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# What if?

## Counterfactual Trump and the western response to the war in Ukraine

JULIET KAARBO, KAI OPPERMANN AND RYAN K. BEASLEY\*

The united response by NATO allies to the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, rallying unprecedented sanctions against Russia and extensive military assistance to Ukraine, was remarkable and unexpected.<sup>1</sup> It stands in stark contrast to the comparatively weak, uncoordinated and irresolute international reactions to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.<sup>2</sup> The West's reaction not only came as a surprise to Russian leaders and most analysts at the time, but was also hugely significant in preventing a swift Russian victory.<sup>3</sup>

Some observers have speculated that western unity would have been less likely had Donald Trump, not Joe Biden, been president of the United States at the time of the invasion.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to Biden, President Trump was inexperienced in foreign affairs, had superficial understandings of complex international situations, and often based his foreign policy decisions around affinity for authoritarian leaders.<sup>5</sup> This resulted in many decisions that were capricious, improvised and

\* The authors thank the University of Edinburgh Foreign Policy Research Group, Oliver Turner and the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments, and the Leaders, Decision-Making and Grand Strategy conference at the University of St Andrews for the origins of this article.

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Kempe, 'The western response to Putin's war has been remarkable. But it's not enough', *Atlantic Council*, 13 March 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/inflection-points/the-western-response-to-putins-war-has-been-remarkable-but-its-not-enough/>; Uwe Wunderlich, 'Russia's invasion of Ukraine: a turning point for European integration?', *LSE Blog*, 5 April 2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2022/04/05/russias-invasion-of-ukraine-a-turning-point-for-european-integration/>; Victor Jack, 'Sergey Lavrov admits Russia was surprised by scale of western sanctions', *Politico*, 23 March 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/lavrov-admits-no-one-could-have-predicted-scale-of-western-sanctions/>; Mark Landler, Katrin Bennhold and Matina Stevis-Gridneff, 'How the West marshaled a stunning show of unity against Russia', *New York Times*, 5 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/05/world/europe/russia-ukraine-invasion-sanctions.html>; Gideon Rachman, 'Putin, Ukraine and the revival of the West', *Financial Times*, 15 April 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/7d9f69b9-2f04-451a-a0d5-e1242a2bc999>.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Sweeney, 'Western policy failures have facilitated Russia's terror campaign', *UK in a changing Europe* website, 9 March 2022, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/western-policy-failures-have-facilitated-russias-terror-campaign/>.

<sup>3</sup> Denys Davydenko, Margaryta Khvostova and Olga Lyman, 'Why Ukraine needs greater military support from the West', European Council on Foreign Relations, 15 March 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/why-ukraine-needs-greater-military-support-from-the-west/>.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Chait, 'If Trump was still president, Ukraine would be so screwed right now', *National Interest*, 14 April 2022, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/04/if-trump-was-still-president-ukraine-would-be-so-screwed.html>; Alan Z. Rozenshtein, 'What if Trump were still the president?', *Lawfare*, 8 March 2022, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/what-if-trump-were-still-president>.

<sup>5</sup> Domenico Montanaro, '6 strongmen Trump has praised—and the conflicts it presents', 2 May 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/05/02/526520042/6-strongmen-trumps-praised-and-the-conflicts-it-presents>.

bore the mark of his own personality.<sup>6</sup> Biden and Trump also had very different personal traits and beliefs relevant to the Ukrainian crisis. While Biden expressed strong support for NATO, Trump approached it as a renegotiable business deal.<sup>7</sup> Trump also directly pressured Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to find dirt on his political opponent's family, instrumentalizing Ukrainian relations for personal gain.<sup>8</sup> Had Trump been re-elected, it thus seems implausible that a united and coordinated western response to Russia's invasion would have occurred.

While intuitively appealing, and perhaps unsurprising, such arguments remain speculative. They do not effectively demonstrate that Trump and his personal characteristics would have made a difference to US policy and the western response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Indeed, International Relations (IR) scholars have long maintained that showing the importance of leaders in shaping world events is fraught with empirical challenges and often rests upon unprovable assumptions and intuitions. We argue that counterfactual analysis can address these concerns. We demonstrate the value of this method for leadership explanations, using counterfactuals to make a convincing case for the importance of Trump *not* having been re-elected. By grounding our counterfactual analysis in a significant body of research on how leader personality influences foreign policy we can specify what exactly about the differences between Biden and Trump likely resulted in the united western response. We begin by explaining counterfactual analysis as a method before discussing Biden's role in the western response—the *factual*—and how this was consistent with key aspects of Biden's personality. We then contrast Biden's personality with Trump's, showing how these differences would likely have altered Trump's response as well as the western response—the *counterfactual*. We conclude by reflecting on counterfactual methods and their value for research on leader personality and the importance of leaders in international affairs.

## Counterfactuals as method

Counterfactuals are 'subjunctive conditionals in which the antecedent is known or supposed for purposes of argument to be false'.<sup>9</sup> At least implicitly, such thought experiments are unavoidable in any causal statements linking causes to effects.<sup>10</sup> Causal arguments necessarily involve the claim that outcomes would have been

<sup>6</sup> Stephen M. Walt, 'Trump's final foreign-policy report card', *Foreign Policy*, 5 Jan. 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/05/trumps-final-foreign-policy-report-card/>.

<sup>7</sup> Leonard August Schuette, 'Why NATO survived Trump: the neglected role of Secretary-General Stoltenberg', *International Affairs* 97: 6, 2021, pp. 1863–81.

<sup>8</sup> "I would like you to do us a favor": the 30 minute phone call that changed Trump's presidency', CNBC, 12 Oct. 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/10/12/i-would-like-you-to-do-us-a-favor-the-30-minute-phone-call-that-changed-trumps-presidency.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Philip E. Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, 'Counterfactual thought experiments in world politics: logical, methodological, and psychological perspectives', in Philip E. Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, eds, *Counterfactual thought experiments in world politics: logical, methodological, and psychological perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Richard N. Lebow, *Forbidden fruit: counterfactuals and International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 30–37.

different had the hypothesized causes taken a different shape. This centrality of counterfactual reasoning to causal inference is the starting point for the use of counterfactuals as a social scientific method in case-study analysis.<sup>11</sup> The method involves a) the deliberate manipulation of the antecedent, b) theoretical arguments about the effects of this manipulation, and c) the analysis of the processes through which the antecedent impacts the consequent in the counterfactual scenario.<sup>12</sup> Along these lines, counterfactuals have been used in a diverse range of scholarship in history as well as in IR and foreign policy analysis (FPA).<sup>13</sup>

The counterfactual method holds particular promise for the study of individual leaders in foreign policy,<sup>14</sup> for at least three reasons. First, counterfactuals bring into view the contingency of international outcomes, mitigating against the ‘certainty of hindsight bias’,<sup>15</sup> which reinforces a deterministic reading of the past. The method speaks to the overall agenda of individual-level FPA research in questioning structural accounts and foregrounding the agency of decision-makers. We employ counterfactuals to probe widespread interpretations of the ‘inevitability’ of western unity in standing against Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which leave little scope for individual leaders to make a meaningful difference.<sup>16</sup> Specifically, we show this response to be causally contingent on who was president by focusing on the impact of Biden’s personality and contrasting that with Trump’s likely response.

Second, the method is ideally suited for research designs that explore the causal weight of a single explanatory variable for an observed outcome.<sup>17</sup> Counterfactuals can approximate a controlled experiment in which the variable of interest is manipulated, while other possible influences on the outcome are held constant.<sup>18</sup> Specifically, the method is well placed to address the issue of actor dispensability, that is, whether different leaders would have behaved differently in the same

<sup>11</sup> Gary King and Langche Zeng, ‘When can history be our guide? The pitfalls of counterfactual inference’, *International Studies Quarterly* 51: 1, 2007, pp. 183–210.

<sup>12</sup> Jack S. Levy, ‘Counterfactuals and case studies’, in Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier, Henry E. Brady and David Collier, eds, *Oxford handbook of political methodology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 633.

<sup>13</sup> Niall Ferguson, ‘Virtual history: toward a “chaotic” theory of the past’, in Niall Ferguson, ed., *Virtual history: alternatives and counterfactuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Gary Goertz and Jack S. Levy, eds, *Explaining war and peace: case studies and necessary condition counterfactuals* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); Lebow, *Forbidden fruit*; Kimberly Marten, ‘Reconsidering NATO expansion: a counterfactual analysis of Russia and the West in the 1990s’, *European Journal of International Security* 3: 2, pp. 135–61; Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, ‘Back to the past: counterfactuals and the Cuban Missile Crisis’, in Tetlock and Belkin, eds, *Counterfactual thought experiments in world politics*, pp. 119–48; Frank Harvey, *Explaining the Iraq War: counterfactual theory, logic and evidence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Mischa Hansel and Kai Oppermann, ‘Counterfactual reasoning in foreign policy analysis: the case of German nonparticipation in the Libya intervention of 2011’, *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12: 2, 2016, pp. 109–27.

<sup>14</sup> Fred I. Greenstein, ‘The impact of personality on the end of the Cold War: a counterfactual analysis’, *Political Psychology* 19: 1, 1998, pp. 1–16.

<sup>15</sup> Richard N. Lebow, ‘What’s so different about a counterfactual?’, *World Politics* 52: 4, 2000, pp. 550–85.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Alina Polyakova, Edward Lucas, James Lamond, Bobo Lo and Lauren Speranza, ‘What does Europe look like 3–7 years after Russia’s war in Ukraine?’, Center for European Policy Analysis, 24 May 2022, <https://cepa.org/what-does-europe-look-like-3-7-years-after-russias-war-in-ukraine>.

<sup>17</sup> Gary King, Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba, *Designing social inquiry: scientific inference in qualitative research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 119–21.

<sup>18</sup> Roland Wenzlhuemer, ‘Counterfactual thinking as a scientific method’, *Historical Social Research* 34: 2, 2009, pp. 27–54, pp. 30–33.

decision-making context.<sup>19</sup> This question is central to scholarship on individual leaders in foreign policy, but seldom systematically interrogated.

Third, research on individual leaders lends itself well to the kind of careful counterfactual manipulation of the antecedent that the method requires. Replacing a leader in the counterfactual can be less invasive than manipulating the structural context of decision-making, which often demands more far-reaching rewrites of the historical record with wider repercussions.<sup>20</sup> Counterfactual changes of individual decision-makers can thus come close to the method's quasi-experimental aspirations and enable a clear line of sight on the causal effects of the intervention.

Along these lines, we employ counterfactuals to explore how the personality of the US president shaped the western response in the months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Specifically, we replace Joe Biden with Donald Trump as US president. We examine how this change of the antecedent would have affected the consequent, that is, the unified western approach to the war. This type of 'idiographic counterfactual' explores specific 'what if' scenarios,<sup>21</sup> bringing in case-specific evidence to derive observable implications of the antecedent for the consequent. This strategy is similar to Harvey's discussion of US foreign policy on Iraq in 2003 under a counterfactual Gore presidency,<sup>22</sup> but our analysis focuses specifically on the role of leader personality.

The counterfactual method is controversial,<sup>23</sup> with critics dismissing counterfactual analyses as speculative and unscientific 'flights of fancy'.<sup>24</sup> However, the logics of counterfactual and factual case-study research are not fundamentally different, as both seek observable empirical implications of theoretical arguments linking causes to effects.<sup>25</sup> While inherently unfalsifiable,<sup>26</sup> counterfactuals do involve an explicit set of methodological criteria to enable systematic and disciplined analyses: plausible manipulations, minimal rewrites of history, and clarity of antecedents and consequents.<sup>27</sup>

Our counterfactual is a 'plausible world' counterfactual;<sup>28</sup> this means that our manipulation of the antecedent remains within the bounds of theoretical possibility, since the counterfactual scenario could have emerged through realistic causal pathways.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Donald Trump could conceivably have won re-election

<sup>19</sup> Fred I. Greenstein, *Personality and politics: problems of evidence, inference and conceptualization* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 40–46.

<sup>20</sup> Lebow, 'What's so different about a counterfactual?'

<sup>21</sup> Levy, *Counterfactuals*, p. 631.

<sup>22</sup> Harvey, *Explaining the Iraq War*.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, David H. Fischer, *Historians' fallacies: toward a logic of historical thought* (London: Routledge, 1970).

<sup>24</sup> Lebow, 'What's so different about a counterfactual?', p. 551.

<sup>25</sup> Richard N. Lebow, 'Counterfactuals, history and fiction', *Historical Social Research* 34: 2, 2009, pp. 57–73, pp. 67–8.

<sup>26</sup> Fred I. Greenstein, 'Can personality and politics be studied systematically?', *Political Psychology* 13: 1, 1992, pp. 105–28, at p. 124.

<sup>27</sup> See James Fearon, 'Counterfactuals and hypothesis testing in political science', *World Politics* 43: 2, 1991, pp. 169–95; Tetlock and Belkin, 'Counterfactual thought experiments'; Lebow, 'What's so different about a counterfactual?'; Levy, *Counterfactuals*.

<sup>28</sup> Lebow, *Forbidden fruit*, p. 44.

<sup>29</sup> In contrast, 'miracle world' counterfactuals make no claims to historical plausibility and may be used to prob-

in 2020, given that Biden's majority in the electoral college depended on very close wins in key battleground states, with margins of victory less than 1 per cent in Wisconsin, Arizona and Georgia.<sup>30</sup>

Strong plausible-world counterfactuals, in turn, follow the 'minimum rewrite of history rule'.<sup>31</sup> This requires that counterfactual manipulations should not imply other far-reaching changes to the antecedent that might also have affected the consequent.<sup>32</sup> While not demanding unrealistic 'surgical counterfactuals',<sup>33</sup> good plausible-world counterfactuals should still minimize the repercussions for other variables that can equally be expected to impact the course of events. Our antecedent manipulation changes only one factor—the individual holding the US presidency—with only minimal 'ripple effects' on other relevant domestic and international factors.

US presidents govern within an institutionalized system of checks and balances, yet have considerable power to influence US foreign policy and other international actors. This is especially true when presidents are deeply involved in the policy-making process and in matters of 'high security' such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine.<sup>34</sup> President Biden was indeed central to US foreign policy towards Russia and Ukraine, and while not alone in condemning Russia—there was general consensus in the US government—Biden led US efforts by spending considerable time on the topic and taking key decisions himself.<sup>35</sup> As 'diplomat-in-chief', Biden was 'a central player in marshalling the West's response to Russia's invasion', having left 'his distinct imprint on the crisis'.<sup>36</sup> Trump too would very likely have been directly involved in the US reaction to Russia's invasion given the importance of the crisis, the powers of the presidency, and Trump's personal interest in Russia and Ukraine (as discussed below). While Trump's views on Russia may have differed with the US foreign policy bureaucracy, as was evident during Trump's presidency, his personal reaction to the crisis would have been central in shaping US foreign policy and the western response. Thus, while the party in power would have also changed in our counterfactual, the centrality of the president in the US and NATO response means that our counterfactual meets the method's 'minimal rewrite' requirement.

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lematize dominant interpretations and interrogate unspoken assumptions, see Lebow, *Forbidden fruit*, p. 45.

<sup>30</sup> Ian Simpson, 'How close was Trump to winning the election?', *Electoral Reform Society*, 5 Jan. 2021, <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/how-close-was-trump-to-winning-the-election/>.

<sup>31</sup> Tetlock and Belkin, 'Counterfactual thought experiments', p. 23.

<sup>32</sup> Fearon, 'Counterfactuals and hypothesis testing', pp. 173–5.

<sup>33</sup> Lebow, *Forbidden fruit*, p. 50.

<sup>34</sup> Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, 'Let us now praise great men: bringing the statesman back in', *International Security* 25: 4, 2001, pp.107–46; James Goldgeier and Elizabeth N. Saunders, 'The unconstrained presidency: checks and balances long eroded before Trump', *Foreign Affairs*, Sept./Oct. 2018; Greenstein, 'Can personality and politics be studied systematically?'

<sup>35</sup> Ashley Parker, Tyler Pager and Marianna Sotomayor, 'Biden at war: inside a deliberate yet impulsive Ukraine strategy', *Washington Post*, 7 April 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/04/07/biden-war-ukraine/>; Katie Bo Lillis, 'Biden declassified Russia intel due to alliance "skepticism", spy chief says', 6 June 2022, [https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/russia-ukraine-war-news-06-07-22/h\\_8ebf3ff2546f70f666dd865598d13545](https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/russia-ukraine-war-news-06-07-22/h_8ebf3ff2546f70f666dd865598d13545).

<sup>36</sup> Parker et al., 'Biden at war'.

Another ‘minimal rewrite’ challenge suggests that Russia would not have invaded Ukraine if Trump were president.<sup>37</sup> Others, however, believe a continuation of Trump’s foreign policies would likely have emboldened, not appeased, Russia.<sup>38</sup> Former NATO commander James Stavridis argues that the chaos and divisiveness of Trump’s presidency made it seem to Putin that ‘America was broken’ and incapable of a forceful response.<sup>39</sup> Given Trump’s pro-Putin attitudes (discussed below), Putin would have likely discounted strong pushback from Trump. Moreover, many explanations for Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine are not tied to who sat in the Oval Office.<sup>40</sup> On balance, then, it is reasonable to assert that Trump’s re-election would not have prevented Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Good counterfactuals must also pass the criterion of ‘clarity’ in specifying their antecedents and consequents.<sup>41</sup> Our antecedent—Trump still being president of the US—is indeed clearly defined. The consequent in our analysis, in turn, concerns the western diplomatic response to the Russian invasion just prior to and during the initial months of the war. Would western countries have been as unified in their approach in the counterfactual as in the factual? Would they, for example, have built similar sanctions regimes against Russia or offered such extensive military support for Ukraine?

Finally, the counterfactual method depends on linking the antecedent to the consequent using well-established theoretical arguments.<sup>42</sup> The analysis must tease out observable implications of these theoretical arguments and assess them against empirical evidence, allowing theory-guided counterfactuals to infer how the antecedent would have impacted the consequent in the counterfactual scenario. For this, our counterfactual analysis draws from extensive research demonstrating the significant impact political leaders and their personalities have on their states’ foreign policies. We use this research to profile Biden’s and Trump’s personalities and to establish expectations for how they influence foreign policy and decision-making.

## The factual: Biden and the western response

During the Russian build-up of forces along the Ukrainian border in 2021,<sup>43</sup> at the time of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, and in the critical first 100 days after the invasion, the US government’s responses were consistently characterized by: 1) strong condemnation of Russia coupled with significant

<sup>37</sup> This is itself a counterfactual argument emphasizing the importance of leaders. See Jonathan Lemire, ‘Trump’s shadow lurks over Biden’s support for Ukraine’, *Politico*, 14 March 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/03/14/biden-support-ukraine-russia-trump-00016882>.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Draper, ‘“This was Trump pulling a Putin”’, *New York Times Magazine*, 11 April 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/11/magazine/trump-putin-ukraine-fiona-hill.html?searchResultPosition=3>.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Lemire, ‘Trump’s shadow’.

<sup>40</sup> See e.g. Harald Edinger, ‘Offensive ideas: structural realism, classical realism and Putin’s war on Ukraine’, *International Affairs* 98: 6, 2022, pp. 1873–93.

<sup>41</sup> Levy, *Counterfactuals*, p. 632.

<sup>42</sup> Tetlock and Belkin, ‘Counterfactual thought experiments’, pp. 25–7.

<sup>43</sup> Reuters, ‘Russian force on Ukraine border larger than any time since 2014, US says’, 8 April 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-usa-idUSKBN2BV2Z3>.

support for Ukraine; and 2) efforts to lead a unified multilateral effort to deter and then punish Russia and to assist Ukraine, while making clear that military support did not include direct participation of US or NATO troops.<sup>44</sup>

Condemnation of Russia and support for Ukraine came directly from President Biden, backed by a consensus from his security and foreign-policy advisors and bipartisan support from the US Congress. Biden had personally called Putin in December 2021 to express concerns about the Russian force build-up along the Ukrainian border, threatening strong economic and other responses if Russia attacked Ukraine.<sup>45</sup> When Russia invaded, Biden immediately condemned it as ‘unprovoked and unjustified’, pledging significant economic sanctions and humanitarian, economic and military assistance to Ukraine (but no US troops). Within two months the US committed more than \$3.4 billion in security assistance, building on previous support following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014.<sup>46</sup> While US military support to Ukraine since 2014 was mostly non-lethal, in January of 2022 the US along with NATO allies supplied Ukraine with weaponry as the crisis worsened.<sup>47</sup> Throughout this period, Biden and other US officials reassured Ukrainian President Zelensky of US support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>48</sup>

The US strategy of organizing a multilateral response was in place by the end of 2021 and was key to the unified and swift action from NATO allies.<sup>49</sup> According to Sestanovich, US policy successfully maintained ‘near-total unanimity’ within NATO, sending ‘the same strong message: a Russian invasion would trigger new US and European sanctions’.<sup>50</sup> US efforts to garner support also involved unusual sharing of intelligence.<sup>51</sup> In November 2021, US officials warned allies that ‘there is a short window of time to prevent Russia from taking military action in Ukraine, pushing European countries to work with the United States to develop a package of economic and military measures to deter Moscow’.<sup>52</sup> The US director

<sup>44</sup> Lemire, ‘Trump’s shadow’.

<sup>45</sup> The White House, ‘Readout of President Biden’s video call with Vladimir Putin of Russia’, 7 Dec. 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/12/07/readout-of-president-bidens-video-call-with-president-vladimir-putin-of-russia/>.

<sup>46</sup> Cory Welt, ‘Russia’s invasion of Ukraine: overview of US sanctions and other responses’, Congressional Research Service, 22 April 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11869>. For a full list of US economic sanctions on Russia from February 2022, see Chad P. Bown, ‘Russia’s war on Ukraine: a sanctions timeline’, Peterson Institute for International Economics, <https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economic-issues-watch/russias-war-ukraine-sanctions-timeline>, accessed 1 July 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Margaret Brennan and Eleanor Watson, ‘US and NATO to surge lethal weaponry to Ukraine to help shore up defenses against Russia’, CBS News, 20 Jan. 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/u-s-nato-ukraine-weapons-defense-russia/>.

<sup>48</sup> Ken Bredemeier, ‘Biden assures Ukraine’s Zelenskiy of US support in face of Russian invasion’, *Voice of America*, 13 Feb. 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/biden-speaks-with-ukraine-s-zelenskiy-as-threat-of-russian-invasion-looms/6439904.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Ashley Parker, Shane Harris, Michael Birnbaum and John Hudson, ‘13 days: inside Biden’s last-ditch attempts to stop Putin in Ukraine’, *Washington Post*, 25 Feb. 2022, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/02/25/inside-biden-putin-ukraine/?itid=ap\\_ashleyparker](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/02/25/inside-biden-putin-ukraine/?itid=ap_ashleyparker).

<sup>50</sup> Stephen Sestanovich, ‘The Russia–Ukraine crisis: a scorecard on Biden’s response’, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 23 Dec. 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/russia-ukraine-crisis-scorecard-bidens-response>.

<sup>51</sup> Parker et al., ‘13 days’.

<sup>52</sup> Julian E. Barnes and Eric Schmitt, ‘US warns allies of possible Russian incursion as troops amass near Ukraine’, *New York Times*, 19 Nov. 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/19/us/politics/russia-ukraine-biden-administration.html>.



of national intelligence herself briefed NATO ambassadors about a possible major Russian military invasion, also sharing this intelligence with Ukraine.<sup>53</sup> Unusually, the Biden administration shared intelligence with the international public through public briefings, possibly to shore up US public opinion and congressional support, but also public support in allied countries. Such actions assisted the US in forging consensus among its partners,<sup>54</sup> and was likely instrumental in getting allies on board, as Biden intended.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, sustained intelligence-sharing ‘galvanized support for the need for robust sanctions threats’ by shifting discussions from *whether* US warnings of an invasion were correct to *how best* to deter Russia.<sup>56</sup>

The US multilateral approach continued up to and after the war began. When Russian forces invaded, US Secretary of State

Blinken had been shuttling back and forth to Europe to coordinate with US allies on a variety of doomsday scenarios ... As Putin ordered troops into Donetsk and Luhansk ... Biden ... convened a three-way phone call ... with French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to devise a response.<sup>57</sup>

Biden then led efforts to gather the allies in person, around the already scheduled European Council meeting in March.

Julianne Smith, the US ambassador to NATO, organized a NATO meeting in Belgium’s capital for the same day, and Biden advisers also decided to try to pull the G-7 nations together for a meeting ... ‘Biden said, “I’m coming to NATO on this day,” and we were all like, “Great, we’ll come, too,”’ said one European diplomat, explaining how the United States spearheaded the day of meetings in Brussels on March 24.<sup>58</sup>

According to former ambassador to Ukraine William Taylor, ‘Biden’s focus on alliances has been the backbone of the nation’s response to Putin ... The commitment the Biden administration has made to the United States’ allies stands in stark contrast to the apparent lack of commitment from the previous administration ...’<sup>59</sup>

Biden’s multilateral approach towards support for Ukraine was consistent with his foreign policy both generally and with European partners.<sup>60</sup> Biden’s top advisory team had been working ‘to reassure allies across Europe that he would prioritize cooperation as he rallied the G-7 and NATO countries to stand together against the rising forces of autocracies’.<sup>61</sup> Biden had signalled a ‘return to multilateralism’ during his presidential campaign, along with a ‘focus on renewed “free

<sup>53</sup> Barnes and Schmitt, ‘US warns allies’.

<sup>54</sup> Stephen Long, ‘Sharing top secret intelligence is unusual, but helped the US rally the world against Russian aggression’, *Conversation*, 2 March 2022, <https://theconversation.com/sharing-top-secret-intelligence-with-the-public-is-unusual-but-helped-the-us-rally-the-world-against-russian-aggression-178084>.

<sup>55</sup> Parker et al., ‘13 days’; Lillis, ‘Biden declassified’.

<sup>56</sup> Henry Foy, ‘US intelligence-sharing convinces allies of Russian threat to Ukraine’, *Financial Times*, 5 Dec. 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/b287f2e3-3b8b-4095-b704-c255a943c84c>.

<sup>57</sup> Parker et al., ‘13 days’.

<sup>58</sup> Parker et al., ‘Biden at war’.

<sup>59</sup> Lemire, ‘Trump’s shadow’.

<sup>60</sup> Hal Brands, ‘The emerging Biden doctrine’, *Foreign Affairs*, 29 June 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-06-29/emerging-biden-doctrine>.

<sup>61</sup> Lemire, ‘Trump’s shadow’.

world” alliance in which the United States would work with allies and partners ... and push back against increasingly assertive and powerful autocracies, namely China and Russia’.<sup>62</sup>

## The personalities of Biden and Trump: analysing the factual and anticipating the counterfactual

While other factors (e.g. geopolitical and economic interests) were relevant to the US and western reactions, we argue that Biden’s personality is clearly central among them. Research on leaders’ personalities’ effects on foreign policy is extensive, has been validated and provides the theoretical linchpin for our counterfactual analysis.<sup>63</sup> Personalities are *patterned relationships* among cognition, affect, motivations and orientations towards interpersonal relationships.<sup>64</sup> This scholarship suggests a focus on three aspects of a leader’s characteristics—background and experience, beliefs, and traits—as these characteristics have been most systematically shown to influence leaders’ behaviours and choices in foreign policy-making.

- The leaders’ *background and experiences* shape their information processing, management styles and foreign policies.<sup>65</sup> Experience affects how leaders use and interact with their advisers and can, when combined with other personality traits, influence important decision-making dynamics.<sup>66</sup>
- *Beliefs* are cognitions and schemas that leaders hold to be true about the world. They affect leaders’ perceptions, frames, inferences, attributions, preferences and behaviours.<sup>67</sup> Operational code analysis examines leaders’ general beliefs about the nature of the international system and how they should interact with others.<sup>68</sup> Leaders’ beliefs can also relate to more specific actors and situations, most often shaped by their own personal experiences.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Ulrich Speck, ‘The consequences of a Trump or Biden win for European security’, German Marshall Fund of the United States, 18 Oct. 2020, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/consequences-trump-or-biden-win-european-security>.

<sup>63</sup> For reviews, see: Stephen B. Dyson and Thomas Briggs, ‘Leaders and foreign policy: surveying the evidence’, in William R. Thompson, ed., *The Oxford encyclopedia of empirical International Relations theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Margaret Hermann and Juliet Kaarbo, ‘Psychological approaches’, in Rudy B. Andeweg, Robert Elgie, Ludger Helms, Juliet Kaarbo and Ferdinand Müller-Rommel, eds, *The Oxford handbook of political executives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 66–90.

<sup>64</sup> Jerrold M. Post, ed., *The psychological assessment of political leaders* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

<sup>65</sup> Research on leaders’ experiences include Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, D. Alex Hughes and David G. Victor, ‘The cognitive revolution and the political psychology of elite decision making’, *Perspectives on Politics* 11: 2, 2013, pp. 368–86; Jessica L. Weeks, ‘Strongmen and straw men: authoritarian regimes and the initiation of international conflict’, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 106, 2012, pp. 326–47; David G. Winter, ‘Philosophering or polarizing politician? A personality profile of Barack Obama’, *Political Psychology* 32: 6, 2011, pp. 1059–81.

<sup>66</sup> Elizabeth Saunders, ‘No substitute for experience: presidents, advisers, and information in group decision making’, *International Organization* 71: 51, 2017, pp. 219–47; Thomas Preston, *The president and his inner circle: leadership style and the advisory process in foreign affairs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

<sup>67</sup> See, e.g., Charles A. Duelfer and Stephen B. Dyson, ‘Chronic misperception and international conflict: the US–Iraq experience’, *International Security* 36: 1, 2011, pp. 73–100; Aaron Rapport, ‘Cognitive approaches to foreign policy analysis’, in Cameron G. Thies, ed., *The Oxford encyclopedia of foreign policy analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>68</sup> Research on operational code analysis is extensive; for a recent contribution and overview, see Mark Schafer and Stephen G. Walker, eds, *Operational code analysis and foreign policy roles: crossing Simon’s bridge* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>69</sup> See e.g. Bruce W. Jentleson, *The peacemakers: leadership lessons from twentieth-century statesmanship* (New York: W.

- *Traits* are general characteristics of leaders, such as their level of confidence, extraversion, openness to information, trustfulness, interpersonal style and what motivates them. They affect many behaviours important in foreign policy, including risk-taking and aggression.<sup>70</sup> Leader trait analysis is one framework that has been extensively applied to world leaders, focusing on specific traits and their influence on foreign policy.<sup>71</sup>

Biden's background makes him one of the most *experienced* foreign policy presidents in US history, chairing the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for several years before becoming an active vice-president in the Obama administration. This experience shaped his policy preferences, particularly his positive attitude towards multilateralism, internationalism and Atlanticism, clearly displayed in his reaction to Russia.<sup>72</sup> It also shaped the way Biden used his top advisers, consistent with existing research. Experienced leaders tend to monitor advisers, are reluctant to delegate, but are open to diverse information from their team, act cooperatively, and rely heavily on their own previous experiences.<sup>73</sup> Biden's extensive experience specifically with Ukraine, in turn, convinced him that the conflict required his sustained attention.<sup>74</sup> As vice-president he repeatedly visited Ukraine, working to develop close relations with former president Petro Poroshenko.<sup>75</sup> For Biden, according to Alina Polyakova, president of the Center for European Policy Analysis, the Ukraine conflict was personal: 'I think he's deeply invested personally in the future of the country, and I think he personally sees this as his major test for his presidency.'<sup>76</sup>

Biden's experiences also shaped his general *beliefs*, with some research showing he views rewards, rather than punishments, as the most effective tools for dealing with others.<sup>77</sup> He also has a 'broad aversion to military adventurism',<sup>78</sup> as seen, for example, in his preference to end the US military presence in Afghanistan during the Obama administration and in his policy to do so after becoming president. Biden's beliefs on military involvement underpinned his insistence, at the very

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W. Norton & Company, 2018).

<sup>70</sup> See e.g. David G. Winter, *Roots of war: wanting power, seeing threat, justifying force* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Imran Demir, *Overconfidence and risk taking in foreign policy decision making* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

<sup>71</sup> Research on leader trait analysis is extensive. For an overview, see Margaret G. Hermann, 'Assessing leadership style: trait analysis', in Post, ed., *The psychological assessment of political leaders*, pp. 178–212; for recent examples, see Ç. Esra Çuhadar, Juliet Kaarbo, Barış Kesgin and Binnur Özkeçeci-Taner, 'Turkish leaders and their foreign policy decision-making style: a comparative and multi-method perspective', *Turkish Studies* 22: 1, 2021, pp. 1–27; Consuelo Thiers and Leslie E. Wehner, 'The personality traits of populist leaders and their foreign policies: Hugo Chávez and Donald Trump', *International Studies Quarterly* 66: 1, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqab083>.

<sup>72</sup> Lemire, 'Trump's shadow'; Speck, 'The consequences'.

<sup>73</sup> Saunders, 'No substitute'; Hafner-Burton et al., 'The cognitive'; Preston, *The president*.

<sup>74</sup> Steven Pifer, 'The Biden presidency and Ukraine', *Stanford International Policy Review* 5: 2, 2019–2020, p. 8.

<sup>75</sup> Parker et al., 'Biden at war'.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Parker et al., 'Biden at war'.

<sup>77</sup> Ryan Beasley, Juliet Kaarbo and Consuelo Thiers, 'Leader personalities: Trump vs. Biden', *Duck of Minerva*, 27 Oct. 2020, <https://www.duckofminerva.com/2020/10/leader-personalities-trump-vs-biden.html>; Heidarali Masoudi, 'Joe Biden's operational codes in foreign policy', *Political and International Approaches* 12: 2, 2021, pp. 95–122.

<sup>78</sup> Parker et al., 'Biden at war'.

start of the Russian invasion, that the US would not become directly involved.<sup>79</sup> Biden's cooperative orientation does not, however, extend to all actors. In 2021, Biden agreed when a journalist asked him if he thought Putin was a 'killer'; this was seen as part of Biden's continued criticism of the Russian leader.<sup>80</sup> 'Biden has no sympathy towards Vladimir Putin, has no illusion of any change in Russian behaviour and clearly understands the challenges posed by the Russian activities in the broader region.'<sup>81</sup> Biden's views of Russia and Putin were consistent with his strong condemnation of the invasion.

In terms of personality *traits*, Biden is ambitious, affable (although occasionally quick to anger),<sup>82</sup> empathetic, prone to compromise, garrulous, self-confident and competitive.<sup>83</sup> This picture of Biden is supported by social-science profiles where Biden emerges as a conciliatory extrovert, with both outgoing and accommodating patterns of traits. Biden, with this profile, is likely to be sociable and confident, attention-seeking, emotionally expressive, overly cooperative, conciliatory, and likely to avoid interpersonal conflict.<sup>84</sup> Biden's courting of allies, his proclivity for cooperation, his emotional yet confident condemnation of Russia and his personal involvement in decision-making in the Ukrainian crisis are all consistent with these traits. A leadership trait analysis of candidate Biden suggested his management style would involve a policy-focused advisory system, rather than one predicated on loyalty.<sup>85</sup> This is consistent with the picture of Biden's management style on Ukraine.<sup>86</sup> Another trait of Biden is his occasionally unreflective rhetoric, as when he seemed to suggest regime change in Russia was a US foreign policy goal in March 2022.<sup>87</sup> Overall, Biden's foreign policy responses—his strong condemnation of Russia and strong support of Ukraine, his cautiousness on troop commitment, and his work building a multilateral front—are consistent with his personality profile.

Donald Trump is another story. He was one of the *least experienced* US presidents, having previously held no political or foreign policy-related office. This political inexperience, along with his extensive business career (including

<sup>79</sup> Barbara Plett Usher, 'Ukraine conflict: why Biden won't send troops to Ukraine', BBC News, 25 Feb. 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-60499385>.

<sup>80</sup> Anton Troianovski, 'Russia erupts in fury over Biden's calling Putin a killer', *New York Times*, 18 March 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/18/world/europe/russia-biden-putin-killer.html>.

<sup>81</sup> Nadiia Bureiko, 'Whither US-Ukraine relations during a Biden presidency?', *New Eastern Europe*, 3 Feb. 2021, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2021/02/03/whither-us-ukraine-relations-during-a-biden-presidency/>.

<sup>82</sup> Matt Viser, 'Irish humor, Irish temper: how Biden's identity shapes his political image', *Washington Post*, 17 March 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-irish-st-patricks/2021/03/17/6b59390c-8740-11eb-8a8b-5cf82c3dffe4\\_story.html?utm\\_source=twitter&utm\\_campaign=wp\\_main&utm\\_medium=social](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-irish-st-patricks/2021/03/17/6b59390c-8740-11eb-8a8b-5cf82c3dffe4_story.html?utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=wp_main&utm_medium=social).

<sup>83</sup> Mark Fisher, 'The two sides of Joe Biden', *Washington Post*, 13 Jan. 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-two-sides-of-joe-biden/2021/01/12/ece0a9d8-4f8c-11eb-bda4-615aefcd0555\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-two-sides-of-joe-biden/2021/01/12/ece0a9d8-4f8c-11eb-bda4-615aefcd0555_story.html); Tim Samuels, 'Joe Biden: by the people that know him', *Evening Standard*, 27 Jan. 2021, <https://www.standard.co.uk/insider/joe-biden-personality-history-family-life-b901297.html>.

<sup>84</sup> Anne Marie Griebie and Aubrey Immelman, 'The political personality of 2020 Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden', working paper—release 1.0, Unit for the Study of Personality in Politics, Aug. 2020, [https://digitalcommons.csbju.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1123&context=psychology\\_pubs](https://digitalcommons.csbju.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1123&context=psychology_pubs).

<sup>85</sup> Beasley et al., 'Leader personalities'.

<sup>86</sup> Parker et al., '13 days'; Parker et al., 'Biden at war'.

<sup>87</sup> Tom Nichols, 'Biden's comments about Putin were an unforced error', *The Atlantic*, 27 March 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/03/biden-putin-regime-change-russia/629397/>.

business dealings in Russia)<sup>88</sup> affected his understanding of international relations and, according to Nye, was combined with 'limited efforts to fill in the gaps in his knowledge'.<sup>89</sup> Charles Kupperman, Trump's deputy national security advisor, remarked: 'If one were to ask him to define "balance of power," he wouldn't know what that concept was. He'd have no idea about the history of Ukraine ... that Stalin starved that country. Those are the contextual points one has to take into account in the making of foreign policy. But he wasn't capable of it, because he had no understanding of history ...'<sup>90</sup> Although Trump surrounded himself with experienced foreign policy advisers, research shows 'a team of seasoned veterans cannot fully compensate for an inexperienced leader' because the leader ineffectively monitors their advisers, decreasing incentives for them to provide critical information and marginalizing diverse opinions.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, Trump often ignored his foreign policy advisers, even surprising them with unexpected statements about Europe and Russia.<sup>92</sup> In 2018, for example, Trump went against a clear warning from advisers not to congratulate Putin on his election victory.<sup>93</sup>

In terms of Trump's *beliefs*, operational code analyses point to a very conflictual world-view compared to other world leaders, and to strong beliefs in punishments as effective policy tools.<sup>94</sup> While his beliefs are sometimes inconsistent, he has 'long expressed protectionist views on trade and a nationalist feeling that allies took unfair advantage of the United States'.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, his 'America First' agenda builds on his opposition to the liberal international order.<sup>96</sup> Trump sees international relations as transactional and zero-sum, which 'explains his views on trade, alliances, and multilateral agreements' and 'suggests that ethical and strategic imperatives matter far less than whether Americans—or, more often, him [*sic*] personally—can gain at the expense of others'.<sup>97</sup> Trump's belief system has also been described as 'Jacksonian', with a preference for strong policies, regardless of constitutional constraints and norms, and a tendency to believe in conspiracies: '[I]ndeed, Trump's attempt to pressure Ukraine into digging political dirt on [Joe Biden's son] Hunter Biden was driven in part by a stream of debunked conspiracy theories circulating on the fringes of the right-wing online media'.<sup>98</sup> Trump's belief in the importance of strength can also be seen in his support and

<sup>88</sup> Draper, "This was Trump pulling a Putin".

<sup>89</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr, *Do morals matter? Presidents and foreign policy from FDR to Trump* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 177.

<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Draper, "This was Trump pulling a Putin".

<sup>91</sup> Saunders, 'No substitute', p. 219.

<sup>92</sup> Draper, "This was Trump pulling a Putin"; Susan B. Glasser, 'How Trump made war on Angela Merkel and Europe', *New Yorker*, 17 Dec. 2018; Ivo H. Daalder and I. M. Destler, 'Why national security advisor is the hardest post for Trump to fill', *Foreign Affairs*, 11 Sept. 2019.

<sup>93</sup> Carol D. Leonnig, David Nakamura and Josh Dawsey, 'Trump's national security advisers warned him not to congratulate Putin. He did it anyway', *Washington Post*, 20 March 2018.

<sup>94</sup> Stephen G. Walker, Mark Schafer and Gary E. Smith, 'The operational codes of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton', in Alex Mintz and Lesley Terris, eds, *The Oxford handbook of behavioral political science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Thiers and Wehner, 'The personality traits'.

<sup>95</sup> Nye, *Do morals matter?*, p.170.

<sup>96</sup> Nye, *Do morals matter?*, p.170.

<sup>97</sup> Cato Institute, 'What Ukraine tells us about Trump', 3 Oct. 2019, <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/1317339/what-ukraine-tells-us-about-trump/1920629/>.

<sup>98</sup> Cato Institute, 'What Ukraine tells us about Trump'.

affinity for authoritarian strongmen, frequently expressing admiration for other authoritarian leaders, including Putin.<sup>99</sup>

Trump's specific beliefs about Ukraine portrayed the country as corrupt and as a political opportunity for himself. 'A widely respected diplomat testified to Congress that Trump believed "Ukraine was a corrupt country, full of terrible people"'.<sup>100</sup> According to Bolton, Trump's former national security advisor, Trump viewed Ukraine 'entirely through the prism of Hillary Clinton's server and Hunter Biden's income—what role Ukraine had in Hillary's efforts to steal the 2016 election and what role Ukraine had in Biden's efforts to steal the 2020 election'.<sup>101</sup> As reported by Kupperman, 'the very subject of Ukraine threw the president into a rage: "He just let loose—"They're [expletive] corrupt. They [expletive] tried to screw me."' <sup>102</sup> For Kupperman, Trump was unable to recognize the geopolitical importance of Ukraine and he did not see how America's global alliances and engagement furthered US interests.<sup>103</sup> 'By the spring of 2019, Trump seemed to be persuaded ... that Ukraine was demonstrably anti-Trump.'<sup>104</sup>

There is broad consensus on Trump's personality *traits* among observers and analysts alike. Trump has 'a highly unconventional political style' with his use of 'statements that are more outrageous than true, and by breaking norms of conventional behavior'.<sup>105</sup> Trump's biographer reviewed recorded interviews with Trump and observed

a man who is fixated on his own celebrity, anxious about losing his status and contemptuous of those who fall from grace. They capture the visceral pleasure he derives from fighting, his wilful lack of interest in history, his reluctance to reflect on his life and his belief that most people do not deserve his respect.<sup>106</sup>

Drezner summarizes the image of Trump as a 'toddler': impatient, short attention span, emotional, moody, petulant, quick-tempered, unfiltered, in need of praise and with a willingness to flout norms.<sup>107</sup> According to Nye, Trump's 'low level of emotional intelligence meant that Trump's personal needs often affected his motives and interfered with his policy objectives'.<sup>108</sup> A statement signed by

<sup>99</sup> Nye, *Do morals matter?*, pp. 170, 177; Draper, "'This was Trump pulling a Putin'"; Krishnadev Calamur, 'Why the president praises dictators', *Atlantic*, 14 Jan. 2019.

<sup>100</sup> Marshall Cohen, '4 Things to Remember about Trump, Ukraine and Putin', CNN, 26 March 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/26/politics/trump-putin-ukraine/index.html>.

<sup>101</sup> Draper, "'This was Trump pulling a Putin'".

<sup>102</sup> Draper, "'This was Trump pulling a Putin'".

<sup>103</sup> Draper, "'This was Trump pulling a Putin'".

<sup>104</sup> Draper, "'This was Trump pulling a Putin'".

<sup>105</sup> Nye, *Do morals matter?*, pp. 168–9.

<sup>106</sup> Michael Barbaro, 'What drives Donald Trump? Fear of losing, tapes show', *New York Times*, 25 Oct. 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/26/us/politics/donald-trump-interviews.html>.

<sup>107</sup> Daniel W. Drezner, 'Immature leadership: Donald Trump and the American presidency', *International Affairs* 96: 2, 2020, pp. 383–400; for a gendered analysis of Trump's style, see, for example, Karin Aggestam and Jacqui True, 'Political leadership and gendered multilevel games in foreign policy', *International Affairs* 97: 2, 2021, pp. 385–404.

<sup>108</sup> Nye, *Do morals matter?*, p. 177.

50 former national security officials described Trump's traits in strong, negative terms: 'He does not encourage conflicting views. He lacks self-control and acts impetuously. He cannot tolerate personal criticism.'<sup>109</sup>

This picture of Trump is supported by social-science research. Using leadership trait analysis, two separate studies show Trump to be very self-confident and distrustful compared to other leaders.<sup>110</sup> Self-confident leaders are fairly 'immune to incoming information and '[i]nformation is filtered and reinterpreted based on their high sense of self-worth'.<sup>111</sup> Leaders high in distrust, such as Trump, are deeply suspicious of others, demand loyalty from their advisers, are extremely sensitive to criticism and see the world in Hobbesian terms.<sup>112</sup>

Finally, Nai and Toro's expert rating of political candidates assessed Trump as low on emotional stability and high on Machiavellianism and psychopathy.<sup>113</sup> They observe: 'across different academic studies, a consensus seems to emerge regarding the "off the charts" personality of Donald Trump, characterized by very high extroversion, very low agreeableness and conscientiousness, emotional instability, and sky-high narcissism.'<sup>114</sup> Individuals with such values on these 'big five' personality traits tend to be ill-disciplined, emotionally distressed, uncooperative, intolerant, conflictual, charismatic, insensitive to others and to criticism, impulsive, attention-seeking and manipulative.<sup>115</sup> Trump's extreme personality tendencies may have intensified in a second term, in which Trump 'would probably be increasingly inclined to follow his instincts and to rely even less on advice by experts, feeling vindicated by re-election and unstrained by further electoral concerns'.<sup>116</sup>

The key features of Trump's and Biden's personalities are summarized in Table 1. They fall along three important aspects of leaders' characteristics, as evidenced in prior research, and there are clear behavioural expectations for how these characteristics influence foreign policy and decision-making.

<sup>109</sup> Carol Morello, 'Former GOP national security officials: Trump would be "most reckless" American president in history', *Washington Post*, 8 Aug. 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/group-of-50-former-gop-national-security-officials-trump-would-be-most-reckless-president-in-american-history/2016/08/08/6715042c-5d9f-11e6-af8e-54aa2e849447\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/group-of-50-former-gop-national-security-officials-trump-would-be-most-reckless-president-in-american-history/2016/08/08/6715042c-5d9f-11e6-af8e-54aa2e849447_story.html).

<sup>110</sup> Stephan Fouquet and Klaus Brummer, 'Profiling the personality of populist foreign policy makers: a leadership trait analysis', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, publ. online 28 Sept. 2022, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41268-022-00270-2>; Thiers and Wehner, 'The personality traits'.

<sup>111</sup> Hermann, 'Assessing leadership', p. 195.

<sup>112</sup> Hermann, 'Assessing leadership', p. 203; Dennis M. Foster and Jonathan W. Keller, 'Leaders' cognitive complexity, distrust, and the diversionary use of force', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 10: 3, 2014, pp. 205–22 at p. 209.

<sup>113</sup> Allesandro Nai and Emre Toros, 'The peculiar personality of strongmen: comparing the Big Five and Dark Triad traits of autocrats and non-autocrats', *Political Research Exchange* 2: 1, 2020, pp. 1–24.

<sup>114</sup> Allesandro Nai and Jürgen Maier, 'Can anyone be objective about Donald Trump? Assessing the personality of political figures', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 31: 3, 2021, pp. 283–308, p. 3. This is consistent with Griebie and Immelman's psychodynamic trait analysis, finding Trump 'ambitious/self-serving, dominant/controlling, and outgoing/gregarious (bordering on impulsive)': Griebie and Immelman, 'The political personality'.

<sup>115</sup> Nai and Toros, 'The peculiar personality'.

<sup>116</sup> Speck, 'The consequences'.

**Table 1: Summary of personalities and foreign policies—Biden vs Trump**

<i>Personality characteristics</i>	<i>Biden</i>	<i>Trump</i>
Background/ experience	extensive experience in foreign affairs; specific experience in policy towards Ukraine	inexperienced in foreign affairs; business background
General beliefs	multilateralism; internationalism; aversion to direct use of force; prefers rewards to punishments	world is conflictual and zero-sum; unilateralism; sees punishments as effective; transactional; belief in conspiracies
Specific beliefs	sees Ukraine as complex and important; extensive knowledge about Ukraine; negative image of Putin	sees Ukraine as corrupt, political opportunity; limited knowledge about Ukraine; sees Putin as 'strong'
Traits	ambitious; extroverted; cooperative; policy-focused, emotional; sometimes unreflective rhetoric	ambitious; self-confident; very distrustful; temperamental; intolerant of criticism; uncooperative
Expectations for foreign policy and decision-making	multilateral; direct diplomacy, indirect conflict; moderate information-seeking; strong advocate of policy preference	unilateral; conflictual; suppress dissent; limited information-seeking
	Overall: balance against and strongly condemn Russia; avoid direct US military action; support Ukraine; build multilateral coalition	Overall: admire but compete with Putin/Russia; unilateral indifference/hostility towards Ukraine; suspicious of advisers/intelligence

### **The counterfactual: how would Trump have responded?**

How would a second-term President Trump have responded to Russia's military build-up and invasion? We argue that the two key aspects of our counterfactual consequent—Biden's strong condemnation of Russia and strong support for Ukraine, as well as his multilateral coalition-building—would have been absent. The swift, unified western reaction to Russia would therefore not have materialized. Our counterfactual rests on the above psychological profile. Trump's personality affected his foreign policies toward Ukraine, Russia and Europe during his presidency, and, we argue, would have continued to condition his response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine had he remained president.



Trump's foreign policies towards Ukraine during his presidency reflected his transactional worldview, his image of and lack of knowledge about Ukraine, his beliefs about Russia and affinity for Putin, and his tendencies to deviate from his own bureaucracy, believe in conspiracies, reject alternative approaches, and pursue unusual (out-of-step with advisers and allies) policies. Substantively, Trump's foreign policy towards Ukraine was a bit of a dog's breakfast. On the one hand, the foreign policy bureaucracy continued the support for Ukraine established during the Obama administration following the events in Crimea and Donbas in 2014. Ukraine-related sanctions on Russia were maintained, and the US and NATO bolstered their military presence in Ukraine's neighbouring central European countries.<sup>117</sup> But as Pifer notes, 'Trump never seemed committed to his administration's policy.'<sup>118</sup> Trump initially resisted meeting Ukrainian president Poroshenko, and when he eventually did 'Trump flatly told Poroshenko that Ukraine was a corrupt country', based on hearsay from one of Trump's Ukrainian friends rather than formal intelligence analysis.<sup>119</sup> According to Pifer, 'Trump's primary engagement on Ukraine was his bid to extort Kyiv into manufacturing derogatory information on his Democratic opponent . . .'<sup>120</sup> This self-serving extortion—in what Trump would call a 'perfect phone call'<sup>121</sup>—involved Trump withholding almost \$400 million in military aid, including Javelin missiles, to pressure Zelensky to investigate corruption charges against candidate Biden and his family. When a whistleblower made this information public, Congress initiated an impeachment inquiry, where former White House advisor Fiona Hill testified that this was a 'domestic political errand' for Trump's political purpose.<sup>122</sup> After Trump was acquitted, according to former National Security Council director for European affairs, Alexander Vindman: 'Ukraine became radioactive for the duration of the Trump administration. There wasn't serious engagement.'<sup>123</sup> Instead, focusing on himself and those conspiring against him, Trump pushed a litany of false claims about Ukraine—in public and private. According to Marie Yovanovitch, former US ambassador to Ukraine (whom Trump dismissed from her post), 'Trump began to treat Ukraine as a political enemy'.<sup>124</sup>

In contrast, Trump's rhetoric was decidedly pro-Moscow.<sup>125</sup> In 2014, before his presidency, Trump praised Putin for annexing Crimea and predicted Russia would soon take all of Ukraine, a move that Trump did not condemn.<sup>126</sup> Parroting Putin while revealing his limited historical knowledge, Trump told President

<sup>117</sup> Pifer, 'The Biden presidency and Ukraine', pp. 18–23, at p. 18.

<sup>118</sup> Pifer, 'The Biden presidency', pp. 18–19.

<sup>119</sup> Draper, "'This was Trump pulling a Putin'".

<sup>120</sup> Pifer, 'The Biden presidency', pp. 18–19; Draper, "'This was Trump pulling a Putin'".

<sup>121</sup> Richard P. Barberio, *Presidents and political scandal: managing scandal in the modern era* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 105, 114–15.

<sup>122</sup> Michael D. Shear, 'Key moments from Hill and Holmes's testimony in the impeachment inquiry', *New York Times*, 21 Nov. 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/21/us/politics/impeachment-hearing.html>.

<sup>123</sup> Quoted in Draper, "'This was Trump pulling a Putin'".

<sup>124</sup> Quoted in Draper, "'This was Trump pulling a Putin'".

<sup>125</sup> Steven Pifer, 'Trump, Putin and Crimea', Brookings, 9 July 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/07/09/trump-putin-and-crimea/>.

<sup>126</sup> Donald Trump, speech at Conservative Political Action Conference, 6 March 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nzaemPHSUo&t=480s>.

Poroshenko that Crimea ‘was rightfully Russia’s—because, after all, the people there spoke Russian’.<sup>127</sup> Trump repeated this to leaders at a G7 meeting in 2018.<sup>128</sup> When asked, Trump did not rule out recognizing Russia’s annexation of Crimea or lifting Ukraine-related sanctions on Russia.<sup>129</sup> Trump rejected evidence that Russia had meddled in the 2016 election, claiming instead that Ukraine was behind the interference.<sup>130</sup> Trump’s pro-Russian take on disputes between Russia and Ukraine was consistent with his positive orientation toward Russia more generally. Trump avoided criticizing Russia and ‘pushed for rapprochement, as evidenced, for example, by his repeated wish for Russia to join the G7’.<sup>131</sup> Given Trump’s fairly consistent anti-Ukraine, pro-Russian rhetoric, driven by his narrow background knowledge, his specific beliefs about the two countries and his egocentric conspiratorial vision, it is very unlikely that he would have strongly condemned Russia and supported Ukraine if he were president in late 2021 and early 2022. His supreme self-confidence and business sensibilities instead may have led him to believe he could personally influence Putin, or perhaps strike a negotiated deal, much as he had previously attempted with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.<sup>132</sup> Indeed, ex-President Trump claimed, just prior to the Russian invasion, that only he could ‘talk to’ Putin.<sup>133</sup>

Nor would Trump have built the multilateral front with European and other allies against Russia, due to mutual antipathy and distrust. ‘Trump’s constant negative rhetoric about NATO and verbal attacks on its members have led many observers to question his commitment to the alliance.’<sup>134</sup> Far from rallying a united NATO response, Trump’s unilateralist beliefs and America First strategy would have pushed in the opposite direction, and observers of transatlantic relations lamented ‘the Trump administration’s bullying tactics with regard to trade relations, its disinterest in international agreements and institutions, and its lack of support for the entire “global governance” agenda’.<sup>135</sup> His zero-sum ‘winner-loser’ mentality could also have led him to see NATO as ‘a failure’ at deterring Russia, and his Machiavellianism and Hobbesian world view might have pushed him away from moral condemnation, seeing instead Putin’s military initiative as ‘savvy genius’—comments ex-president Trump actually made upon learning of the invasion.<sup>136</sup> Trump’s general views devaluing multilateralism and international

<sup>127</sup> Draper, “This was Trump pulling a Putin”.

<sup>128</sup> Grace Panetta, ‘Trump reportedly claimed to leaders at the G7 that Crimea was part of Russia because everyone there speaks Russian’, *Business Insider*, 14 June 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-claims-crimea-is-part-of-russia-since-people-speak-russian-g7-summit-2018-6?r=US&IR=T>.

<sup>129</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, ‘Trump doesn’t rule out recognizing Russia’s annexation of Crimea’, 30 June 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/trump-doesnt-rule-out-recognizing-russian-annexation-ukraine-crimean-peninsula/29328403.html>.

<sup>130</sup> Cohen, ‘4 Things’; Draper, “This was Trump pulling a Putin”.

<sup>131</sup> Speck, ‘The consequences’.

<sup>132</sup> Eugene B. Kogan, ‘Art of the power deal: the four negotiation roles of Donald J. Trump’, *Negotiation Journal* 35: 1, 2019, pp. 65–83.

<sup>133</sup> Cheryl Teh, ‘Trump says his personality kept the US out of war and that, without him in office, there’s no one to “talk to” Putin’, *Insider Business*, 14 March 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-says-his-personality-kept-the-us-out-of-war-2022-3?r=US&IR=T>.

<sup>134</sup> Speck, ‘The consequences’.

<sup>135</sup> Speck, ‘The consequences’.

<sup>136</sup> Joseph Gedeon, ‘Trump calls Putin “genius” and “savvy” for Ukraine invasion’, *Politico*, 23 February 2022,

institutions, his specific views on NATO, and his dismissal of contrary advice on the importance of transatlantic relations make it very unlikely he would have quickly built a rapport with European partners for a unified response. Further, Trump's extremely high distrust would have pushed him away from both trusting intelligence warnings of an imminent invasion and sharing that intelligence with allies, which runs counter to Biden's approach. Indeed, Trump had previously dismissed his own intelligence community on the question of Russian involvement in the US election, publicly endorsing Putin's version in 2018.<sup>137</sup>

Would Trump have changed in his second term, leading to a more Biden-like response to the Russian invasion? Probably not, given that his policies were rooted in his personality, and personalities are slow to change. If anything, personality change often moves in a negative, more extreme direction.<sup>138</sup> Speck asserts that 'over a second term, Trump would most likely continue with his current strategy of US primacy. His readiness to break with tradition and the consensus of the US foreign policy community might increase, making him perhaps more disruptive'.<sup>139</sup>

## Conclusions

While the phrase 'counterfactual Trump' may conjure notions of fake news and false election denials, in this article we have gone further by actually overturning the 2020 election, if only analytically. Our counterfactual analysis demonstrates how differences between Trump's and Biden's personalities—their beliefs, traits and the experiences that shaped them—affected the US approach and the response of NATO allies to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Biden's commitment to Ukraine and his views on Russia, combined with his empathy and willingness to listen to advisers, all contributed towards his strong condemnation of Russia and his strong support for Ukraine. His cooperative nature—both in his worldview and his style—were an important part of his multilateral efforts. In contrast, Trump's transactional orientation, his affinity for Putin and his antipathy towards Ukraine, combined with his overly self-confident, exploitative and distrusting nature, would have compelled him towards a different approach, making sustained criticism of Russia, support for Ukraine, free sharing of intelligence and prioritizing European allies very unlikely.

Ukraine itself is largely responsible for its successes in opposing the Russian invasion, but the early and united response from the US and the West was significant, allowing Ukrainian resistance to be more organized and effective. Were Trump president rather than Biden, this very likely would not have happened. Although larger forces, both within the US administration and internationally, may *ultimately* have pushed Trump to resist Russia, it is also possible that a

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<https://www.politico.com/news/2022/02/23/trump-putin-ukraine-invasion-00010923>.

<sup>137</sup> Matthew Nussbaum, 'Trump publicly sides with Putin on election interference', 16 July 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/07/16/trump-russia-putin-summit-722418>.

<sup>138</sup> Juliet Kaarbo, 'New directions for leader personality research: breaking bad in foreign policy', *International Affairs* 97: 2, 2021, pp. 423–41.

<sup>139</sup> Speck, 'The consequences'.

delayed and less unified response to Russia's rapid invasion would have facilitated an early Russian military victory, potentially changing the long-term landscape of European security quite quickly. While assessing the ultimate consequences of different events in the war requires other methods, our counterfactual analysis has made a strong case for the role of personalities, not only in the international behaviours of individual countries, but in a collective response to aggression.

Trump is certainly one of a kind, and his dramatically different personality from Biden's might intuitively suggest numerous differences in foreign policies, including in the Ukrainian case. But such speculation makes for poor analysis, whereas the counterfactual method systematically shows how specific personality differences impacted foreign policy at particular points, arguably changing a significant international outcome. The stark differences between Trump and Biden certainly help illustrate this method, but counterfactual analysis does not require extreme differences between the antecedents, just a plausible manipulation with minimal ripple effects, a clear consequent and theory linking the two. When these criteria are satisfied, counterfactuals hold as much promise for leadership research in cases where personality differences are smaller or more targeted. It is precisely in such cases that counterfactuals can put the spotlight on specific foreign policy consequences of leader personalities that may otherwise remain hidden from view.

In this way, additional counterfactuals could be constructed around other leaders in the war in Ukraine, provided they focus on the link between personality characteristics and a specific consequent. How would the war have been impacted had Ukrainian President Zelensky gone into exile when the invasion started?<sup>140</sup> A leader with less risk propensity or resolve might have chosen to flee over fighting. What if Angela Merkel had still been Germany's chancellor? Chancellor Olaf Scholz's relative inexperience may have significantly shaped his decision to support Ukraine both militarily and economically following the Russian invasion.<sup>141</sup> And of course, a different Russian leader than Vladimir Putin—or perhaps even Putin in previous times—might not have invaded in the first place or might have responded differently to the unified western approach.<sup>142</sup> These potential cases may involve less stark personality contrasts than that between Biden and Trump, but still promise the benefits of counterfactual analysis: highlighting the contingency of outcomes, exploring the causal force of single factors, and, as we have argued, teasing out the role of leader personalities.

More than 20 years ago Byman and Pollack urged International Relations scholars to bring the statesman back in, rejecting arguments against the important

<sup>140</sup> Simon Shuster, 'Inside Zelensky's world', *Time Magazine*, 28 April 2022, <https://time.com/6171277/volodymyr-zelensky-interview-ukraine-war/>.

<sup>141</sup> Matthew Karnitschnig, Hans von der Burchard, Florian Eder and Andrew Desiderio, 'Inside Olaf Scholz's historic shift on defense, Ukraine and Russia', *Politico*, 5 March 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/olaf-scholz-historic-shift-defense-ukraine-russia-war/>.

<sup>142</sup> Daniel Treisman, 'Putin unbound: how repression at home presaged belligerence abroad', *Foreign Affairs* 101: 3, 2022, pp. 40–44, 46–53; Elena Semenova and David G. Winter, 'A motivational analysis of Russian presidents, 1994–2018', *Political Psychology* 41: 4, 2020, pp. 813–34.

role of leader personality in shaping history.<sup>143</sup> Scores of studies using robust methods and controlled designs have provided clear evidence for how leaders and their personalities impact important international outcomes. For this thriving scholarship on leader personality and foreign policy, counterfactuals offer an underutilized but especially suitable research tool, as ‘imagining a different leader minimizes the number of historical factors that must be changed to construct a compelling counterfactual’.<sup>144</sup> It also pushes researchers to link personality characteristics to their real-world impacts more precisely. While comparatively showing how leaders with different personalities behaved differently despite facing similar circumstances, counterfactuals go further by requiring a more exacting link between specific characteristics and their asserted effects. The consequent must be clearly yet narrowly defined, and the theoretically grounded causal link must tightly circumscribe the analysis. The Trump-not-Biden counterfactual exemplifies this because these leaders had different personality characteristics, yet were closely personally involved—factually or counterfactually—minimizing potential ripple effects. In sum, counterfactuals rely on making a small change with a precise mechanism to observe a specific effect. Leadership counterfactuals, combined with extant research on leader personalities and foreign policy, are thus a promising tool for assessing the impact individual leaders can have—or might have had—on international affairs.

<sup>143</sup> Byman and Pollack, ‘Let us now praise great men’.

<sup>144</sup> Michael McFaul, ‘Putin, Putinism, and the domestic determinants of Russian foreign policy’, *International Security* 45: 2, 2020, pp. 95–139, at p. 106.