

Retoryka zreinterpretowana

Rhetoric reinterpreted

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The rhetorical dimension of the justification for the absence of direct military support for Ukraine in Joe Biden's statements

Retoryczny wymiar uzasadnienia dla braku bezpośredniego militarnego wsparcia Ukrainy w wypowiedziach Joe Bidena

Abstract

This article investigates the motivation informing President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.'s rhetoric regarding America's lack of a direct military response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine. Employing Kenneth Burke's pentad as its analytical lens, this study identifies how the president attempted to shape public opinion through his linguistic choices and selective interpretation of events. Biden's rhetoric justifying the US' non-military reaction to the conflict is found to reflect realism, and supports the claim that the US approach regarding the situation in Ukraine is an action policy. Furthermore, the results provide insight into the understanding of the working of the no-use-of-force rhetoric within the context of the still evolving post-post-Cold War world order.

W artykule analizuję motywację leżącą u podstaw wypowiedzi prezydenta Josepha R. Bidena, Jr., dotyczących braku bezpośredniej interwencji militarnej Stanów Zjednoczonych w odpowiedzi na rosyjską agresję na Ukrainę. W badaniu wykorzystuję pentadę Kennetha Burke'a jako kluczowe narzędzie do analizy, w jaki sposób prezydent celowo kształtował percepcję publiczną poprzez strategiczny dobór słownictwa i selektywną interpretację wydarzeń. W konkluzjach stwierdzam, że wypowiedzi Bidena, uzasadniające niemilitarną reakcję USA na konflikt, są głęboko osadzone w paradygmacie realizmu politycznego. Ponadto, w analizie potwierdzam tezę, że stanowisko Stanów Zjednoczonych wobec Ukrainy stanowi przemyślaną i aktywną politykę działania, a nie bierność. Wyniki te przyczyniają się do pogłębienia zrozumienia mechanizmów retoryki braku użycia siły w kontekście ewoluującego porządku geopolitycznego po zakończeniu zimnej wojny.

Key words

Joseph R. Biden, Jr., Kenneth Burke, pentad, non-military action, Ukraine

Joseph R. Biden, Jr., Kenneth Burke, pentada, działanie niemilitarne, Ukraina

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1. Introduction

The concept of motive/motivation has long been of interest in the field of rhetorical studies. Ways of understanding motive and means of analyzing it have greatly varied across differing approaches to rhetorical scholarship. Motive has commonly been understood as “the [force] that [impels] the human being to act” (Walter 1955, 271–278). Examined as a psychological phenomenon, it has been defined as “a recurrent concern for a goal state based on a natural incentive—a concern that energizes, orients, and selects behavior” (McClelland 1987, 590). Discussed in relation to argumentation theory, it has been characterized as “some inner drive, value, desire, emotion, or aspiration” which functions persuasively (Brockriede and Ehninger 1960, 51). Linked to the theory of rhetorical situation, it has been identified as a purpose to affirm, reaffirm, purify, or subvert (Fisher 1970, 131–139). Most relevant, approached from the perspective of rhetorical criticism, motive has been called a “distinctly linguistic [product]” (Burke 1970, 98). Reconstructing the Burkean sense of motive, James Jasinski explains that, for Burke, motives “arise from and operate within the interaction between orientations and situations” where “orientations allow us to understand situations, and situations shape and reshape orientations.” “Motives exist in the vocabularies that we use for grasping situations and formulating responses to situations.” They “do not exist in someone’s head; they generally exist in vocabularies and in situations.” They “reside in the language people use to talk about the world of problems, events, and relationships as well as their behavior in it.” The linguistic choices people make communicate their perceptions, inform their actions, and thus reflect motivation—that is, the reason why they choose one interpretive reading over others and why

they behave one way and not another. “Motives, in short, appear to be cultural principles embodied in vocabularies that shape and guide human perception and action” (Jasinski 2001, 370).

Focusing primarily on the motives reflected in President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.’s rhetorical action regarding the war in Ukraine as contextualized within the US presidential discourse of non-intervention, this article seeks to understand the ways in which the president used language to address the critical situation and reasons he proffered for responding to it without using military force. Reading Biden’s rhetoric and associated course of action, this analysis surveys the main contours of and seeks to understand the president’s thinking about American agency, his articulation of the purpose of the nation’s foreign policy in the post-post-Cold War era (van Middelaar 2024), and the motivation prompting his presidential performance. Of course, Biden understood the importance of the events in Ukraine, but how did he choose to frame those events for his domestic and international audiences? If his administration did not exclude the use of force in reaction to events worldwide, why did he argue against forceful action in response to the situation in Ukraine? If the US continued to emphasize its strategic role and importance as a world superpower, what prompted his decision to avoid US military involvement in the conflict?

2. Presidential rhetoric of non-intervention

Scholars have increasingly investigated how presidents use rhetoric to shape public understanding of the US’ international (dis)engagement. Stephen J. Heidt (2021) examines how post-1945 “peace rhetoric” often ironically paved the way for interventions, as presidents used the language of peace to establish moral frameworks that necessitate military enforcement. This paradoxical use of language is further examined in the work of Joshua Reeves and Matthew S. May (2014), who analyze how Barack Obama deployed the “Just War” rhetoric to accommodate his identity as a peace-seeker with his role as a war-time commander-in-chief, using rhetoric to legitimize the use of force. Douglas Kellner (2007) highlights similar aspects of “Bushspeak,” where the administration employed a specific vocabulary of fear and misinformation during the “War on Terror” to evade democratic deliberation. Together, these studies suggest that whether explaining intervention or its absence, presidential language functions not merely as an undistorted, unbiased, or unemotional tool of communication, but as a powerful mechanism for structuring political reality and justifying moral necessity.

Existing findings suggest that the construction of the rhetoric of military inaction is accomplished through generalized and abstract language which is decidedly

noncommittal, disengaged, and unemotional and that highlights instead factual data and statistical information. Such language avoids specific descriptions of war crimes and human rights abuses as well as accounts of personalized horrors, suffering, and dramas. The claim is that this approach to such discourse lowers audience awareness of what is happening, diminishes its interest in the events, and limits support for active US military engagement. Additionally, it deflects media attention, restricts information, skews perceptions, and distorts informed public assessment (Ben-Porath 2007, 181–202).

Previous research indicates that when during an international crisis there is the possibility of combatants using chemical weapons, the US prefers a non-military response, not wanting to risk any escalation from mere conventional arms to the use of illicit chemical weapons. Historically, whenever there has been the need to confront possible chemical weapons usage, the US favors the shared responsibility and joint action of an international approach rather than acting alone (Bentley 2014, 1033–1048; Bentley 2015, 228–236; Bentley 2016; Bentley 2017, 557–580; Price 2019, 37–52).

Another significant finding from previous research is that the rhetoric of non-intervention is marked by strategic use or avoidance of the word genocide. Such discourse either exploits genocide as a political cover or downplays genocide as merely tribal fighting, generic racial hatred, conventional ethnic clashes, ancient hostility, and the playing out of religious divisions. In doing so, it oversimplifies issues and perpetuates stereotypes, on the one hand, and undermines the severity of situations, and thus confusing, misleading, and manipulating policy making, on the other (Burns 2007, 34–40; Heinze 2007, 359–383; Gruley and Duvall 2012, 29–46). In either case, rhetoric related to genocide serves US interests in general, and into the hands of a given president's interests, in particular.

3. Literature review

To date, research regarding President Biden's rhetoric is rare. Existing studies focus primarily upon the language of the president's speeches. The inaugural address has garnered the most research. Scholars have investigated Biden's strategies to construct meaning and convey vision (Nurkhamidah et al. 2021, 73–82; Al-Khawaldeh et al. 2023; Imran et al. 2024, 560–573). They have examined the tools he used to explain, uphold, and promote his ideology (Xiang 2022, 165–169; Abdulla and Ahmed 2024, 1–7). They have analyzed such stylistic elements as the speech's rhythm, sound, stress, and intonation (Anikyan 2021, 70–80) as well as its emotive values, attitudes, and feelings (Salek 2022, 138–150). Some interest has also been shown in the state of the union address (Rouabhia 2024) and the victory speech (Bhusal 2024, 18–35). Single investigations have

been made into Biden's speeches regarding Afghanistan (Amaireh and Rababah 2022, 908–918; Khan and Fatima 2022), vaccination in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bell 2022), and gun control (Al Fajri et al. 2022, 244–253).

Some academic discussion about the president's language has also centered around campaign rhetoric examined from a comparative perspective. Analyzing the 2020 presidential campaign, scholars have compared Biden's and Donald J. Trump's use of irony (Rheem and Ahmed 2022, 98), forms of symbolic politics (Asif 2023), power of persuasion (Mustafa 2023, 1–20), strategies of political polarization (Domínguez-García et al. 2023), and techniques of self-presentation (Eissler et al. 2025, 80–85). Focusing on the 2024 campaign, authors have contrasted Biden's debate themes and communication style with those of Trump and Kamala Harris (Jiménez-Preciado et al. 2025).

Most relevant to this present study, some research has examined Biden's rhetoric regarding the war in Ukraine, primarily his February 24, 2022 remarks on Russia's attack on Ukraine, the September 21, 2022 remarks to the United Nations General Assembly, and the February 21, 2023 remarks ahead of the first anniversary of Russia's invasion. The findings concerning the president's discourse suggest that Biden operated within a political environment which divided the world into cleanly dichotomous ideologies; identified NATO and UN member states as allies and Russia as an enemy; and defined the US as the defender of liberalism, humanitarianism, and democracy and Russia as an existential threat to the modern world (Altamimi 2024; Ma'arif and Maksun 2023, 46–63; Mahfoud and Khaldouy 2022, 132–143). Research results indicate that the language the president employed to justify his position and advance US interests relied on implication, indirectness, euphemisms, and manipulation of historical narratives. His rhetoric shaping the US narrative around the war, in attempting to influence public perception of the conflict, drew on universal notions of freedom and international sovereignty (Tymoshchuk 2023, 210–224; Boutgoumas and Boualam 2024). These observations show that Biden delegitimized Russia's aggression through the strategies of authorization, moral evaluation, and rationalization. He discredited the attack through negative abstract moral values and shared opposition to a common enemy; de-legitimized the invasion referencing international laws and standards; and invalidated Russia's actions by setting rational goals, providing credible explanations, and making safe predictions (Ahmed 2023, 133–149; Aluya and Zidyeb N. 2025, 104–119).

While increasingly more is known about how Biden used language to respond to the situation in Ukraine, there is little published work on how his language drove his political reaction. Aside from Anton Oleinik's study of motives in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War (Oleinik 2025, 61–77), there is a relative lack of research regarding the driving force informing of the president's rationale.

Arguably, the potential value of this study lies in seeking to understand what the president's use of language revealed. Motivation, and how it is manifested through language, as this study argues, provides a source of knowledge about presidential political action. Examining Biden's rhetoric broadens the scope of investigations of presidential language through a Burkean lens to include the rhetoric of the post-post-Cold War era and helps direct attention to presidential rhetoric justifying restraint upon, rather than activism in, the use of American physical force as a means of responding to international critical situations.

4. Method of study

The following analysis looks at President Biden's rhetoric regarding the war in Ukraine. It is primarily based on Biden's spoken messages—major addresses, speeches, remarks, interviews, news conferences, and conversations—with regard to Russia's aggression on Ukraine, delivered from February 24, 2022 to January 20, 2025. Written documents—declarations, proclamations, memoranda, executive orders, or letters—are analyzed for additional support.

The study is a qualitative analysis of the president's rhetoric of non-intervention—an analysis of the linguistic choices that underlay his non-military agenda and, consequently, reflective of the motivation that drove his military inaction in Ukraine. Central to the study is the pentad, Burke's (1969) core method for studying motivation, comprised of a set of five elements—act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose—and the relationships between and among them. As explained by Burke, to define the act is to describe what happened; to name the agent is to specify who acted; to determine the scene is to characterize the situation in which the act took place; to identify the agency is to indicate the means employed to perform the act; and to find the purpose is to discover the reason for action. These rhetorical elements—what he considers important to convey, or not, to his intended audience points to a speaker's philosophy. Additionally, as Burke explains with respect to motive, texts that privilege the act reflect the philosophy of realism and reveal a preference for doing rather than reflecting or analyzing; rhetoric that emphasizes the scene corresponds with the philosophy of materialism and favors accommodation over change; discourse that focuses on the agent relates to the philosophy of idealism and stresses the power of the will over the force of the circumstances; language that features the agency reflects the philosophy of pragmatism and puts the ends before the means; and texts that concentrate on the purpose draw from the philosophy of mysticism underlining the value of goals and objectives.

The concept of the pentad has long been used to analyze presidential language as a means of understanding political action. The usefulness of the theory has been demonstrated in research that considers presidential language in terms of military action. Robert L. Ivie's (1974, 337–345) work exemplifies a longitudinal approach. By spanning seven foreign wars from 1812 to 1965, Ivie proves that presidential language is not just reactionary or responsive but it follows a recurring structure. Denise M. Bostdorff's (1994) design goes beyond wars to look at crises. In an analysis that spans six foreign policy crises from 1962 to 1989, Bostdorff shows how presidential words change the powers of the office and the interpretation of the law. David S. Birdsell (1987, 267–279) narrows his scope to a comparative analysis of the 1993 events in Lebanon and Grenada. His study demonstrates how one president reprioritizes different elements of the pentad to fit specific foreign policy goals and domestic interests.

Application of the pentad to determine what interpretation of the Russia/Ukraine conflict Biden chose to share and what motivated that choice will be examined in the following analysis of the president's rhetoric of non-intervention. The analysis begins with a description of the constraints and exigencies of the conflict that shaped Biden's rhetorical action to it. The study goes on to examine the elements of the pentad and the relationship between and among them to suggest the dominant term of Biden's rhetoric together with the philosophical system to which it corresponds. The focus here is on the rhetorical means that the president used to structure his perspective of the situation and rationalize his approach to it. The paper then speculates as to what motivated Biden's response to the situation. The discussion serves to show how the president's language, and the motivation driving it, informed the administration's decision-making process regarding the conflict and drove the US' non-military response to it.

5. Context of the study

Key to identifying the motive behind Biden's rhetorical action regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine is understanding of the circumstances in which his response was constructed. Much of what the president did and said in reaction to the situation he faced can be traced to the March 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (INSSG), replaced by the October 2022 United States National Security Strategy (NSS), and expanded in the National Defense Strategy (NDS). Reading into the documents reveals that Biden operated in a political environment which cast the United States in a leadership role versus major global powers and framed US foreign policy as a competition between democratic and autocratic powers. His priorities included US national security and strategic interests, protection of

which required—justified—the defense of democratic values, institutions, and states against actors engaged in destabilizing and disruptive activities. Diplomacy, alliances, and partnerships were his preferred means for conducting international relations, with physical force as the alternative instrument of power.

In more practical terms, Biden acted in a world which contested the US' global leadership and the international order it maintained. He faced China, which increased its military activities in the Pacific, raised its military spending, launched aggressive trade policies, and tightened its partnership with Russia. He was tested by the Taliban regime that overthrew the US-backed Afghan government and regained control of the country and the government. He confronted Hamas, which launched a major attack on the US' most strategically vital partner, Israel, leading to a full-scale Israel-Gaza war. He was opposed by postcolonial countries that openly questioned the US-led global order, demanding change regarding the political and economic terms of the international system.

In responding to these challenges, the president reengaged the US internationally, rebuilding long-established partnerships with Australia, India, and Japan and deepening relations with Indonesia and Vietnam; forging new alliances with Australia and the United Kingdom; and signing new agreements with Australia, Japan, Papua New Guinea, and the Philippines. He ended US engagement in the conflict in Afghanistan and did not get involved in a new one. This is not to say that under his administration US forces were not engaged in any conflicts, as there were deployments in Syria and Iraq and active combat in Jordan, Yemen, and throughout Africa; rather, his administration's focus was on how to adjust the US' reaction to critical developments abroad to tailor it to political interests, partisan divisions, and public demands at home.

Perhaps the single most significant domestic factor affecting Biden's actions while president was the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The Omicron variant of the coronavirus caused a surge in infections and a rise in spending on pandemic relief. The situation was further complicated by the status of the economy characterized by high inflation, high interest rates, and high consumer prices, and by the problem of immigration—with historically high statistics on unauthorized crossings on the US-Mexico border. The limits imposed by the balance of power in Congress and the midterm elections were challenging or, at the very least, problematic. Throughout his term, Biden operated under the pressures of Democratic in-fighting and Republican opposition over his legislative agenda. During his first two years in office, he acted against the backdrop of a narrow Democratic majority in the House of Representatives and in the Senate, and, after losing his party control of Congress in the midterm elections, he had to work with a divided government—a Republican-controlled House and a Democratic Senate.

American public opinion also limited Biden's options. During the course of his four years in office, his overall job rating was relatively steady but historically low, ranging between 41 and 39 percent (Gallup; Jones 2025). His average approval rating for handling foreign affairs was only 35 percent (RealClear Polling). A record-high number of Americans—54 percent—opposed an active US role in world affairs. According to 49 percent of polling respondents the US lacked the resources necessary for international interventions and should focus instead upon its many domestic problems. Indeed, a majority of the US public—56 percent—claimed that the benefits of maintaining an active US role in the world outweighed the costs. On the question of US foreign assistance, a decreasing percentage of Americans thought that economic aid—73 percent in 2022 vs. 62 percent in 2024—and military aid—75 percent in 2022 vs. 67 percent in 2024—were effective tools in achieving US foreign policy goals. At the same time, an increasing percentage of Americans believed that economic aid—41 percent in 2020 vs. 51 percent in 2024 and military aid—42 percent in 2022 vs. 50 percent in 2024 to other nations should be reduced. When asked about US assistance to Ukraine specifically, fewer Americans supported economic and military aid in 2024—58 percent and 57 percent—than at the start of the war in 2022—78 percent and 79 percent (Smeltz et al. 2024). While a majority of the American public consistently approved of using sanctions against Russia, support for that policy waned from 70 percent in 2022 to 63 percent in 2024. By contrast, while most US respondents consistently opposed sending troops to Ukraine, approval for the deployment of US ground troops grew in the event of Russia's invasion of a NATO ally (Smeltz and Baz 2024).

The audience perhaps more responsive to Biden's approach regarding Russia was the international community. Major global players generally agreed with the president concerning the immediacy, the urgency, and the need for economic and military assistance, humanitarian aid, and political action to support Ukraine. The International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the European Union, and numerous individual countries offered financial aid. The United Kingdom, Canada, Lithuania, and Poland provided military aid, equipment, training, and advisory support. International organizations, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Food Program, and the United Nations Children's Fund, as well as humanitarian organizations, such as Doctors Without Borders and the Red Cross, provided life-saving assistance to Ukrainian civilians. Finally, countries around the globe condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and demanded that Russia end its military aggression. Some states undertook diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict through negotiations. Others offered propositions for peaceful resolutions. Still others placed economic sanctions in a range of sectors, including financial,

industrial, and technological, with the aim of weakening the Russian state, businesses, and individuals.

6. Analysis

Embedded within the constraints and exigencies of the political reality, domestic and foreign considerations, the American public's concerns and international community stance is Biden's rationale for non-military approach to the situation in Ukraine. Examining why the president chose to share a particular perception of the situation is revealing of the reasons for why he responded to it without direct American military intervention. Key to identifying Biden's motivation is Burke's concept of the pentad. The primary material for the present analysis is the president's remarks on Russia's attack on Ukraine delivered on February 24, 2022. Related statements are analyzed for additional support.

The analysis identifies two different, yet complementary, pentads and examines them in bipolar terms. In the first, the act is Russia's attack on Ukraine; the agent is Russia as represented by the Russian president; the scene is the record of Russian-US relations; the agency is Russia's military power; and the purpose is to subjugate Ukraine and reshape the global order. In the second pentad, the act is the US response to Russia's invasion; the agent is the US as represented by the US president; the scene is the history of US-Russian relations; the agency is US measures taken to coerce Russia to withdraw; and the purpose is to free Ukraine and secure the global order.

Act. The act, as presented by Biden as speaker, is Russia's assault on Ukraine, launched "without provocation, without justification, without necessity" (Biden 2022b). This is contrasted with America's use of economic sanctions and the activation of NATO military plans as a response to the assault. Emphasis on Russia's "unprovoked," "unjustifiable," and "premeditated" (Biden 2022a) attack is placed against America's warranted and consequential reaction to the situation, forced upon the nation and its allies by the adversary. As Biden insists, Russia's "aggression cannot go unanswered" (Biden 2022b). Elsewhere he says, "Appetites of the autocrat cannot be appeased. They must be opposed" (Biden 2023b). The president juxtaposes Russia's rhetorical manipulation—as exemplified by "cyber attacks," "false pretexts," (Biden 2022b), "lies" (Biden 2022c. See also Biden 2022a), and "outlandish and baseless claims that Ukraine was about to invade and launch a war against Russia, that Ukraine was prepared to use chemical weapons, that Ukraine committed a genocide" (Biden 2022b)—against his own nation's transparency regarding the conflict, as exemplified by America's sharing of "declassified evidence about Russia's plans . . . so that there can be no confusion

or coverup about what Putin was doing” (Biden, 2022b). Russia’s unilateral action is contrasted with the US’ collective response. As Biden argues, Russia acts to “pull our countries apart and the world apart,” “to retreat from the world and go it alone” (Biden 2024). The US, in turn, “is not doing this alone. For months, we’ve been building a coalition of partners representing well more than half the global economy” (Biden 2022b). The perspective cast upon Russia as a force intent on dividing the world is a stark contrast to his view of a world dedicated to unity. In Biden’s words: “[Putin] thought he could divide us at home, in this Chamber, in this Nation. . . . But [he] was wrong. . . . We are united. . . . We stayed united” (Biden 2022a). “He thought NATO would fracture and divide. Instead, NATO is more united and more unified than ever—than ever before” (Biden 2023b).

Agent. Biden’s presentation of the act offers a bipolar reading of the agents. One is Russia under the autocracy of President Vladimir Putin and the other is democratic America, as represented by President Biden, and its allies and partners. The rhetoric describes Putin as an “aggressor,” a “[tyrant]”¹ (Biden 2022b), a “dictator” (Biden 2022a), and a “[threat]” (Biden 2023a) who has a “craven lust for land and power” (Biden 2023b), a “desire for empire,” and a “sinister vision for the future of our world, one where nations take what they want by force” (Biden 2022b). In contrast, the US is depicted as “the essential” and “indispensable nation” (Biden 2023a) which “[champions] a vision for . . . world that’s grounded in the values of democracy” (Biden 2022c). Putin’s goal to subjugate Ukraine (Biden 2022b) is placed vis-à-vis the United States and its freedom-loving allies’ determination to “stand against global politics of fear and coercion; to defend the sovereign rights of smaller nations as equal to those of larger ones; to embrace basic principles like freedom of navigation, respect for international law, and arms control” (Biden 2022c). A clear distinction is drawn when the consequences ensuing from the agents’ actions are discussed. “Putin’s aggression against Ukraine will end up costing Russia dearly, economically and strategically,” Biden assures. “Putin will be a pariah on the international stage.” Unlike, the United States and its allies and partners who “will emerge from this stronger, more united, more determined, and more purposeful” (Biden 2022b). These interpretations divide the world into two opposing camps representing, on one hand, the powers of good that stand up for peace and security and, on the other, the forces of evil that choose the side of fear and force. Such language casts Russia/Russia’s president in the role of the agent of war and the US as a defender of peace. This kind of rhetoric forces the taking of sides. As Biden warns: “Any nation that countenances Russia’s naked aggression against Ukraine will be stained by association” (Biden 2022b).

1. Square brackets are used for words or phrases that have a different linguistic form from the original.

Scene. Biden’s construction of the agents suggests the scene as one of division between two competing systems of government. He repeatedly labels the situation a “contest” (Biden 2022b) and a “battle” (Biden 2022b) “between democracy and autocracy” (Biden 2022b; Biden 2022a). He calls it a test ground for the West when he says that Russia’s invasion “wasn’t just Ukraine being tested. The whole world faced a test for the ages. Europe was being tested. America was being tested. NATO was being tested. All democracies were being tested” (Biden 2023b). He marks the situation as “an inflection point in history, one of those moments where the decisions we make today are going to determine the future for decades to come” (Biden 2023a. See also Biden 2024; Biden 2023b). The idea of autocracy, as represented by Russia, is contrasted with the notion of democracy, exemplified by the US and its allies and partners. The two systems are juxtaposed in bipolar opposition to emphasize the differences “between chaos and stability; between building and destroying; between hope and fear; between democracy that lifts up the human spirit and the brutal hand of the dictator who crushes it; between nothing less than limitation and possibilities, the kind of possibilities that come when people live not in captivity, but in freedom” (Biden 2023b). The argument is that Russia “chose . . . war” (Biden 2022b) while the US “chose liberty. . . . sovereignty. . . . principles” (Biden 2022c). Putin decided to inflict war (Biden 2023a. See also Biden 2023b) and “[unleash] a great pain” (Biden 2022b) on the people of Ukraine, while the US tried hard to “avoid needless conflict and avert human suffering” (Biden 2022b). The projected vision of the conflict’s resolution is of stronger democracies and weaker autocracies (Biden 2023b). As Biden envisions, “When the history of this era is written, Putin’s choice . . . will have left Russia weaker and the rest of the world stronger. Liberty, democracy, human dignity . . . will endure. . . . Freedom will prevail” (Biden 2022b).

Agency. As defined by Biden, opposite means are used by the agents to achieve their contradictory goals. Russia’s “bullying” through “coercion and corruption,” “violence and intimidation” (Biden 2022b) are contrasted with US perseverance in “dialogue” (Biden 2022b) and “diplomacy” (Biden 2022a). A narrative built around Putin’s use of “shelling,” “missile strikes,” “air raids,” “tanks and troops” (Biden 2022b) to shift Ukraine into Russia’s sphere of influence is juxtaposed with an account of Biden’s imposition of economic sanctions on Russia to “limit [its] ability to do business,” “stunt the ability . . . to finance and grow [its] military,” and “impair [its] ability to compete in a high-tech 21st-century economy” (Biden 2022b). There is a difference between Moscow’s use of military power to “[change] borders” and commit “a brutal assault,” “naked aggression,” and an “all-out invasion” (Biden 2022b. See also Biden, 2023a. Biden, 2022a) and Washington’s deployment of ground and air forces to strengthen NATO as a deterrent against

Russian expansionism. As Biden explains, US forces were sent to Europe “to defend our NATO allies in the event that Putin decides to keep moving west” (Biden 2022a). The distinction is made clearer when Biden’s assertion that Putin’s use of force leads to “the mass graves, the bodies found bearing signs of torture . . . and thousands of Ukrainian children forcibly taken into Russia, stolen from their parents” (Biden 2023a. See also Biden 2022c) is placed against Biden’s own decision to “send Ukraine the weapons they need to defend themselves and their country” (Biden 2023a). As Biden argues: “If Ukraine [stops] defending itself against Russia, it [will] be the end of Ukraine” (Biden 2023b). Emphasis is placed on US non-military engagement in the situation in Ukraine. Biden assures that “We do not seek to have American troops fighting in Russia or fighting against Russia” (Biden 2023a). He promises that US “forces are not and will not be engaged in the conflict with Russia in Ukraine” (Biden 2022b. See also Biden 2022a).

Purpose. Bipolarity also defines the agents’ reasons for performing the acts. Moscow’s concerns regarding Russia’s national security (Biden 2022c) are depicted by Biden as contradictory to Washington’s responsibility for ensuring the safety of America and the world (Biden 2023a). Putin’s claim that “he had to act because Russia was threatened” is juxtaposed with Biden’s argument that he needed to respond because if “terrorists don’t pay a price for their terror” and “dictators don’t pay a price for their aggression,” there will be “more chaos and death and more destruction. They keep going, and the cost and the threats to America and the world keep rising” (Biden 2023a). The scope of the argument is broadened to include a higher goal: “If we don’t stop [Putin],” Biden warns, “he won’t limit himself just to Ukraine;” “if we walk away . . . , would-be aggressors around the world would be emboldened to try the same” (Biden 2023a). Putin claims he carried out the invasion because Ukraine was created by the Soviet Union and never had real statehood (Biden 2022c. See also Biden 2023a). To which Biden responds that America “[stands] up against aggression” (Biden 2024), it “stands up to bullies. . . . This is who we are” (Biden 2022b). The difference is further drawn between the suggested incentives underlying the actors’ action when Putin’s selfish wants are contrasted to Biden’s selfless service. While Putin is said to have taken military action against Ukraine to satisfy his own “desire” (Biden 2022b), “ambitions” (Biden 2022c), and “appetite for power and control” (Biden 2023a), Biden presents his reaction as “a smart investment” in “American security for generations,” which will “keep American troops out of harm’s way” and “build a world that is safer, more peaceful, and more prosperous” (Biden 2023a). While Putin is said to be aiming to “annihilate a neighboring democracy” (Biden 2023a), to “[extinguish] Ukraine’s right to exist as a state . . . and . . . as a people” (Biden 2022s), Biden insists that his goals are every nation’s “freedom, independence, self-determination” (Biden 2023a).

Ratios. This analysis suggests that the featured term of both pentads is the act, indicating that Biden sees the situation in Ukraine in terms of action and thus justifies his approach to dealing with it by focusing upon the question of what happened. The following table summarizes the rhetorical means that the president used to structure his perspective of the situation and rationalize his response to it.

Kenneth Burke's Pentad: The 2022 Russia's Attack on Ukraine

	Act	Agent	Scene	Agency	Purpose
Pentad	Russia's assault on Ukraine/ the US' use of economic sanctions and the activation of NATO military plans as a response to the assault	Russia – Vladimir Putin/the US and its allies and partners – Joseph R. Biden, Jr.	Autocracy/ democracy	Russia's use of military force to shift Ukraine into Russia's sphere of influence/ the US' use of economic sanctions and deployment of ground and air forces to strengthen NATO	Moscow's concerns regarding Russia's national security/ Washinton's responsibility for ensuring the safety of the US and the world
Controlling term	Act				
Philosophy	Realism				
Motive	To depict US foreign policy as one based on action; to position the agent as a man of action				

Source: Table created by the author.

Much of what we learn about the agents is through the prism of the acts. The narrative that details *what* was done shapes our understanding of *who* did it. Descriptions of Putin's long-term planning, thorough preparation, and steadfast execution expose him as the agent of war, being the primary and sole force behind the initiative and performance of the action. References to Biden's diplomatic efforts, security warnings, and reactive economic and political response depict the American president as the ambassador of peace, actively leading nations working with the US in partnership based on consultation and collective action. Emphasizing what the US did to prevent the war serves to excuse Washington for whatever actions were required to stave off the aggression and to absolve Biden of responsibility for how the situation developed. Stressing what Russia did to pursue its military objectives functions to assign the blame for the act of aggression to

Moscow and serves to make Putin personally answerable for the consequences that follow from it.

The act also affects the treatment of the scene. The reading of Russia's actions creates a scene of subjugation and destruction dominated by fear and chaos. By contrast, an interpretation of US actions suggests that the American response is what serves peace and security and ensures freedom and order. The scene is largely set by Putin's choice to launch an invasion and his will to follow through with a full-scale war. Its development is shaped by Biden's decision to repel the attack and his determination to stop the aggression. Much of what the scene will look like as the conflict evolves depends on both Russia's persistence in subjugating Ukraine and US pressure to weaken and isolate the aggressor. The act is credited with a direct impact on the scene when Biden describes the steps the US and its partners and allies took to actively oppose Russia. The act also takes precedence over the scene when the president predicts potentially dire consequences should America and the world withdraw their support for Ukraine.

Consistent with the action orientation is the presentation of the agency. The nature of the act determines the means used to carry it out. The description of Russia's actions suggests that the agency associated with it is unjust, unjustified, and unnecessary. Moscow's violence is tied to war crimes and crimes against humanity. It is linked to acts of torture, rape, and murder, to crimes of taking hostages, inhumane treatment, and willful killing. Putin's violence is presented as a weapon used without shame or remorse, but rather with a sense of impunity and disregard for accountability. In the description of the US' action, in turn, the agency is depicted as fair, warranted, and essential. Washington's use of economic sanctions and political pressures suggests that the US tries to bring peace to Ukraine without the use of force. Emphasis placed on principles and beliefs suggests that America's response is morally mandated. The fact that it is taken after consultation and in cooperation with US allies and partners suggests that it is legally as well as morally right.

Finally, what the agents do reflects what the perceived purpose is. Putin demonstrates by action his intention to subjugate and control Ukraine; by contrast, the action undertaken by the US and its allies and partners is aimed towards helping Ukraine defend its independence and sovereignty. There are also broader causes. Russia's invasion represents Putin's ambition to undo the post-Cold War world order; while the US' response to the attack reflects Biden's desire to maintain it. Such language functions rhetorically to expose Putin's goal as anarchy and defend Biden's response on the ground of maintaining established law and order. To support Putin's actions is comparable to breaking agreements, abusing power, and breaching human rights. To step up Biden's efforts is presented as equivalent

to honoring commitments, exercising responsible authority, and respecting fundamental freedoms.

7. Discussion and conclusions

Motive. If discovery of the dominant term suggests the motive, finding the act to be the controlling pentadic feature indicates that the speaker's view of the situation and options available to him for reaction are concerned with realism. Realism, across various fields and disciplines, shifts the focus from subjective intent to objective mechanics of action. In a rhetorical sense, Kenneth Burke redefines "a thing" not merely as a static entity that exists, but as something actively "taking form" (1969, 228), where the individual functions as a participant in a larger structure rather than a central character (Brock 1989). This agrees with Sonja K. Foss's observation that realism treats abstract or general terms as having an objective reference, situating discourse in external reality rather than subjective perception (1996, 461). Consequently, as Andrew King clarifies, what people "are" is secondary to what they do; behavior and action are the primary performance measures (2009, 173). This objective stance is seen in Roy Bhaskar's (2008) critical realism, which posits that active engagement with a reality exists independent of our thoughts. When applied to politics, this philosophy represents a naturalistic pursuit of power. As exemplified in the tradition of Hans Morgenthau (1967), Kenneth Waltz (1979), and John Mearsheimer (2001), political realism views states as selfish entities driven by the desire to accumulate and consolidate strength and expand power and influence. In this framework, rhetoric serves the goal of state security, persuading others to support one power's interests within the calculated logic of the balance of power.

Biden speaks to the idea that concepts are real when he says: "In moments like these, we have to remind—we have to remember who we are. We are the United States of America—the United States of America. And there is nothing—nothing—beyond our capacity if we do it together" (Biden 2023a). He emphasizes the significance of action when he states: "the United States has come together with our allies and partners . . . to stand against Russian aggression. But the work in front of us is . . . [the] kind of world . . . we want to build. . . . That's our responsibility. . . . The decisions we make over the next 5 years or so are going to determine and shape our lives for decades to come" (Biden 2023b). The proposed assumption that emerges from the present analysis in which the motive is situated in the act is that Biden wants public opinion to see the situation in Ukraine and the US' response to it in terms of realistic action. Consequently, while the president explicitly talks about what the US is, he makes it clear that America demonstrates

adherence to its values through action. The act is defined as the means for the US to show that it has the capacity to back its talk. While it is important that the US help Ukraine maintain its sovereignty, Ukraine must play its role in helping the US show that its messaging aligns with actions, fostering trust, reliability, and unity.

Beyond depicting US foreign policy as one based on action, ordering of the elements of the situation in such a way that the act becomes controlling functions rhetorically to position the agent as a man of action. As King notes, “We admire devotees of action . . . we admire the leader who rushes headlong into an act. . . . We have a fear of too much reflection. . . . Too much reflection and analysis frightens people. We tend to associate thoughtful decision making with passivity, a state that fills red-blooded Americans with fear” (2009, 169). Prioritizing action connects behavior to character and structures the audience’s thinking about the president and his policy. We see in Biden a manager capable of dealing with difficult situations, holding his ground and defying adversaries. We find in the president a leader who is able to unite others around a common cause, win over support for a suggested course of action, and successfully accomplish established goals. Such perceptions lend credibility to Biden’s claims regarding the situation in Ukraine by affirming for the audience that he has the character qualities requisite to effectively address the conflict.

Positioning Biden as an action-oriented agent further serves to emphasize the strategic nature of his approach: his policy towards Ukraine is an action policy which reflects America’s unwavering engagement and continued commitment, both of which are crucial to the US’ position as a global power. Although Biden’s approach excludes the traditional—forceful—US methods of handling international conflicts, he contends its non-military alternatives are strong and effective, albeit viewed in the long term. While this strategy represents a departure from unilateral military action, the impact and role of the US in international affairs remains substantial. Economic penalties, political pressure, and diplomatic measures are presented as potent instruments of defense, deterrence, and defeat. Similarly, acting through alliances, coalitions, and partnerships is shown to strengthen the common cause and determination to serve it. The administration argues that a less proactive stance does not diminish the significance of the eventual US response. From the White House’s perspective, the decision to delegate leadership in certain areas of the conflict is framed not as a lack of commitment, but as a strategic choice to bolster collective international agency.

This reading of Biden’s statement of motive invites interpretation of the rhetorical forms that shape the president’s understanding of the post-post-Cold War era. It suggests a sense of the world as being divided into contradictory dichotomies, with the forces of democracy confronting, defying, and resisting the forces of anarchy.

It posits that the competing forces' goals and objectives, their policies and practices, their approaches and techniques are mutually exclusive and exhaustive. This view is grounded in the assumption that states engage in world affairs for a combination of ethical and pragmatic reasons, acting in a manner that aligns with their moral principles while also serving their best interests. The world's states have divided themselves into two opposing camps: the defenders and the enemies of democracy. The role of defenders belongs to the US and its allies and partners. While all are considered equal, the US has emerged as the leader of the world's democracies, and through its moral principles and physical force has rendered itself essential. The role of the enemy is occupied by individuals, states, and organizations that seek to impose their will upon others or who support anarchy, dictatorship, and tyranny. Each camp is challenged to prove the superiority of its system over that of its adversaries. Each is tested on the effectiveness of its preferred means of action. The democratic governments rely on diplomatic, economic, and political pressures in the first place and on physical force in the second. They prefer to negotiate conflicts so that confrontations could be avoided. Military power is tied to the protection and defense of national security interests. For the democracies, such power is justified in the service of freedom and peace. Additionally, it is a component of meeting global commitments. Just the opposite is the case regarding authoritarian, dictatorial, and tyrannical regimes who often force in pursuit of their self-serving goals and in open contempt for international agreements. When employing military might, authoritarian regimes prefer unilateral action—in contrast to the defenders of the rule of law, who favor working in and through coalitions over acting independently of others.

Examining how Biden used language to respond to the situation in Ukraine, this analysis offered an opportunity to learn what drove his political action. It found that the president wanted public opinion to see the situation in Ukraine and the US' response to it in terms of action. This perspective rationalized his policy and, consequently, promoted a view of him as an action agent. It exposed a strategy for providing support to Ukraine without entering the conflict. It expressed resolve to engage in the situation while at the same time setting clear limits on that engagement. The view positioned the president as a leader able to link moral claims to realistic considerations involving national interests. His language was direct and unambiguous, designed to avoid escalating tensions or expanding the conflict.

Implications of this study's findings are twofold. First, looking into Biden's rhetorical action, we learned about the language that was relied on to guide public judgment of the situation in Ukraine. Exploring how the president's articulation of his position gives expression to motivation towards a non-military course of action

helps to develop a better understanding of what he considers to be most effective when measured against American values and interests. By exploring the language that reveals motivation behind political action we are better able to understand where the persuasive power of communication is located, what rhetoric facilitates agreement, and how linguistic choices impact political processes and outcomes. Second, analyzing Biden's argumentation for non-military action, we critically read the president's understanding of the political reality of the post-post-Cold War era. Considering the demands and constraints on the use of force to manage foreign conflicts, in the context of and in relation to global reaction, national interests, and international commitments, informs our interpretation regarding how restraint upon forceful action in response to foreign aggression is explained and justified.

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