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The Kremlin's Visit to the Red Dragon's Lair:

## **A Stimulus-Response Look into Russia's May Visit to China**

**Raihan Alfi**

# The Kremlin's Visit to the Red Dragon's Lair: A Stimulus-Response Look into Russia's May Visit to China

## Introduction

On April 29, 2024, Jens Stoltenberg, the Secretary General of NATO, visited Kyiv to discuss the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine and the future of NATO's support for this blue and yellow flag country (NATO, 2024). Around two weeks later, Vladimir Putin visited Beijing from Thursday, May 16, 2024, until Friday, May 17, 2024. According to the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Indonesia (2024), the meeting happened because Xi and Putin had not held a conversation for more than six months. The last one-on-one meeting between the two leaders was in October 2023, when China hosted the third Belt Road Initiative (BRI) summit in Beijing (Lowe & Gecsoyler, 2023). The absence of meetings is significant given the many times both leaders have met, around 63 times, not to mention the other tracks involving high officials held every two weeks (Campbell, 2024). Furthermore, a similar precedent can be considered upon taking a step back. In April 2023, Jens Stoltenberg set foot in Ukraine for the first time after the war outbreak. His visit can be seen as one that also encompasses NATO's support for Ukraine as he said in his visit, "NATO stands with you today, tomorrow, and for as long as it takes," (NATO, 2023). In the days surrounding that event, there were some developments between Russia and China. Said developments came in the form of a visit by China's defence minister to Russia and the signing of some bilateral agreements (Al Jazeera, 2023; Tamkin, 2023). With that in mind, it can be noted how Russia's May visit to China, combined with how it broke the absence of a meeting prior to that, is related to Jens Stoltenberg's visit to Ukraine. This distinct feature of the meeting begs the question of why Russia decided to break the ongoing silence by having its leader meet with its counterpart in China.

The matters that set this meeting between Xi and Putin apart from their other sessions were the topics they addressed and the timing of the meeting. In consonance with China's official side, they stated there was no conversation about the Russia-Ukraine war in this private meeting (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Indonesia, 2024). Some media outlets, like CNN and the New York Times, pointed out how the visit allowed the Kremlin to procure more resources for its war effort in Ukraine. For example, an article in the New York Times shows how Russia's visit was driven by China's tacit support for Russia's war and its provision of many goods, from jet fighter parts to satellite intelligence, that could be further expanded with said visit (Pierson & Sonne, 2024). The centrality of the Russia-Ukraine war is also present in an article on CNN that touches on Russia's interest in gaining more direct support from China (McCarthy, 2024). Contrary to what had been informed by the media, this meeting aimed to strengthen the bilateral cooperation between the two countries, serving as a solid diplomatic gesture after a week of Putin's fifth presidential term (Edwards et al., 2024). An additional source suggested that the primary talk was about energy issues (Faulconbridge, 2024). Others argued that Russia's initial agenda was to ask for Beijing's help to support Russia in terms of economics and politics after the isolation and sanctions of the "West" by the Kremlin (Bahree, 2024; Foucart, 2024; McCarthy, 2024). While many analysts view the visit as a one-way action, there is an alternative interpretation that has not been widely discussed.

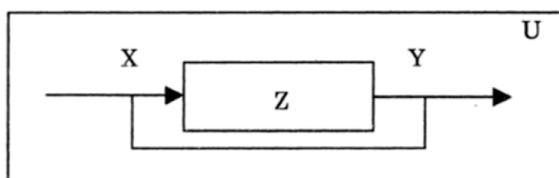
This paper suggests that Putin's visit to Beijing was not simply the result of his personal agenda but rather a response to prior developments. Furthermore, this paper will try to explain Putin's visit using the stimulus-response theory. A driving reason behind the choice to settle with this theory is the consideration of the interconnectedness that binds states in the international system. The interconnectedness in the international system, in part, can be understood through the opted theory, given how states could develop their interest and policies as a result of stimulus from the international system. Such interconnectedness also allows events that may not directly involve a state to have its share of repercussions for it. That particular notion can be seen in, as this paper will elaborate on later in the section, how the meeting between NATO and Ukraine served as a stimulus for Russia that eventually led to its response in the form of engagement with China.

Such an understanding would also make it apparent that Russia's move was not one born in isolation.

### The Instrument at Hand: Stimulus-Response Theory

The stimulus-response theory was rooted in the field of psychology, the study of behaviorist psychology. It was proposed by John B. Watson in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, who divided human behavior into two categories: internal and external stimuli from the environment and responses (Liu et al., 2024). The internal stimulus response refers to events or changes that someone may be subjected to. On the other hand, the external stimulus-response refers to the response that emerges as a reaction to a stimulus. Based on this theory, the human mind was seen as a “black box,” where an objective is linked between stimulus and response. The theory posits that response is not made out of an interest in one-way communication but rather as a response to a stimulus they received.

In the field of international relations, the stimulus-response model was developed by Mark Victor Weisenbloom in 1977. Similar to what Watson's said, a stimulus-response model in international relations could be understood as the behavior of Country A towards Country B being a result of the behavior of Country B towards Country A. Weisenbloom believes that there is no such thing as a one-way act and this occurred in states-to-states interaction. This stimulus-response model would lead to two bargaining situations: deterrence and conflict escalation. Since Weisenbloom's theory was primarily developed to analyze World War II, this paper opts to use a more recent theory proposed by Indian scholar Bandyopadhyaya (2004) for analysis.



U : international system  
Z : a state system  
X : a set of inputs/stimuli for Z = outputs/responses of U  
Y : a set of Z's outputs /responses = inputs/stimuli for U  
YX : feedback loop linking Y and X

**Figure 1.** Stimulus-Response Interaction (Bandyopadhyaya, 2004)



Bandyopadhyaya (2004) argued how the stimulus-response interaction mechanism works at the global level. The international system's output serves as input from a state's system, which will then give a positive or negative stimulus. Similarly, the output from a state, which many also name as a foreign policy, is an input and stimulus for the international system it resides in, which could either be positive or negative. Many states usually produce the stimulus of the international system to respond to a specific country's foreign policy or act. A state always gets constant input from its external environment, which is the international system. This input could be seen as a chain of acts in the same or prior time that affect the system and structure of a country, including its own foreign policy. Some examples that could be seen as inputs include imports of goods and services, military threats or support, diplomatic threats or support, economic aid or sanctions, purchasing weapons from foreign sources, and foreign ideological propaganda. In addition, external disturbances also influence the policy-making process. These disturbances will later become additional inputs. Some of the most common examples of disturbances include sporadic terrorist attacks, non-repeated attacks by foreign parties, either with or without weapons, covert operations by foreign intelligence, bribes from foreign TNCs, kickbacks received from arms dealers abroad, and sudden unseen developments in other countries (Bandyopadhyaya, 2004: 18).

To put it into perspective, the U can be seen as the international system or world in which the Z(s) or the states reside. Their interactions emerge as a response to stimulus from other states within the international system. From the perspective of a state (Z), the inputs (X) would lead them to come up with their own response (Y). Meanwhile, some examples of outputs (Y) or the moves taken by states as a response to the inputs include Z's participation in a military alliance led by a country, Z's agreement to the establishment of a military base by A in its territory, an open-door policy for TNCs, military threats against B country that is also A's enemy, economic diplomacy for economic aid from other countries, and Z's vote in support of A in the UN. As a matter of fact, the implementation of stimulus-response theory may consist in some areas of elements, such as economy, military, politics, culture, and ideology. The Y would then be seen as another input or stimulus (X) in the international system for other states as they would undergo the same stages as other states that came up with their own response (Y). Such a

feat is possible given the interconnected nature of the international system, which also serves as the feedback loop (YX) that allows states' response to serve as a stimulus that would perpetuate the cycle.

To implement what is pictured by Bandyopadhyaya (2004) in the context of the issue at hand, we could refer to the explanation:

**U:** International system

**Z:** Russia

**X:** NATO's visit to Ukraine

**Y:** Russia's visit to China

First, the contemporary international system serves as the arena where the interaction between states occurs, including Russia's. Following that, Russia can be seen to be the concerned actor, given its role in carrying out its eventual move. Then, as an input or stimulus for the actor above, NATO's visit to Ukraine can fit this role. Finally, there is the China visit by Russia as the response from the actor. When considered collectively, it can be seen that the stimulus arising in the international system, the NATO visit to Ukraine, would affect Russia as it delivered its response in the form of its visit to China.

When deciding to give a response to their stimulus, a state also brings its national interest as a prominent variable that should be considered. Bandyopadhyaya did not visualize his ideas about national interest interaction. As far as he is concerned, national interest could be perceived as a state's objective to achieve. Some variables become a state's national interest: (i) internal security, (ii) external security, (iii) national economic development, (iv) national cultural development, (v) national cultural development, and (vi) world order. For deeper analysis, we would integrate the use of the international system interaction mechanism and its correlation with national interest. In this case, this paper is going to analyze only the factors of internal security. It is because of how this paper perceives this point as the most in-danger situation, especially post the Wagner's rebellion in 2023, that would be said to be one of the most threatened moves towards Putin's presidency (Bladel, 2023).

## **Deliberation between the Kremlin and the Red Dragon**

Putin's arrival to meet Xi has similarities with the model of interaction in the international system created by Bandyopadhyaya. Amid the rising tension in the Russia- Ukraine war in April 2024 (AP News, 2024; Khurshudyan, 2024), Jens Stoltenberg decided to meet Zelensky and formally started having a conversation about the ongoing war (NATO, 2024). This paper perceived this gesture and motive between those two actors as a stimulus for the Kremlin. This stimulus shaped how the Kremlin should behave, which responded by giving an ultimatum to use their nuclear weapon towards NATO if they keep getting involved in the Russia-Ukraine war (Hindustan Times, 2024) and the visiting agenda by President Putin, just around two weeks after the NATO-Ukraine meeting. What is also intriguing is the reason Putin made that gesture. This is where using national interest points could help understand his condition.

The internal security of Russia depends on the direct participation of NATO and its members. Even though it is already known that the US and some countries are currently supporting Ukraine in terms of weapon supplies, it is still going "informally," meaning it is not going through the formal NATO mechanism. The arrival of Jens Stoltenberg and its frequency of visits could indicate how much help they will give and how much they are involved in this war. That is not what the Kremlin wishes for. To overcome the intimidation and concern of NATO-Ukraine power consolidation, this paper believes Putin also wanted to show how he is still holding on to the war by visiting his current ally. It is also necessary to note that the alliance between Russia and China is not the same thing as what happened to NATO and its members. However, the relationship between Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea could also be seen as a group of alliances because of their destiny to fight the status quo and US dominance (Chivvis & Keating, 2024). Russia's concern is understandable. If we try to analyze the statistics of the power of arms these actors own, the US is still numbered at the top of the list, followed by members of NATO (GFP, 2024). Those powers are worth mentioning because one member of NATO's enemy is also the enemy of the whole of NATO. If that case also implied the case of Russia-Ukraine, those lists are enough to make Russia unable to operate as a country in the future.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Putin's visit to Beijing in May 2024 follows a pattern similar to the stimulus-response model proposed by Bandyopadhyaya. What is meant by that is that Russia's visit to China was not one born in isolation but rather one made in response to a development or stimulus in the international system, the NATO visit to Ukraine. The stimulus response could not be understood on its own. Another relevant concept, national interest, also needs to be considered to understand the state's decisions and gestures towards others. As apparent in the case of Russia, it can be pointed out how NATO's visit appeared to be one that ailed its interest in the scheme of the conflict. In the case of Russia-China interaction, this paper believes this is a form of reaction from Putin to Jens Stoltenberg's visit to Ukraine and as a catalyst to achieve Russia's national interest, particularly in the field of national security.

Such an understanding can provide a look at the relations between NATO, Ukraine, Russia, and even China that would play out amidst the ongoing war, especially in weighing the options for what path or move to make. What is meant by that is how NATO, Ukraine, and Russia need to consider how their action would serve as a stimulus to the other. Through such an understanding, they could better prepare themselves for what response the other would make once the stimulus is delivered. In doing so, a more prudent approach by the belligerents and outside parties can be achieved, which in turn could provide the leeway for more concrete progress toward the war's resolution.

The Kremlin's response following the stimulus arising from NATO also demonstrates the interconnectedness that imbues the contemporary international system. It highlights how the interests and security of a state are not formed in isolation. The same goes for its moves or policies, as they are made partly upon considering stimulus arising from the system it inhabits. The entanglement Russia has in the ongoing war against Ukraine can also be seen to push Russia to be responsive to stimulus pertaining to said war. This understanding could also be tested in understanding how other conflicts or interactions exist between state and non-state actors in other parts of the world. It is all the more prominent given the interconnectedness that imbues the international system as well as the actors that reside in it. Hence, future endeavors on the topic or beyond can be done to explore



and provide more understanding of how Russia has responded to either NATO or other parties' support of its belligerence.

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**Raihan Alfi**

*Sarjana Hubungan Internasional, Universitas Padjadjaran (S-1)*

*Universitas Padjadjaran*

*[raihan19017@mail.unpad.ac.id](mailto:raihan19017@mail.unpad.ac.id) / [raihanalfi26@gmail.com](mailto:raihanalfi26@gmail.com)*

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