1999).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section will *first* discuss, the current situation and conditions of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, followed by a glimpse into China's indirect participation in this conflict and the profit that China will obtain for its participation. The *second* area of discussion will elaborate on several underlying factors as to why the United States and NATO are incorporating themselves into the Ukraine-Russia conflict, including *aggregate power* and *geographical proximity*. The last section will explain the actions that have been taken by both the United States and NATO to manifest their intended goals for China with two strategies: *deterrence* and *containment*.

China's lukewarm support in the Russian-Ukrainian Escalation Vortex

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea, relations between Russia and Ukraine have grown in tension and conflict. Ukraine feels haunted by fears that Russia will again invade its territory. This prompted Ukraine to draw itself closer to the European Union and NATO. Especially after the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky delivered a statement that his government promised to do everything it could return Crimea to Ukraine. The statement was welcomed by the NATO delegation and the European Union. Even the President of the European Union Council, Charles Michael, also openly expressed support for Zelensky's plan. "Ukraine will never be alone in that Crimea is Ukraine. Unfortunately, Russia continues to act in ways that multiply the negative impact of the annexation" (Aljazeera, 2021). This closeness of relations between Ukraine and western countries is considered to be the cause of President Putin sending his troops to control areas southeast of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

Russia's policy entitled "strategy operation military" was accompanied by the mobilization of 190,000 troops and succeeded in occupying the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia regions. Furthermore, these four regions were annexed by Russia through a unilateral referendum held between September 23-27, 2022, (BBC, 2022). But previously, there had been fighting in the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine, namely on the west bank of the Dnieper (Kherson), Lyman (Donetsk), and Luhansk rivers. Furthermore, the Russian Government is alleged by the Ukrainian military commander to have launched as many as 83 missiles into Lviv and Ternopil (the western region of Ukraine) killing 12 Ukrainian civilians. President Putin claimed

that the attack was in retaliation to an attack carried out by Ukrainian security forces on the Kerch Bridge (Hunder, 2022).

The state of conflict in Ukraine, which is getting worse, has also affected China. China has been the largest trading partner of Ukraine since the end of 2020. The total value of trade between the two since 2019 has reached \$103.4 billion and continues to increase. Goods imported from China include mineral fuels, oil, vehicles, and mechanical equipment. In contrast, Ukraine exports wheat, metals, and animal fats and oils as well as vegetables to China (CraneIP, 2021). However, China also has strategic relations (both political and economic) with Russia. Therefore, this kind of situation puts China in a dilemma position — between continuing to defend its normative commitment to sovereignty and integrity regions, and maintaining strategic partnerships to support interests in the reform of the global order free of western influence. It is evident that this is the case from China's stance which tends to be cautious in responding to the Russian-Ukraine conflict. China did not even condemn Moscow's invasion of Ukraine on February 24 and instead criticized western sanctions against Russia that would make matters worse (Aljazeera, 2022). The day before the Munich Security Conference, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi urged all parties involved to avoid hyping war and creating panic (Yang, 2022).

China is taking a balancing act strategy: on the one hand China does not want a high-intensity and long-term war because of the political, reputational, and economical risks that will be brought on by the war. On the other hand, Beijing also does not want to see a total defeat of Russia that would lead to the construction of a pro-western democratic government in Moscow. Furthermore, this

result will create a new geo-strategic environment that will even negatively impact China's competition strategy over western countries. Therefore, the Beijing Government will seek a ceasefire for the rest of the year. In addition, China will also execute 'distance diplomacy'—avoiding direct support for Russia in order to avoid western sanctions (Kusa, 2022). Moreover, China does not see Russia as a vital part of modernizing its national economy whereas, for this, China clearly considers the future of its economy and technology to be dependent upon the European market.

The Belt Road Initiative (BRI) project has been negatively affected by this conflict. *First*, the Eurasian Land Bridge is directly affected considering that the main line from 'The China-Europe Railway Express' to the west will go through Russia, Belarus, and Poland which will also be passing through Ukraine (the epicenter of the conflict). Also, the sanctions that the European Union (EU) imposed on Russia resulted in the refusal of goods, which travelled through Russia and Belarus, to enter the EU. *Second*, Chinese investment in Ukraine has been affected by the war. This investment includes the construction of wind power plants. *Third*, to some extent, China-EU trade has been hit by the conflict, although not on such a large scale (Zongyi, 2022). The Russian-Ukrainian war has an impact on slowing economic growth, and Europe is no exception. According to Betty Wang, a senior researcher at ANZ (Australia and New Zealand Banking Group), China is the second largest trading partner for the EU, accounting for about 15% of the total exports from Asian countries. Even EU exports jumped up further last year, which was 16% of China's 30% export growth. Therefore, for every 1% value that falls from the EU's Gross Domestic Product

(GDP) growth, China's total export growth will also plunge by 0.3%. (Tan, 2022).

In addition to the negative impacts, China has also benefited from the emergence of the Ukraine-Russia conflict. *First*, it is true that the BRI is also disturbed by the outbreak of war in Ukraine. However, the impact that caused is not as great as has been stated by the western media. On the contrary, with the heating up of relations between Russia and western countries, it becomes a convenience for Beijing to strengthen China's BRI and Russia's Greater Eurasian partnership, by widening cooperation with countries of Central Asia. In addition, from the experience of this conflict, China was finally able to diversify trade and commercial routes from the BRI to European countries without going through Russia; a new China-Europe railway links through the trans-Caspian and Black Sea routes and is the focus of development of the BRI on the periphery region (especially Southeast Asia) (Zongyi, 2022). *Second*, China can realize its dream of modernizing its strategic air force. Sanctions placed upon Russia over the invasion of Ukraine made it challenging for Moscow to develop the next generation of aircraft due to a lack of funding. Furthermore, the aircraft industry has supported 50% of Russia's arms exports. This situation was taken advantage of by China to make deals related to the sale of aircraft and at the same time transfer technology to Russia. (Jhao-kai, 2022). *Third*, China can use Ukraine-Russia conflict to take down the credibility of the United States leadership and at the same time destabilize their relations with ally-countries in Europe. Moreover, the United States prioritizes assertive actions (the imposition of economic and political sanctions) as a strategy to resolve this conflict, but until now that strategy has not been so effective. On the contrary, China's approach by putting forward a more peaceful

method has succeeded in gaining Russian confidence, even forming a closer relationship between the two countries. "China's trust relations with Russia, it's not a liability, actually it's an asset in the international efforts to solve the crisis in a peaceful way. China is a part of the solution, it's not part of the problem." (Kuo, 2022). This statement made by the Chinese Ambassador of the United States, Qin Gang, implies the closeness of China-Russia relations will play an important role for China as "part of the solution" and at the same time as a "peaceful arbitrator". This has become Beijing's bargaining power to pressure the EU and the leadership of the United States in the Ukraine crisis.

Determinants of U.S.-NATO Entanglement in the Conflict

Many approaches to security issues seek to apply *balancing* and *bandwagoning* strategies as a framework for central analysis. In fact, both strategies are usually framed solely in terms of power capabilities. Whilst this statement is correct, strength is not the only factor considered by policymakers to determine whom to ally with. More precisely, a country tends to ally with or against other countries that it feels will pose the greatest threat to their country (Walt, 1990). According to Stephen M. Walt, *balancing* and *bandwagoning* strategies are clearly seen as a response to threats where the threat level is formed by several factors such as *aggregate power, geographical proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions*.

In the Ukraine-Russia conflict, the United States and NATO see China as a beneficiary and believe that China's gain poses a threat to them. The alarm was evident when NATO leaders labelled China as a '*systemic challenge*' in its new policy guidelines established at the Madrid Summit in June 2022 (Drozdiak, 2022). This effort

was made in response to a statement by China that it has a 'borderless' strategic partnership in February 2022—China and Russia declared there are no "forbidden areas of cooperation" as they moved to counter the hegemony of the United States (Russell, 2022) — at the same time the Russian invasion of Ukraine was taking place. Whereas NATO's Strategic Concept in 2010 did not mention China at all and gave Russia status as a partner. When assessing this phenomenon whilst referring to Stephen Walt's hypothesis, there are at least two factors that shape the perception of the threat to China and make the US-NATO involved in the Ukraine-Russia conflict by executing a *balancing* strategy. First, the **aggregate power** factor means the total amount of power possessed by a country-*inter alia* with population, industrial and military capabilities, and technological prowess—so that those will be important components to threaten other countries (Walt, 1990). Usually, this factor is often combined with the second factor, **geographical proximity**—close countries are more likely to pose a greater threat than distant countries.

Since 2019, the Chinese armed forces, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), have been actively building military bases abroad with the aim of overcoming supply shortages in China's overseas operations, including the evacuation mission of Chinese nationals abroad (Miller, 2022). However, Washington views the Chinese intention as a regional expansion move after the United States Department of Defense (DoD) issued a report on China that has considered 13 countries for access to military bases, including Angola, Kenya, Seychelles, Tanzania, UAE, and Cambodia. Also, the United States Department of Defense's 2020 annual report to Congress on China's military strength explains that Beijing has surpassed

the United States in terms of the size of its naval fleet.

“The PRC [People’s Republic of China] has the largest navy in the world, with an overall battle force of approximately 350 ships and submarines, including over 130 major surface combatant [...] in comparison, the US Navy’s battle force is approximately 293 ships as of early 2020.” (Huang, 2021).

Although geographically China is not so close to the United States and other NATO member states, the presence of Chinese overseas military bases in the African region has ultimately caused insecurity for NATO's border which is not too far away from China. China, through the BRI project, has also expanded to southern and central eastern Europe, including NATO member states such as Montenegro and Greece.

Montenegro is in debt with the Export-Import Bank of China after being unable to pay what was owed July 2021. The \$944 million loan was used to fund the construction of a 41km long highway from the coastal town of Bar to Boljare bordering the Serbian region (Baczynska, 2021). Podgorica's inability to repay debts was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic that kept the tourism sector, the country's main source of income, not running. Finance Minister Milojko Spajic also unsuccessfully requested financial assistance from the EU resulting in Montenegro's dependence on Beijing being further engulfed as a scenario dramatic from a geopolitical point of view (Hopkins, 2021). The EU left Podgorica with no offer of assistance. This could keep the EU's partners and potential fleas away and push them into Beijing's arms. This is tantamount to allowing Beijing to be on the doorstep of the EU and NATO while making it easier for Beijing to build and develop strategic centers along the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans regions (Fruscione, 2021).

After the crisis in 2008, the Greek Government began to be open to privatization. In 2017, a Chinese expedition company called COSCO purchased a 51% stock in the Piraeus Port Authority (PPA) for €280 million and decided on the potential of the port as part of the BRI. Since COSCO took over the operationalization of the PPA in 2009, they have spent €600 million on infrastructure development (Koutantou, 2021). Piraeus has then developed into a transshipment center for freight destinations in the ports of the Mediterranean and Black Seas. Furthermore, COSCO still wanted to invest €200 million into the construction of a new container terminal, increasing capacity from 8 million TEU (twenty-foot equivalent units) to 11 million in 2021. China's increasing presence in the Mediterranean region dismayed the Dutch, who feared that Southern Europe terminal ports could become China's official trade gateway (BRI) and defeat the port of Rotterdam. Both cases put both the EU and NATO into a divided and threatened position by China's maneuvers. Proof of this is the emergence of disagreements in viewing China as an 'enemy' — as the United States did — or simply as a 'systemic challenge' like what some European countries such as Germany see, which has fairly close economic and trade ties with China (Drozdiak, 2022).

U.S.-NATO Balancing Strategy against Chinese Expansion

China became the party that benefited the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. Even if the post-war between Russia and Ukraine caused the trade transportation routes under the BRI project to be disrupted, it actually at the same time had a positive influence on Chinese expansion, especially in the Caucasus region. Beijing's government could increase the investment to improve infrastructure in The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route

or commonly called Middle Corridor—the network of roads, railways, and ports with the 6,500 km long stretches from Kazakhstan, Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, then all the way to Turkey and the Black Sea. Indeed, for now, the Caucasus countries, such as Georgia and Azerbaijan, receive a surplus from the development of this BRI route, namely making it easier for the two countries to connect to the market in Europe and Asia. Meanwhile, there are not many benefits obtained by China, except only in preventing China from being dependent on using direct routes to Europe through Russia. However, the investment allocated to Georgia and Azerbaijan is in the form of loans so it is possible for both to get caught up in the 'debt trap' played by Beijing like what happened to Greece and Montenegro. These concerns were also raised by Kenderdine and Bucky who argued it would be better if the two countries integrated their economies locally with regional trade zones because borrowing for massive infrastructure construction is gambling (Eurasianet, 2021). In addition to China being able to expand international trade routes through expansion into Europe, from this conflict, Beijing can also secure cheap energy sources. In the midst of the energy crisis that hit the global economy, China can even afford oil and gas with a discount from Russia (Bradsher, 2022). This is seen as an influence caused by the imposition of EU and United States sanctions on Russia.

The United States and NATO chose to implement a strategy that tends to be balanced to at least minimize China's expansion from gains over the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. There are at least two balancing-patterned policies implemented by them, including internal balancing through deterrence and external balancing through a containment strategy which means not

striving to defeat the rising power but only preventing further expansion (Schweller, 1999)—by utilizing the Partnership for Peace Programme (PfP). The meeting of NATO leaders at the Madrid Summit in June 2022 has succeeded in revitalizing the concept of defense and deterrence contained in the NATO strategic plan document, also written as the Madrid Summit Declaration. This document highlights China as a systemic competitor, particularly in the area of cybersecurity (NATO, 2022). NATO is working to construct trans-Atlantic mechanisms for cybersecurity and space (Odgaard, 2022). Jens Stoltenberg, as NATO Secretary-General, announced that NATO is trying to improve the readiness of its forces of more than 300,000 NATO troops and defense budget (Williams, 2022). A number of NATO countries (such as Denmark, Italy, Latvia, Poland, and Romania) pledged to raise their defense budgets to 2% of the total GDP. Even the German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, announced his plan to go beyond the budget limit set by NATO. Scholz has set up a special fund of EUR 100 billion for investment in defense capabilities (Kunertova, 2022). Meanwhile, the external balancing strategy is carried out through PfP. The Partnership for Peace (PfP) is a bilateral cooperation program of a practical nature between each of the Euro-Atlantic and NATO partner countries. The program allows partners to build individual relationships with NATO and choose priority areas of their own cooperation. Also, the PfP aims to improve stability and eliminate threats to peace in the Euro-Atlantic region (NATO, 2020). However, implicitly, PfP is also used by NATO to expand its borders to further strengthen the protection of NATO member states. Moreover, since Georgia and Azerbaijan have also been incorporated into this program, at least the

presence of NATO will not be inferior to China in the Caucasus region. Finally, Finland and Norway will also join NATO to further strengthen NATO's position in the Arctic.

CONCLUSION

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is not only a showdown and culmination between the two countries. But it is also a fight between the United States-NATO and China which is trying to expand its influence into the European region. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict was only ridden by Beijing to realize ambitions considering that from this conflict China gained the benefit of *inter alia* cheap energy sources and territorial expansion to support its international trade routes. However, the United States and NATO did not stand still. Both actors sought to counter China's expansion into Europe by implementing the balancing strategy, focusing on The Partnership of Peace (PfP) program and also strengthening NATO's own internals, especially in retranslating the concepts of defense and deterrence after the Madrid Summit 2022.

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