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## **Realism's Perspective on Russia's National Interest in Invading Ukraine: A Literature Review**

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### **Abstract**

Conflict is unavoidable. Regardless of the nature of the conflict, war is the last alternative when the peace effort has failed to take. Russia's attack on Ukraine is the last stage in resolving the conflict due to the failure of peace negotiations between the two sides. This study aims to analyze the national interest of Russia in invading Ukraine through the perspective of realism. The method used in this research is a descriptive method with a qualitative approach. The data collection technique is secondary data through documentation or literature study. In this case, the researcher conducted previous research with the research topic studied from scientific articles in libraries and cyberspace. This study's results indicate an iceberg phenomenon in Russia's national interest in invading Ukrainian territory. Western expansion into the territory of Ukraine has created a security dilemma for Russia, so the war is used as momentum for Russia to achieve its national interests. Through the war, Russia played zero-sum to achieve its national interests, as a balance of power from Western powers, power expansion into the territory of Ukraine, and the power struggle. The armed conflict between the two countries is a challenge that must face by countries around the world, including Indonesia. In response to it, Indonesia used an independent-active principle based on Indonesia's national interests.

**Keywords:** *National Interest; Foreign Policy; Realism; Security Dilemma; Balance of Power*

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### **Introduction**

Tensions between Russia and Ukraine have been building for hundreds of years. The source of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine cannot be separated from the long history and dynamics of the relations between the two countries. The main issues that concern both parties are ideological, political, and economic differences, historical linkages, individual interests, and others (Welt, 2021). Around the 9th-13th centuries, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus were part of the empire of Kievan Rus, which covered most of Eastern Europe. Although from the same land, Russia and Ukraine have prominent differences in language, history, and political life (Ornay & Azizah, 2022). However, this narrative has always been denied by Putin, who considers that Russia and Ukraine are a unit that is part of Russian civilization. In contrast, the Ukrainian side has always denied it (Kotulas & Pusztai, 2022). During World War I and II, Russia and Ukraine were also incorporated into the federation of the Soviet Union and 13 other countries.

Tensions between the two countries began in 1932-1933, and famine claimed millions of people in Ukraine. This became the origin of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Historians in Kyiv described the incident as a genocidal tragedy orchestrated by the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, who at the time was said to have punished the people of Kyiv for opposing the forced

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collectivization of agricultural land (CNN Indonesia, 2022). After the dining war and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine finally declared its independence on August 24, 1991. After Russia and Ukraine became independent, the two countries established diplomatic relations on February 14, 1992, followed by various agreements and cooperation agreements in 1997. Over time, bilateral relations between the two countries experienced ups and downs, including a change of leadership that brought Ukraine to the West, which resulted in the diminishing role of Russia (Hidriyah, 2022). The root cause of the conflict between the two countries is Ukraine's very complex internal affairs. There is an ideological division between Ukrainian society, namely pro-Western and pro-Russian groups. Russia and Ukraine have a tangent geopolitical relationship. Geopolitically, Ukraine is on two sides: pro-Europeans are in the West, while pro-Russia is in the east (Hidriyah, 2022).

Since the 2000s, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has been expanding, exacerbating tensions between Russia and Ukraine. At the same time, the European Union (EU) expansion to the East and Western support for the pro-democracy movement in Ukraine are also essential elements in this conflict. Russia has long warned the United States and its European allies not to touch Ukrainian territory. In 2008, with the support of the United States, Ukraine planned to join NATO (Hendra et al., 2021). Western support has made Ukraine falter in favor of the West or Russia. It shows that Ukraine has not yet wholly joined the Western alliance and is not yet entirely under Russian influence. However, this was opposed by France and Germany after Russia announced its opposition to Ukraine's membership in NATO. Finally, the plan to join Ukraine was postponed to another time. In February 2010, a newly elected Ukrainian president, Yanukovich, promised Ukraine would be a 'neutral state' that would cooperate with Russia and Western alliances such as the European Union and NATO (Mankoff, 2022).

Relations between Russia and Ukraine have been heating up again since 2014. At that time, there was a revolution against Russian supremacy. The anti-government mob overthrew the pro-Russian former president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich. The revolution also increased Ukraine's desire to join the EU and NATO. It angered Putin at the prospect of establishing a NATO base next to his border. It is also supported by the increasingly close relations of several Eastern European countries with NATO, such as Poland and the Balkan countries. Unfortunately, Russia's interest in resolving Ukraine's internal conflict has become an attempt to exploit Russia to gain territory in Crimea. Crimea's strategic location seems to have been used by Russia to strengthen its influence in the Eastern and Central European regions (Hidriyah, 2022). When Yanukovich fell, Russia used the power vacuum to annex Crimea in 2014. Russia also supported the separatists in eastern Ukraine, Donetsk, and Luhansk, against the Ukrainian government (Mankoff, 2022). Then, since February 2015, Russia and Ukraine have been trying to stop the violence through the Minsk Agreement, with France and Germany as mediators. The agreement includes provisions for a ceasefire, the withdrawal of heavy weapons, and total control of the Ukrainian government throughout the conflict zone. However, this peace effort failed, and the armed conflict in Donbas is still ongoing (Kotulas & Pusztai, 2022).

In January 2021, Zelensky asked US President Joe Biden to allow Ukraine to join NATO. On the other hand, Russia then began deploying its armed forces near the Ukrainian border in the spring of 2021. They claimed this was a form of exercise. As of November 2021, satellite imagery taken by Maxar Technologies showed a buildup of Russian troops near Ukraine. A month later, on December 17, 2021, Russia filed a security claim. It includes getting NATO to withdraw troops and weapons from eastern Europe. At the same time, Russia forbade Ukraine from joining them (Mankoff, 2022).

The conflict between the two countries escalated again in February 2022 when Putin recognized the independence of two pro-Russian separatist regions in eastern Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk. Putin conveyed this in a speech on state-run television. Putin said the West had spat on Russia's security concerns for years by moving NATO east and placing military infrastructure closer to Russia's borders. Until the peak of tension broke out when Russia decided to invade Ukrainian territory on Thursday, February 24, 2022, until now

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(Kotulas & Pusztai, 2022). The Russian invasion of Ukraine was due to Russia's goal of eliminating Ukraine's status as a sovereign state outside Russia's control or demilitarizing and changing the Ukrainian regime or de-Nazification of Ukraine (Umland, 2022). Where Putin said the invasion was designed to stop the genocide being carried out by the Kyiv regime and ultimately to achieve the demilitarization and de-Nazification of Ukraine.

Even though the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine does not directly impact Indonesia, a protracted conflict will significantly disrupt the Indonesian economy (Bakrie et al., 2022). Considering that Indonesia is one of the countries in Southeast Asia with economic and military relations with Russia, with the total trade owned by Indonesia and Thailand as much as 1% of gross domestic product (GDP) (Hutabarat, 2022). In response to this, Indonesia has an independent-active foreign policy orientation (Hutabarat, 2022). Through its position as host, Indonesia made the G20 forum momentum to encourage Russia as a member of the G20 to stop the war over Ukraine. In addition, Indonesia also emphasized that it does not side with anyone (Dora, 2022).

Based on the data that has been described, the ongoing armed conflict between both countries has brought global challenges that must be faced by countries around the world, including Indonesia. Therefore, this study aims to analyze Russia's interests in invading Ukraine based on a realism perspective and Indonesia's foreign policy in response to it.

## Literature Review

### *National Interest*

According to Morgenthau (1951), national interest is the minimum capability of a country or nation to protect and maintain its physical, political, and cultural identity from interference from other countries. The country's capability can be measured through its national resilience and strength. In achieving the national interest, power is an important instrument. According to Vesna Danilovic, at least three things can be known about a country's foreign policy by looking at its national interests. These three things are that it can be known what the sources of the country's foreign policy preferences are, can also be evaluated on particular strategies or steps taken by the state, and justification for decisions taken by decision-makers (Danilovic, 2005). In addition, two crucial things are interrelated in carrying out the national interest: rationality and morality. In achieving morality, rationality is needed. Thus, the national interest will be in harmony with the prevailing morals in society (Oppenheim, 1987).

Then, there are four fundamental interests that encourage a country to carry out its national interest. The four things are defense interests, economic interests, world order interests, and ideological interests. The purpose of defense is to protect nations and people from the threat of physical violence by other countries. Economic interests aim to improve the country's economy by building cooperation with other countries. The interests of the world order aim to maintain the international political and economic system to create a sense of security and peace for the state and its people. Meanwhile, ideological interests aim to protect the country's values from external threats (Williams, 2012). In addition, there are two dimensions of national interest. First, vital interests are very high in value, so a country is willing to go to war to achieve them. Second, secondary interests include the desires that each country wants to achieve, but they are not willing to go to war where other possibilities exist (Perwita & Yani, 2006).

### *Foreign Policy*

In the globalization era, foreign policy is a concept that explains that various dimensions, such as politics, economics, culture, technology, and other dimensions, are equally dominant. Foreign policy is both action and inaction, or attitudes and activities carried out by the state or government in various fields, primarily aimed at the external or international environment to defend and fight for national interests whose achievements are also determined by various international actors, both state and non-state actors, in addition to being affected by the

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overall international environmental conditions (Rosenau et al., 1976). In *Undang-Undang Nomor 37 Tahun 1999* concerning *Hubungan Luar Negeri* (Foreign Relations), foreign relations is also used in addition to foreign policy. Of course, it has a broader meaning than foreign policy because it covers all dimensions or aspects of Indonesia's interaction with the international community. National interests can be achieved within the country and determined by international actors. It can be seen from how foreign policy can contribute to solving problems such as politics, security, economics, and socio-culture currently facing the Indonesian nation.

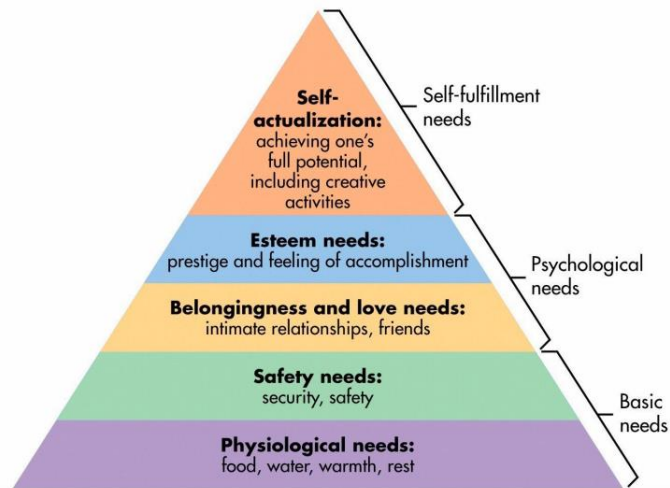
### *Realism Theory*

Based on the realism perspective, the state is the most important actor in an anarchic world (Viotti & Kauppi, 2012). The state is a rational or purposive actor, so there is no higher authority than state sovereignty, while non-state actors have secondary roles. On the other hand, the approach assumes that the international system is a conflict. In a conflicted international system, relations between countries are a zero-sum game in which one party benefits and the other loses. Realism assumes that the international system is anarchic and that all states pursue their national interests. National security or international security is at the top of the hierarchy of issues. International politics is a power struggle. The world order is created through a balance of power mechanism. The natural approach is utilization and security and sees economic and trade cooperation forums as instruments for geopolitical interests, even if countries have to sacrifice their economic interests. Countries that tend to be realists make peace difficult because the state wants to control everything, even individual rights (Viotti & Kauppi, 2012). In addition, realist countries are pessimistic about global transformation. It is because global transformation causes the emergence of competition between countries. At the same time, realists are of the view that they should benefit more. Therefore, they do not want competition because it results from global transformation (Jackson & Sorensen, 1999).

According to Waltz (1990), the weakness of realism is that it focuses only on the state, while non-state actors, such as international organizations, are not taken into account. In addition, there are realist ways of measuring strength and pursuing the state's interests in any way so that sometimes war becomes a natural thing in conflict resolution. However, some realists argue that this act of anarchy can be overcome by wise leadership and by pursuing national interests compatible with the international order. Meanwhile, the advantage of realism is that it guarantees the achievement of national interests without having to reduce state sovereignty by joining an international organization.

### *Human Needs Theory*

Basic needs or primary human motivations are drives or forces that direct the behavior of individuals and groups. The impulse can be influenced by internal factors or non-negotiable intrinsic manifestations such as values, needs, beliefs, and external factors or negotiable extrinsic manifestations such as position, data, and interests (Polkinghorn & Frodeman, 2000). Meanwhile, Abraham H. Maslow (1943) states that basic human needs are driven by five hierarchical needs: psychological needs, safety needs, love, and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs (Maslow, 1943). Psychological needs are the most basic drives, such as eating, drinking, and sleeping. After the psychological needs have been met, safety needs emerge, which as the need for security. Then the third desire will appear, namely love and belonging needs, which means the desire to have something. Then a higher need emerges is esteem needs initiated by self-esteem and driven by the ego. After the four needs have been met, self-actualization needs will appear, which is the highest position on Maslow's pyramid. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs chart is as follows:



**Chart 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**  
Chart with permission ©McLeod, 2007

In contrast to Maslow, according to Manfred Max-Neef, basic needs are at the highest in the pyramid (Max-Neef, 1991). While Rosenberg (2001) also sees a spiritual impulse and celebrates grief. So, spiritual aspects can become basic needs, not only freedom and identity. Regarding its relation to conflict, the Human Needs Theory was later developed more broadly by Burton. Burton (1990) sees that all conflicts stem from unsatisfied human needs, namely that basic needs are not met. According to Burton, in conflict, individuals or groups represent their interests, not their needs. In the iceberg phenomenon, Burton explains that what is visible on the surface is only a position. At the same time, the interests or interests of an individual or group are not visible or hidden (Burton, 1990).

## Method

In conducting research, determining the method to be used is very important because it will be the subject of agreement in choosing the research design, data collection techniques, and data analysis techniques. The research approach used in this paper is a descriptive qualitative method. In this study, researchers used secondary data, namely documentation. Documentation is a record of past events, such as writing, pictures, or monumental works of someone (Sugiyono, 2022). In this case, the researcher conducted previous research on the research topic under study from scientific articles in libraries and cyberspace. Following the approach used in this study, namely a qualitative approach using descriptive methods, the analysis technique is carried out by arranging, sorting, grouping, and analyzing continuously from the beginning to the end of the study (Nasution, 1996).

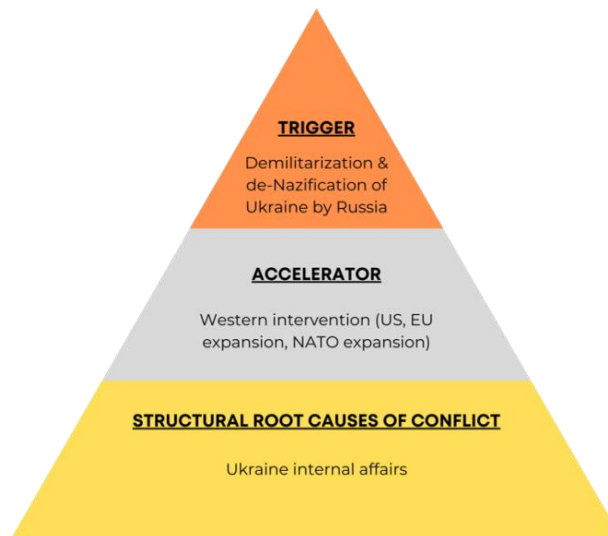
## Results and Discussion

### *Driving Factors of the Russian-Ukrainian Armed Conflict*

Conflict is unavoidable. It is the driving force for escalating conflicts in the war. Regardless of the nature of the conflict, war is the last alternative when the peace effort has failed to take. It will result in many adverse effects for the parties to the conflict. In addition to taking many victims, the war also creates an economic depression for the parties to the conflict. However, there are considered good effects of war (Thucydides, 1903). In the context of armed conflict between the two countries, Russia's attack on Ukraine is the last stage in resolving the conflict due to the failure of peace negotiations between the two sides. The type

of armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine is an international armed conflict (IAC) that originates from conflicts within countries. Thus, this armed conflict is included in the IAC type because it involves more than one country, Russia and Ukraine. In addition, there is also interference from outside parties such as the United States, the European Union, and NATO (Hendra et al., 2021).

The analysis of SAT factors includes three aspects, structural root causes of conflict, accelerator, and trigger. The root of the conflict is dry grass, the accelerator that accelerates conflict is the wind, and the trigger of conflict is fire. Through SAT factor analysis, the process of identifying problems in conflict will be taken care of. So that conflict resolution is carried out with the right mechanism by minimizing accelerators and triggers (Pindavanija & Malik, 2021). The chart for analyzing the SAT factors of the Russia and Ukraine armed conflict is as follows:



**Chart 2. SAT Factor Analysis of the Russian-Ukrainian Armed Conflict**  
Chart with permission ©Personal document, 2022.

In this case, the structural root cause of the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict in Ukraine's internal affairs is very complex. The main issues that concern both parties are ideological, political, and economic differences, historical linkages, individual interests, and others (Welt, 2021). There is an ideological division between the Ukrainian people, namely pro-Western and pro-Russian groups. On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine's territory. Then the accelerator between the two countries is caused by the intervention of outside parties, namely the west, by expanding NATO, expanding the European Union, and promoting democracy in Ukraine, which is a threat to Russia's national security interests (Hendra et al., 2021). Russia has long warned the United States and its European allies not to touch Ukrainian territory. Western support has made Ukraine falter in favor of the West or Russia. It shows that Ukraine has not yet wholly joined the Western alliance and is not yet entirely under Russian influence. Both countries will try to optimize their military strength in dealing with and achieving victory regarding their intended interests. Thus, the expansion of NATO and the European Union has led to an escalation between the two countries. While the trigger is the demilitarization and de-Nazification of Ukraine by Russia (Umland, 2022).

Then it can be analyzed further through the Human Needs Theory put forward by Maslow and Burton. The Russian invasion of Ukraine was caused by an unfulfilled need for self-fulfillment, namely self-actualization in Russia to control the territory of Ukraine. So, when self-actualization or self-fulfillment is hampered, this will cause an armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine

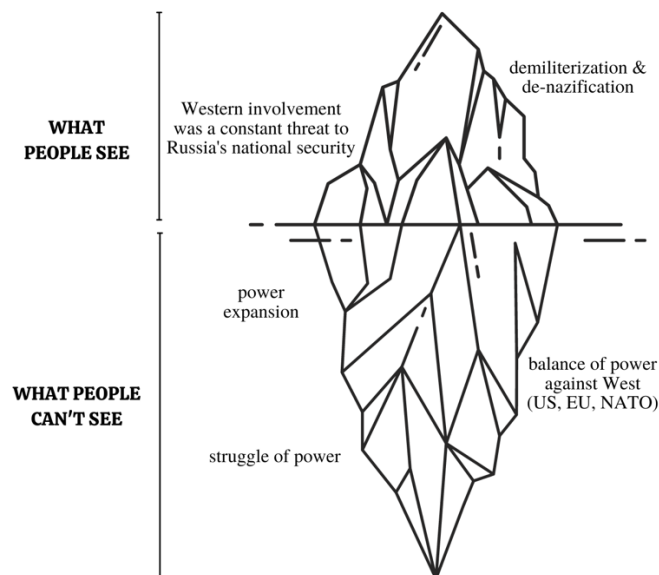


### *Realism's Perspective on Russia's National Interest in Invading Ukraine*

The existence of interactions that happen between actors shows that there are factors behind the momentum and dynamics. For realists, national interest is the pursuit of power. In this case, power means influence, energy, and strength. Then this power is used to develop and maintain control of a country against other countries. Russia uses its military power in Russia as an effort to pursue power. Through this power, Russia can control Ukraine to achieve its national interests. Russia's national interests in invading Ukraine include defense interests and economic interests.

Russia's defense and security interests are linked to territorial sovereignty and Russia's political system against Western threats. Russia stated that its invasion of Ukraine served to stop the genocide carried out by the Kyiv regime and aimed at the elimination of Ukraine's status as a sovereign state outside Russia's control (demilitarization) and regime change of Ukraine (de-Nazification) of Ukraine (Umland, 2022). Because Western powers have controlled Ukraine, it used its military to oppress residents in separatist regions who sided with the Russian government and committed genocide against its people (Bowen, 2019). The Russian government also claims that Ukraine's ambition to join a military alliance with NATO poses an existential threat that has the potential to undermine Russia's stability (Kirby, 2022). In addition, the ambition will also expand NATO's influence to the East. It will bring NATO closer to Russia's borders, ultimately posing an existential threat to Russia's national security.

Meanwhile, economic interests are related to the use of trade routes in Ukraine. Russia is the world's largest oil and gas producer, while Russia is a transit country that ships oil and gas to Europe. Thus, Russia needs Ukraine to minimize costs. So can conclude that Russia invaded Ukraine because Western expansion could infiltrate Russian territory and undermine its national security, as well as take advantage of Ukraine to minimize costs. However, the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine is an iceberg phenomenon in which other interests are not immediately apparent. The picture of the iceberg phenomenon is as follows:



**Figure 1. The Iceberg Phenomenon of Russia's National Interest Invaded Ukraine**  
Figure with permission ©Personal document, 2022

Based on the realism perspective, we can see a security dilemma in Russia. A security dilemma is a situation where a sense of insecurity about the other party's strength is considered a threat (Burchill et al., 2005). Geopolitics and Western hegemony are global

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challenges that Russia must face. United States action in using NATO as an instrument to expand its power in Ukraine has created a security dilemma for Russia, causing Russia to compete to strengthen its power. In the context of the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine, Russia uses war to maintain the balance of power. In this case, Russia's invasion of Ukrainian territory is a balance of power against geopolitics and Western hegemony, especially the United States (Hendra et al., 2021). Aside from being a balance of power, Russia's goal in invading Ukraine is for power expansion, in which Russia tries to expand its territory over Ukraine for its domestic interests, which is carried out in a coercive manner, resulting in conflicts and wars with these other countries.

In the end, the security dilemma also led to a struggle for power from Russia. It is because the excessive power of the West has created a sense of insecurity in Russia. The fear of attack from the Western powers caused the Russians to compete to strengthen their power. Therefore, Russia's national interest in invading Ukraine was a balance of power, power expansion, and struggle of power to change Ukraine's geopolitical orientation from West to East and weaken NATO by getting rid of the pro-Western government in Kyiv, creating a new regime, and signing a peace agreement that included a ban on joining NATO and the European Union. Ukraine has become a vessel and a flashpoint for great power politics in 2022. Countries involved in this conflict use their military power to achieve national interests. It shows that relations between countries are a zero-sum game. Based on the perspective of an anarchic international system, military capability is the ultimate measure of national power. So, it takes a strong military capability from Russia to be able to survive and even become a leader in anarchic inter-systems. In this case, we can see the significant influence that the United States has so that it can initiate armed conflict. Ukraine has become an arena of competition for influence between the two great powers in pursuit of their national interests.

#### ***Indonesia Foreign Policy on the Russian-Ukrainian Armed Conflict***

Indonesia has an independent-active (*bebas-aktif*) foreign policy principle that is neutral and free to act based on national interests (Hutabarat, 2022). Regarding the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine, Indonesia is not part of the conflict itself, but some interests cannot be ignored. Indonesia has no direct interests because it has never physically clashed to expand into Ukrainian territory, as shown by the West. However, this does not rule out that this prolonged armed conflict can negatively impact other countries, including Indonesia. Indonesia's national interests in the armed conflict include economic, defense, and security interests. Indonesia's economic interests are linked to trade relations between Russia, Indonesia, and Ukraine.

Meanwhile, defense and security interests are related to threats to national stability. The armed conflict will significantly disrupt the Indonesian economy, considering that Russia and Ukraine play a vital role in the price of food commodities. Based on the report of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), as the two biggest grain suppliers in the world, Russia and Ukraine are essential sources of food for many developing countries (UNCTAD, 2022). The armed conflict between the two countries has hampered exports of food commodities from Russia and Ukraine. It is a challenge that must face because it causes changes in the price or availability of food and energy that directly impact communities and countries around the world, and Indonesia is no exception. Furthermore, a prolonged armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine could lead to a food crisis, energy shortages, and world inflation, thus threatening the stability of Indonesia's defense and security.

In addition, the parties to the conflict are members of the United Nations (UN), and Indonesia is a member of that organization, so Indonesia has the responsibility to work for peace. The actors involved in the armed conflict are also members of the G20. Indonesia's G20 presidency has become momentum in asserting that the attitude of the G20 Presidency is neutral and does not side with anyone (Dora, 2022). Indonesia's role by not taking sides or participating in this armed conflict reflects Indonesia's foreign policy, independent-active. Using the independent-active principle is the right thing to work for world peace. Indonesia does not want an armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine and chooses to declare its



freedom in making its own policy choices. That does not mean that Indonesia decides to be passive but always active in realizing world peace under the mandate of the Preamble to the 1945 Constitution. This independent-active principle is based on Indonesia's national interests, which it formulated without being dictated by outside forces, either the West or Russia. In the context of the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the meaning of independent means impartiality, while active means that Indonesia participates and joins international organizations such as ASEAN and continues to strive for regional peace.

## Conclusion

The armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine is an international armed conflict (IAC) because it involves more than one country. Analyzed through the SAT factor, the structural root causes of the Russian invasion were caused by Ukraine's very complex internal affairs. Then, what became an accelerator between the two countries was due to the intervention of outsiders, which was a threat to Russia's national security interests. Meanwhile, the trigger is demilitarization and de-Nazification by Russia.

Russia's national interests in invading Ukraine include defense and economic interests because Western expansion could infiltrate Russian territory, undermine its national security, and take advantage of Ukraine to minimize costs. However, there is an iceberg phenomenon in Russia's national interest that is not visible. Western geopolitics and hegemony are global challenges that must be faced, and Russia is no exception. Russia is not standing still when the West is determined to integrate Ukraine into the West. The armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine shows that relations between countries are a zero-sum game. The countries involved use their military power to achieve national interests.

Even though this conflict is a threat to the stability of national security, Indonesia is responding to this conflict wisely by remaining guided by an independent-active foreign policy but still maintaining bilateral and multilateral cooperation and creating peace in the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine. With this, Indonesia can build strategic partnerships with Russia and Ukraine.

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