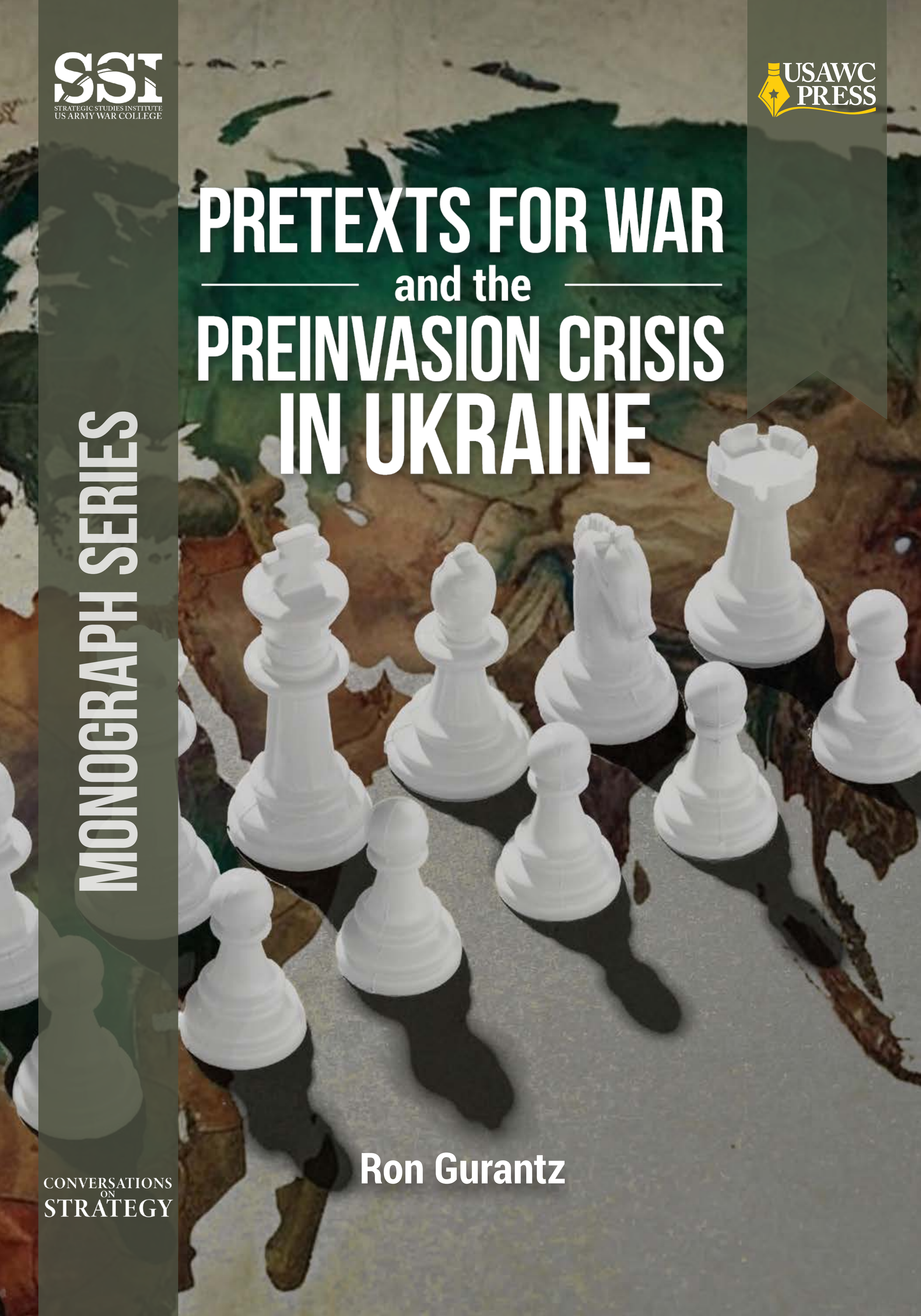

PRETEXTS FOR WAR and the PREINVASION CRISIS IN UKRAINE

Ron Gurantz

"The Army's Think Tank"

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Foreword

Russia's invasion of Ukraine was preceded by months of Russian propaganda and covert operations meant to provide it with a pretext for war. The United States responded with a creative and unprecedented strategy of declassifying and publicizing intelligence that debunked, or in some cases pre-bunked, Russian claims. Many observers believe the strategy contributed to the Biden-Harris administration's broader success in gaining and maintaining allied support for Ukraine.

In this monograph, Dr. Ron Gurantz analyzes US strategy during the preinvasion period to learn lessons about countering attempts to find pretexts for war. He looks beyond the intelligence disclosures to examine how the United States' military strategy and diplomacy also helped deny Russia the excuses it was looking for. He shows that a combination of military restraint, good-faith diplomacy, and transparency can foil attempts to shift blame for war by making clear which side is the aggressor.

This monograph can help inform decision making by military officers and government officials. The historical review of deceptive tactics countries have used to justify war can prepare decisionmakers for those tactics in a future crisis. The concept of *counterjustification* and the methods of a counterjustification strategy provide officials a toolbox for planning a response. Some of the major takeaways of the monograph—that officials should expect their political leadership to make counterjustification a goal of their activities and operations, and that it works best when the instruments of national power are all working in that direction—offer useful guidance.

The monograph also examines some of the trade-offs policymakers will have to make in balancing counterjustification against other goals like deterrence. Military restraint, an openness to negotiation, and transparency about intelligence findings can all have drawbacks, and the monograph reviews them. Decisionmakers in future crises will have to make difficult judgment calls about the value of counterjustification in their specific situations and the risks they are willing to take to win the information battle.

Dr. C. Anthony Pfaff
Director, Strategic Studies Institute
and US Army War College Press

Executive Summary

In this monograph, Dr. Ron Gurantz analyzes US strategy in the lead-up to the Russia-Ukraine War to derive lessons about how to counter an adversary's attempts to justify war. He argues that a combination of military restraint, diplomacy, and intelligence disclosures firmly placed responsibility for the war on Russia, which helped gain allied and public support for Ukraine. He also examines the potential drawbacks of this strategy for future crises.

The first part of the monograph reviews the literature on crisis strategy and introduces the concept of *counterjustification*. Scholars have written a great deal about international crises, focusing mainly on how to deter aggression and avoid escalation. But they have recognized crises are also used to justify war. Beyond simply explaining one's reasons for war, states may provoke military confrontations, instigate political or social turmoil, engineer diplomatic breakdowns, or create other emergencies to have an excuse for immediate military action. Little has been written about strategies to counter these deceptive activities. The monograph defines *counterjustification* as the act or effect of denying an opponent a pretext for war.

The second part of the monograph is a case study of US strategy in the preinvasion crisis. It identifies and evaluates the United States' different counterjustification tactics. Russia engaged in many of the pretext-seeking behaviors identified in the first part of the monograph, like conducting bad-faith diplomacy and attempting to provoke or stage military incidents. The United States' response combined several elements that undermined Russia's deceptive activities. The most well-known elements were the intelligence disclosures to expose Russia's military preparations and covert operations. The United States' willingness to pursue a negotiated settlement and its restrained military response also helped deny Russia a pretext for war.

Although the US strategy appeared to succeed, the monograph acknowledges that conclusively measuring the effectiveness of these tactics is difficult. Moreover, counterjustification tactics carry real dangers. Military restraint can weaken deterrence and leave allies vulnerable to attack; negotiations with aggressors can end in appeasement; and intelligence disclosures can damage intelligence operations. The United States will have to take these possibilities seriously in future crises. Counterjustification is one of several important objectives in crisis strategy, and future leaders will have to make judgments about the emphasis to place on counterjustification in each individual crisis.

Nevertheless, the monograph concludes the US strategy in the preinvasion crisis provides a valuable starting point for thinking through counterjustification strategy. Moreover, the monograph shows that military leaders and government officials should expect that their operations and activities will be guided, in part, by the goal of counterjustification. Finally, the case study suggests the strategy is most effective when the military, diplomatic, and informational elements work together toward the same goal. If the military and diplomatic elements of the strategy are inconsistent with the informational element, the messaging might lack credibility.

Pretexts for War and the Preinvasion Crisis in Ukraine

A central concern for American policymakers during the Cold War was crisis strategy. In this context, *crisis* refers to a period when countries are on the verge of military conflict, but a state of war does not yet exist. The United States repeatedly confronted the Soviet Union in episodes like the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Berlin Blockade, in some cases facing a serious risk of military conflict. The United States had to navigate these showdowns without either yielding to aggression or stumbling into a nuclear war. As competition intensifies with China and Russia, these kinds of crises are likely to return. The preinvasion crisis in Ukraine may have been a preview of future showdowns in Taiwan and elsewhere.

The main goals of crisis strategy are usually understood to be deterring aggression and managing escalation. Less well studied is the goal of *counterjustification*. Crises are often used as opportunities to justify war. States make efforts to gain public and allied support for possible military action, and aggressors often engage in deceptive activities to create pretexts for war. Before the Ukraine invasion, Russia made outrageous claims and unrealistic demands to shift blame for the crisis and tried to provoke or stage incidents that would justify a military response. Countering efforts like these and denying the adversary casus belli is an important, and underappreciated, objective in crisis strategy.

The tactics Russia used have a long history and have received attention in the literature on crisis decision making. Less has been written on efforts to counter them. The preinvasion crisis in Ukraine provides an opportunity to identify and evaluate strategies for counterjustification. The United States adopted some innovative tactics that appeared to be for counterjustification purposes, or at least had counterjustification effects. Although the United States did not deter Russia's invasion, evidence suggests it foiled Putin's attempt to generate excuses for war and contributed to the Biden-Harris administration's success in generating allied and public support for Ukraine.[1]

In this paper, I examine counterjustification strategies and tactics through an analysis of the events of the preinvasion crisis. First, I review the existing literature on justification-seeking behavior during crises and find insights on how states should approach counterjustification. Then, I present a case study of the preinvasion crisis in Ukraine to identify and evaluate counterjustification

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strategies. I examine the counterjustification purposes and effects of the United States' military, diplomatic, and informational strategies. I also evaluate the costs and risks of the US strategy and derive lessons for future crises. I conclude by discussing trade-offs between counterjustification and other crisis objectives such as deterrence.

I show that the United States adopted a strategy of military restraint, negotiation, and intelligence disclosures, at least in part for the purposes of counterjustification. The most innovative and lauded elements of the US strategy were the intelligence disclosures to expose Russia's military preparations and covert operations. The United States' willingness to pursue a negotiated settlement based on principles Russia had previously agreed to, and its relatively unprovocative military response, also helped to place the responsibility for the war on Russia. I argue this combination of patience and transparency had the effect of frustrating Russian efforts to generate an excuse for war.

Though the policy appears to have been successful, measuring the effectiveness of these tactics is difficult. Moreover, they come with drawbacks and trade-offs. Military restraint might be politically effective but physically dangerous. Good-faith diplomacy may ensure war is truly a last resort, but too much accommodation may lead to appeasement. Declassifying intelligence could make for an effective information campaign but could damage intelligence operations. In the future, the United States will have to adapt its strategy to the particulars of a given crisis and balance competing considerations. Perhaps the main takeaway from the case study is that military, intelligence, and other government agencies must anticipate that counterjustification considerations will matter to national leadership in crisis situations, and they should be prepared for their own operations to be guided by them.

Justification of Hostility in International Crises

There are many definitions of an international crisis. In contrast to other uses of the term, which may refer to natural disasters or social unrest, the international relations field uses the term to describe confrontations where countries are on the verge of war but where major military operations have not begun. Most definitions have a few common elements. They typically involve an interaction between two or more countries involving 1) an increased risk of war; 2) a short time to make decisions; and 3) important interests or values at stake.[1] I focus on the preinvasion period in Ukraine as a distinct crisis period leading up to the outbreak of war, even though the war itself is still frequently labeled as a crisis.

Scholars have produced many studies on the dynamics of international crises.[2] Crises can start with intentional provocations or with accidents, and typically consist of military preparations, diplomacy, and efforts to shape public opinion. Countries can have a range of goals, such as preparing for war, securing concessions, or deterring aggression. Deterring aggression was frequently the United States' main objective in Cold War crises, so many of the studies are on the causes of deterrence success and failure. The literature has typically viewed crises as exercises in brinkmanship, where countries threaten war or other punishments to force opponents to back down before force becomes necessary.

Richard Ned Lebow argued that some crises are not exercises in brinkmanship at all but are instead exercises in justifying hostility.[3] In these cases, one of the antagonists has already decided upon war and uses the crisis to justify military action. Unlike brinkmanship crises, they do not involve sincere attempts to convince an opponent to back down before force becomes necessary. Instead, the goal of at least one side is to find an excuse for immediate military action so it can start a war while shifting blame to the opponent. These crises are performances for an audience more than they are genuine showdowns with enemies. They can involve attempts to provoke military confrontations, instigate political or social turmoil, engineer diplomatic breakdowns, or create other emergencies. I review these tactics in more detail below.

Why do states engage in this behavior? Clearly, leaders worry domestic or international audiences may not find their real reasons for war sufficiently compelling. Sometimes this is because leaders wage war for morally objectionable reasons. Even when a war could reasonably be justified, though, states will often seek pretexts. The decision for war is usually driven by multiple short- and long-term considerations and may be beset by uncertainty and calculated risk. Such complex calculations may not produce the urgency and moral clarity necessary to gain broad political support. Leaders can explain their reasons

in the simplest and most compelling manner possible, but even the best rhetoric can fail. Emergencies, on the other hand, give leaders the opportunity to convince audiences that war is necessary and necessary *now*. They allow the government to claim that the actions of an enemy made continued peace impossible and left no other choice but war.

Such motivations are apparent in the speeches that follow military incidents, which typically portray enemy attacks as unprovoked and as part of a broader plan of aggression, regardless of whether that portrayal is true. President James K. Polk, for instance, claimed the attack that started the Mexican-American War was unprovoked, not mentioning that American troops had moved into disputed territory.[4] He claimed the United States had "tried every effort at reconciliation," despite negotiations having already collapsed over US demands for Mexican territory.[5] He also claimed that Mexico, through its actions, had "proclaimed that hostilities have commenced, and that the two nations are now at war," even though the attack was an isolated one.[6] Despite significant doubts, Congress authorized war because of the emergency.

Leaders do seem to believe that crises should be managed in a way that helps convince audiences to support their cause. To be fair, the historical record is full of examples of countries going to war on the thinnest of pretexts. Staged incidents and outrageous claims are often little more than a fig leaf that allows governments to avoid openly admitting sinister motives. But states sometimes make major sacrifices, forgoing preemptive strikes or delaying war, for lack of justification.[7] Moreover, justification appears to be a consideration in every crisis. Lebow exaggerates by labeling justification as a distinct *type* of crisis. Even in crises mostly characterized by brinkmanship, governments seek to justify their behavior and may try to generate false pretexts. These efforts make clear justification is not a sideshow.

The fact that governments believe having a casus belli is important is not necessarily evidence that it *is* important. Leaders are not the source of all wisdom, and decisions to delay military action and seek justification have been criticized as foolish. But the fact that national leaders have consistently invested effort into generating pretexts in many different historical contexts suggests it cannot be ignored completely. The national leaders are the ones who have to navigate competing political demands at the highest levels, and they are frequently attuned to the preferences of allies, legislatures, political supporters, the media, and the public. Their sense that justification is necessary should not simply be dismissed as a misconception.

In fact, evidence suggests these leaders are not wrong. Governments usually need some level of support from the public or key domestic audiences. Public opinion studies have shown support for military action is higher when it is intended to restrain aggression, and dramatic events like being attacked can result in a substantial increase in support for the government in rally-around-the-flag effects.[8] Allies' decisions to participate or abstain can be deciding factors in a war's outcome. States may seek endorsement of their military actions from allies or international organizations, and they will often attempt to signal limited aims to the international community and explain their reasons for war in ways that are consistent with international law or practice.[9]

That military incidents and other emergencies can serve as pretexts for war seems intuitive, but why a single attack or incident—especially one that could be staged—could change so many minds is somewhat puzzling. Some authors have proposed the reaction is not rational but emotional. Michael Colaresi argues that it is rational for the public to give the government the "benefit of the doubt" during emergencies because the stakes could be high in the moment and the public can hold leaders accountable later for misleading them.[10] The attack may also act as a device for coordinating the public's views. Supposing people want to support war only if they believe others support it, a dramatic public incident can quickly convince individuals that everyone else now supports military action, even if some lingering doubt about the details of the incident remains.[11]

Notably, pretext-seeking tactics can be observed across regime types. One reason may be because many possible target audiences exist: the domestic public, the legislature, allied governments, third parties, or even the enemy population or military. Even totalitarian regimes with total control of the domestic information environment have felt compelled to seek pretexts to influence foreign audiences.[12] The same types of justification, like self-defense or the defense of sovereignty, are frequently used regardless of regime type or audience—some justifications do seem to be universal.[13] In fact, convincing one audience can also help convince others, as rallying support from other countries can help generate domestic support.[14]

The distinction between pretext and sincere justification is not always clear. Leaders may believe arguments that appear outrageous to outside observers. Decisionmakers may be susceptible to motivated reasoning and can deceive themselves when doing so is in their interest. Their reasoning could be clouded by ideology, emotion, or just plain foolishness. Moreover, all politics involves some shading of the truth, so the line between normal political rhetoric and outright deception is always fuzzy. Still, a long history exists of patently false claims and covert operations to stage attacks that can definitively be categorized as deceptive.

The Tactics of Justification and Counterjustification

Previous studies have described tactics for generating pretexts, but they have only offered piecemeal insights for how to counter them. I define counterjustification as the act or effect of denying an opponent a pretext for war. Unlike deterrence and escalation management, it has not been a high priority topic for crisis scholarship. I can only speculate why this has been the case. It may derive from deterrence being the focus in the study of crises. The typical scholarly view is that deterrence is achieved by the application of national power rather than the pursuit of moral justification.[15] Doubts remain about whether justification really matters for international decision making. But if justification is important for gaining public and allied support for war, then it logically follows that successful counterjustification could improve one's prospects in war and even make one's enemy think twice about attacking.

Many potential justifications for war exist, from self-defense, the defense of allies, or the defense of universal principles to narrower grounds like religious values or the redress of historical injustices.[16] Whatever the overarching justification, states usually want some imminent threat or emergency to explain why the dispute cannot be settled peacefully and why going to war has become an immediate necessity. The immediate pretext may amplify the broader justifications, but states still seek incidents and emergencies rather than simply trying to make a convincing argument. In this section, I review common tactics states have used to generate pretexts for war and the insights the literature has provided on countering these tactics.

Justification is, first and foremost, an exercise in messaging. If the existing circumstances are insufficient to generate support for war, governments will use crises to engage in threat inflation.[17] They will exploit their access to information to present misleading evidence of an imminent threat. Before the Iraq War, the Bush administration misrepresented the available intelligence by claiming Iraq was on the verge of building nuclear weapons and was cooperating with al-Qaeda.[18] Threat inflation can also involve the disclosure or fabrication of nefarious plots. Franklin D. Roosevelt claimed he possessed a secret map showing Nazi plans for the conquest of South America, which was later discovered to be a British forgery.[19] Threat inflation also usually involves loudly proclaiming one's own innocence and victimhood in the dispute.

Countering threat inflation can be difficult. Other governments, along with opposition parties, the press, or independent experts, must have access to independent sources of information, the credibility to make the contrary case, and the means of conveying that information to relevant

audiences.[20] A government engaged in threat inflation may command a great deal of information and authority, and other actors may find themselves unable to debunk misleading claims. They may also be under political or social pressure not to do so. Audiences in one country may also default to believing their own government during crises and reject competing narratives from other governments.[21] Trust in one's own government tends to increase when foreign policy issues are prominent.[22]

The best evidence of an imminent threat, of course, is an overt act of aggression. That is why states may be reluctant to shoot first even if they believe war is inevitable. Israel decided against a preemptive strike or full mobilization in 1973 despite knowing an Egyptian attack was imminent.[23] When attacks are not forthcoming, states will exaggerate incidents to blame an adversary for starting a war or acting in a way that justifies war. Lyndon B. Johnson seized upon reports of an attack in the Gulf of Tonkin to gain congressional support for war in Vietnam, later learning the attack may not have occurred at all.[24] Congress and the American press seized upon the sinking of the USS *Maine* to pressure President William McKinley into war against Spain.[25]

Failing this, states may attempt to provoke adversaries to attack. Before World War II, Roosevelt ordered American warships to pursue German submarines in the Atlantic, leading to a series of naval clashes.[26] He misrepresented these encounters to the public, and some argue he sought to bait Germany into attacks. According to Winston Churchill, Roosevelt said "[e]verything was to be done to force an 'incident' . . . which would justify him in opening hostilities."[27] When provocations are insufficient, states may even attempt the wholesale staging of incidents to frame the enemy, commonly known as false-flag operations. Nazi Germany went so far as faking a Polish attack before its invasion of Poland, with its troops seizing a German radio station, broadcasting a Polish message, and shooting a prisoner they had dressed in a Polish uniform, whose body was shown to journalists as proof of a Polish attack.[28]

The best way to counter pretexts based on military incidents would seem to be exercising restraint so the incidents don't occur, or so the identity of the instigator is clear. Adolf Hitler ordered his navy not to engage American ships to avoid giving Roosevelt an excuse for war.[29] Before the Yom Kippur War, the United States told Israel it would not receive support if it fired first.[30] Of course, choosing that response is not always so easy. The tactic of forcing military incidents is effective because it creates real dilemmas. A state may have to choose between being blamed for war or allowing its forces to be attacked

with impunity. Moreover, enough ambiguity often surrounds these incidents that even practicing restraint may not be enough to avoid blame.

Provocations other than military attacks can also be staged as a pretext for war. The Joint Chiefs of Staff under John F. Kennedy considered a range of possibilities to generate a pretext to invade Cuba, including assassinations, terrorist bombings, and hijackings.[31] Naval incidents, from seizures to sinkings, have been used to justify war.[32] Emergencies such as riots and other forms of social and political unrest can justify intervention, allowing one country to gain a toehold in another before pursuing greater ambitions. Hitler engineered political crises in Austria and Czechoslovakia to justify sending in troops to protect civilians and restore order.[33] The Soviet Union repeatedly claimed it was "invited" to resolve political unrest in Eastern Europe.[34] Even a war itself can be used to justify intervention on the pretext of separating warring parties, as in the Suez Crisis.[35]

Diplomacy can also be used to generate an excuse for war, either in response to incidents or on its own. States may make demands they know will be rejected so they can blame the adversary for ending negotiations. Evan Braden Montgomery refers to this as "counterfeit diplomacy."[36] States may make excessive demands predicated on security concerns, particularly after incidents. Following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Austria-Hungary sent Serbia a list of 10 demands that were almost impossible to meet. To everyone's surprise, Serbia accepted nine—Austria-Hungary declared war anyway.[37]

In contrast to the Austria-Hungary example, where the demands were excessive, most cases of counterfeit diplomacy Montgomery describes involve relatively accommodating offers. In these cases, states design offers that can demonstrate a desire for peaceful resolution even if they are still likely to be rejected. Sometimes, states simply want to continue negotiating to show diplomacy is still ongoing, even if they are not making a sincere effort to reach a deal. Before the Persian Gulf War, the United States proposed diplomatic meetings—even though it had no intention to change its offers—so it could blame Iraq for rejecting peaceful compromise.[38] As with threat inflation, states loudly express their desire for a peaceful resolution throughout this process.

According to Montgomery, the biggest danger for a country engaged in counterfeit diplomacy is if the opponent calls its bluff by accepting the offer or making a counterproposal.[39] He notes the cases where states did not do this are puzzling. Part of the answer must be that, like military provocations, these situations pose genuine dilemmas. Conceding to excessive demands can be costly, open the door to further demands, and still not avert war. Agreeing to more accommodating demands, on the other hand, should be less

risky. But even these demands are usually constructed in ways that make them unacceptable.

In summary, the literature has identified threat inflation, provoked or faked incidents, and counterfeit diplomacy as the main tactics of justifying hostility. As I describe below, Russia engaged in all three in the preinvasion crisis. In theory, these tactics can be countered by disputing threat inflation, avoiding military incidents, and negotiating even in the face of bad-faith diplomacy. But these counterjustification tactics are not guaranteed to work, and they come with their own risks. In the next section, I describe how the United States' crisis strategy included these and other methods, and in the following section I analyze their effects in countering Russia's attempts to generate a pretext for its invasion of Ukraine.

The Preinvasion Crisis

The United States' detection of a Russian military buildup in September and October 2021 began the crisis that ended with the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. During those months, Russia's behavior was consistent with the strategy of justifying hostility. Russia made outrageous and unfounded claims about the Ukrainian government's threat to Ukraine's Russian minority and to Russia itself. It ludicrously denied its military buildup and appeared to negotiate in bad faith. Russia repeatedly sought to exaggerate, provoke, or fake military incidents. Of course, some of these actions may not have been insincere. Perhaps Putin believed his claims about the Ukrainian threat, and perhaps there was a negotiated settlement that could have averted war. Denying the military buildup and staging incidents, on the other hand, were clear acts of deception, which casts doubt on the sincerity of the other behavior.

The United States' response was multifaceted. Officials declared a commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty. They sent forces to the region and provided military aid to Ukraine, but resisted calls for more extensive deployments or direct intervention. American officials threatened severe economic sanctions and coordinated that threat with allies. They also shared intelligence with allies to convince them of the danger from Russia. Diplomats sought to address some of Russia's security concerns while also rejecting its more far-reaching demands. Maybe the most notable part of the strategy was repeated intelligence disclosures to expose Russia's plans and refute its propaganda.

Counterjustification appeared to be a motivation for American policy choices. President Joseph R. Biden's speech following the invasion of Ukraine emphasized many elements consistent with counterjustification. He mentioned the "declassified evidence about Russia's plans and cyberattacks and false pretexts," released so "that there can be no confusion or cover-up about what Putin was doing."[40] Biden discussed Russia's "outlandish and baseless claims" and "staged political theater." He mentioned the "good-faith" diplomacy the United States and its allies engaged in to avert war and that Russia rejected. He called the attack "unprovoked" and "unjustified" and repeatedly explained Russia's military preparations as premeditated and aggressive rather than reactive or defensive.

The Biden-Harris administration certainly had other goals during the crisis, such as deterring aggression and preventing escalation. Although the intelligence revelations were clearly meant to undermine Russia's justifications for war, American diplomacy was probably driven by some genuine hope for a diplomatic solution, and its military deployments were constrained

by considerations of economy and escalation. But even these elements of US crisis strategy were geared in large part toward the international audience and the need to address allied skepticism. Many allies appeared to doubt the Biden-Harris administration's alarm over Russia's intentions and continued to believe the crisis could be settled diplomatically. The US strategy was to expose Putin's aggressive intentions and build an enduring coalition, and it certainly seemed to have this effect.[41]

To evaluate the justification and counterjustification tactics of the crisis, I divide the elements of the strategy into three categories: military, diplomacy, and information. Readers familiar with the military acronym diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (DIME) will recognize the categories as three of the four instruments of national power.[42] The fourth category, economic, is included in the diplomacy section because it plays a smaller role in counterjustification. One caveat is in order. This analysis of the preinvasion crisis is a first draft of history based on contemporary open-source reporting. As with most historical events, our understanding of the episode is likely to change substantially as more information becomes available.[43] Useful lessons can still be derived for future crises.

Military Strategy

The Russian military buildup began in the fall of 2021. Russia had already stationed large numbers of troops near Ukraine and had conducted an earlier buildup in April 2021, leading to a brief war scare.[44] It gave other indications of impending action throughout the summer, particularly through a change in public rhetoric.[45] Beginning with a military exercise in September, Russia appeared to start building up its forces for an invasion. The buildup matched Russian war plans of which the Biden-Harris administration was aware.[46] By the end of October, US officials believed the buildup would likely lead to an invasion of Ukraine, and the United States informed its allies and Russia it detected the preparations.[47] With satellite photos and social media videos showing the public these same developments, the Pentagon acknowledged its awareness of the Russian buildup on November 1.[48]

Russia continued its military buildup around Ukraine for the next four months, eventually reaching as many as 190,000 troops.[49] The buildup included a naval deployment in the Black Sea and the stationing of thousands of troops in Belarus.[50] It also included multiple cyberattacks against Ukraine, intensified shelling and shooting in the breakaway eastern regions, and several actions outside Ukraine that may have been meant to intimidate or distract. These include an unexplained

reversal of gas shipments to Europe on October 30 and an anti-satellite missile test on November 15.[51] Throughout, Russia conducted drills and military exercises while denying it intended an invasion or threatened Ukraine.

The US response exhibited a high level of restraint. Biden flatly ruled out sending American troops to Ukraine on December 8.[52] The Biden-Harris administration did not waver from this position for the rest of the crisis, even warning Americans they would not be rescued if they remained in Ukraine.[53] Military chiefs of both countries continued talks over "risk reduction" and "operational de-confliction," which could suggest coordination on avoiding military clashes or nuclear escalation.[54] The United States and Russia, along with the United Kingdom, France, and China—the other three permanent members of the UN Security Council and the recognized nuclear powers under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty—even released a joint statement in the middle of the crisis affirming "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought."[55]

Initial US military actions were limited to increased surveillance flights and the dispatch of cyber experts to Ukraine.[56] Eventually, in late December, Biden quietly approved an extra $200 million in military aid.[57] The first shipment arrived in Kyiv on January 22, a few days after Biden had announced his belief that Putin had already decided to invade. Over the next two weeks, the United States sent six more shipments of small-arms ammunition and anti-tank weapons. Allies also provided anti-tank and antiaircraft weapons and drones.[58] These shipments were highly publicized. Still, they pale in comparison to the almost $4 billion worth of military assistance the United States sent in the three months after the invasion and the over $75 billion provided since the war began.[59]

The United States and other NATO countries also deployed extra forces to Eastern Europe. The numbers were small—the United States only deployed a total of 3,000 troops.[60] The US government said they were mainly meant to reassure NATO allies who feared Russian aggression and to assist in humanitarian missions, though at the time the United States was also considering plans to train and supply Ukrainian insurgents from Eastern Europe.[61] The troops may have also been meant as punishment against Russia, as US officials warned the Russians that invading Ukraine would accomplish the very thing they were trying to avoid, which was more NATO deployments in Eastern Europe.[62] Biden immediately ordered another 7,000 troops to Europe once the invasion occurred.[63]

The final series of events leading to the invasion was set in motion in the middle of February and was instigated by Russia. On February 15, a major cyberattack struck Ukrainian government, military, and commercial websites.[64] On February 17, Russia-backed separatists intensified shelling in eastern Ukraine.[65] Shelling escalated over the next few days, with Russia claiming Ukraine was concentrating troops for attack and separatists releasing a video of a supposed Ukrainian saboteur.[66] On the morning of February 24, the full invasion of Ukraine began. Despite Russian claims these were responses to provocative actions, each step appeared to be initiated by Russia itself.

The military restraint the United States exhibited was not without controversy. Critics in Congress and the press, along with the Ukrainian government itself, demanded a much more forceful response. But the United States had many reasons to be restrained. Biden revealed his reason for ruling out direct intervention when he warned in February that Americans and Russians shooting at each other would be a "world war."[67] Similar worries limited the provision of major weapons platforms.[68] According to multiple officials, avoiding a direct conflict with Russia or the war spilling out of Ukraine were the United States' top priorities.[69] Allies were clearly worried about provoking Russia. As an organization, NATO has been largely kept out of providing military assistance to avoid the appearance of Ukrainian participation in NATO, even as individual members provide weapons.[70] The United States may have also worried more equipment could not be absorbed by Ukraine or would be captured by Russia.

In addition to these motivations, the United States also appeared concerned about denying Russia a pretext for war. Reporting suggested officials were reluctant to deliver weapons to Ukraine or deploy troops to Eastern Europe for fear of giving Russia a pretext to attack.[71] Other policies the United States adopted vis-à-vis Ukraine also seemed motivated by counterjustification concerns. American officials asked Ukraine to practice restraint along the border, and Ukrainian troops were told not to fire back unless absolutely necessary as Russian shooting and shelling increased.[72] American officials also worried that sharing detailed intelligence could enable Ukraine to strike Russia first.[73] The decisions to resist calls for more aggressive action likely were motivated, in part, by the goal of counterjustification.

Russia would probably not characterize American military assistance to Ukraine as restraint. The United States had been providing a steadily increasing amount of military assistance to Ukraine since 2014, totaling $400 million in 2021 alone.[74] This included a $60 million authorization that came in August after indications Putin was moving toward military action.[75] The United States also sent military advisors and participated in military exercises. The support

formed a significant part of Russia's grievances, specifically recent episodes such as NATO-Ukraine naval exercises and the use of Turkish drones.[76] And of course, US assistance to Ukraine during the war has been considerable. All this suggests the restraint the United States practiced during the crisis period may have been to avoid giving Russia an excuse for military action while external audiences were watching closely.

Diplomatic Strategy

Upon detecting Russia's military buildup, the United States began a flurry of diplomacy. Biden showed evidence of Russia's preparations to the leaders of France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom at the G20 summit in Rome, held on October 30–31. Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky two days later. On November 1, CIA Chief William J. Burns and Assistant Secretary of State Karen Donfried traveled to Moscow to warn Putin the United States was aware of his plans.[77]

Putin had been changing his language on Ukraine and denying its right to independence since earlier in the year.[78] But before Russia began making specific demands in December, the United States staked out its fundamental position. On November 10, the United States and Ukraine agreed to a US-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership where the United States reaffirmed its commitment to Ukrainian sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, which had long been official policy.[79] Blinken stated these commitments were "ironclad," and Biden made a similar statement later in the month.[80]

Putin, meanwhile, warned that NATO deployments of troops and weapons to Ukraine constituted a "red line" that would provoke a strong response. On December 1, he announced Russia would seek "legal" guarantees that NATO would stop expanding east and that weapons threatening to Russia would not be deployed in Europe.[81] Russia formally presented draft treaties on December 17, one to the United States and one to NATO. They included far-reaching demands that NATO agree not to admit any more countries or deploy military forces to NATO members in Eastern Europe, among other demands.[82]

These treaties would have effectively given Russia a veto over military deployments and alliance decisions in Europe. American and NATO officials immediately dismissed the proposals.[83] In fact, they were so unacceptable that they seemed intended to be rejected.[84] Russia appeared to be engaged in counterfeit diplomacy, though whether an acceptable agreement could have averted the invasion will be for future historians to determine. American officials claim to have viewed diplomacy as hopeless, though not all European officials did.[85]

Despite their doubts, the United States offered concessions. For meetings in Geneva on January 10–13, administration officials raised the possibility of negotiating on arms control, missile deployments, and limiting military exercises, including a revival of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.[86] These proposals were spelled out in more detail in the US and NATO written responses of January 26.[87] Biden also reassured Putin the United States had no intentions of placing nuclear weapons in Ukraine.[88]

In an apparent moment of honesty, Biden also admitted that Ukraine was unlikely to join NATO any time soon, which Zelensky later acknowledged in February.[89] Nevertheless, the White House didn't waver from its position that Russia should have no veto over NATO expansion or military deployments within NATO. It referred to statements Russia previously made affirming the "inherent right of each and every participating state to be free to choose or change its security arrangements, including treaties of alliance."[90] It coordinated responses with NATO allies to avoid any split in the alliance's position caused by Russia's separate treaties.

The American response also raised concerns regarding Russian military deployments and force posture and demanded Russia return to certain principles it had committed to in prior negotiations and agreements.[91] These demands included that Russia respect Ukrainian sovereignty by withdrawing forces from Crimea, which could also be considered a nonstarter.[92] Beyond these written and public exchanges, talks and meetings with Russia occurred regularly. Civilian and military leaders had repeated conversations and meetings with their Russian counterparts. Biden and Putin spoke over the phone three times.[93]

Many of the American diplomatic efforts revolved around economic sanctions. The United States threatened Russia with crippling and unprecedented sanctions in private and public and worked with allies to put together a package. Certain measures, such as cutting Russia off from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) global payments system, had long been discussed.[94] The administration previewed other potential measures to the press, such as cutting off Russian banks, embargoing transfers of American-made technology, and targeting the wealth of Putin's inner circle.[95] The United States arranged fuel supplies for Europe from the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia.[96]

In another apparent moment of honesty that was later dismissed as a gaffe, Biden appeared to give Putin an off-ramp from sanctions. Biden admitted that disunity may exist in NATO over how strongly to respond if Russia's invasion only amounted to a "minor incursion."[97] This was a tacit admission that the

United States was willing to tolerate a continuation of Russia's piecemeal tactics. Many worried that this statement appeared to be the United States giving permission for Russian aggression and to be evidence of allied disunity. On the other hand, by giving Russia a less ambitious alternative it chose to reject, the statement could also have had the effect of exposing how far-reaching Russia's goals were.

Other negotiating efforts took place without the United States. French President Emmanuel Macron engaged in a form of shuttle diplomacy, seeking to satisfy Putin's security demands while also de-escalating the crisis.[98] Macron's efforts were based on the Normandy format, a grouping of France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine, meant to implement the 2015 Minsk agreements. The Minsk agreements were meant to end the fighting in eastern Ukraine but were never implemented due to disagreements over interpretation.[99] Despite being signed under duress in the aftermath of the Crimea annexation, Ukraine expressed a willingness to adhere to them.

Zelensky said he would be willing to return to the Minsk agreements, which would begin with confidence-building measures and end with the implementation of a level of self-rule for the disputed eastern provinces of Ukraine. But he rejected negotiations with separatists.[100] Macron, for his part, appeared to be negotiating in part to show the French public that he made every effort for peace and wasn't dragged into the conflict by allies.[101] These efforts were controversial with Eastern European allies who viewed Macron as too willing to make concessions. Throughout the crisis, the United States coordinated its messages and actions with its NATO allies and Ukraine to avoid these kinds of divisions. Putin, meanwhile, courted support in meetings with the leadership of China, Iran, and other countries.

Leading up to the invasion, Russia reiterated that its central demands had not been met, though Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also noted a "kernel of rationality" in the American response.[102] Nevertheless, on February 21, Putin recognized two of eastern Ukraine's provinces as independent and ordered Russian forces in. The same day, Putin made a speech seen as laying out his justification for invasion, in which he sought to portray Russian diplomacy as a sincere attempt to avoid war that failed because of Ukraine and the West.[103] Finally, on the morning of February 24, he announced a "special military operation," and the full invasion of Ukraine began.[104]

It appears American diplomacy was driven, in large measure, by allied skepticism. Allies were not initially convinced Russia intended a major military operation, and they thought the United States might be exaggerating the threat.

American credibility was still damaged from its claims about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Its early reluctance to share specific intelligence did not help.[105] The United States eventually held a series of highly classified meetings with NATO allies and Ukraine to convince them of the depth of the crisis, including a presentation by Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines at NATO Headquarters on November 17 that administration officials described as a turning point in allied attitudes.[106]

Whether the United States was sincerely attempting to settle the dispute alongside its allies or engaged in a conscious effort to show that diplomacy would fail, the United States did attempt to allay allied fears through negotiations with Russia. By going through the motions of trying to negotiate a settlement, it made sure it couldn't be blamed for missing opportunities for peace or causing any subsequent conflict.[107] Sincere diplomacy on smaller issues, and a demonstrated willingness to try to address some of Russia's security concerns, were ways to convince allies war could not be avoided without unacceptable compromises. At the same time, the United States was careful to do so without abandoning its allies or allowing daylight to emerge between their positions. It fell back on principles it could be confident were widely shared and previous agreements that even Russia had been a party to.

Information Strategy

Countering Russian messaging was a priority throughout the crisis. Russian messaging was geared toward justifying military action and shifting blame for the crisis. Russia repeatedly denied it threatened Ukraine and instead claimed Ukraine and NATO were increasing military activity and exacerbating the crisis. Russia's deputy UN ambassador said Russia had no plan to invade Ukraine and would not do so "unless we're provoked by Ukraine, or by somebody else," clearly preparing to claim a pretext for invasion later.[108] Russia protested "provocations" such as American bomber and surveillance flights, NATO-Ukraine naval exercises, and the use of Turkish drones.[109] It accused the United States and Ukraine of hatching plots to justify an invasion of separatist-held territory.[110] It also raised more long-term grievances, accusing NATO of deceiving Russia for decades as it plotted to admit Ukraine into the alliance.[111]

Russia also made far more extreme claims. These included that Ukraine was committing genocide against Russian speakers and Americans had brought chemical weapons to Ukraine. It also claimed NATO countries had supported Chechen separatists and Ukraine itself was supporting Islamic extremists, terrorist attacks, and kidnappings.[112] The United States took pains to refute these claims

in public statements and actions. For instance, the United States imposed targeted sanctions on four individuals engaged in disinformation activities on January 20, and the same day the Department of State released a fact sheet refuting "Russia's top five persistent disinformation narratives."[113]

Perhaps the most striking and novel feature of this effort was the United States' public release of declassified intelligence, a tactic variously referred to as "name-and-shame" or "pre-bunking."[114] On December 3, 2021, ahead of a planned Biden-Putin phone call, the United States announced Russia planned an offensive involving 175,000 troops and released a document with satellite photos showing a major military buildup.[115] The United States also publicized the Russian practice of leaving behind equipment only to return to it right before military action, which the United States later used to reject Russia's claims that its troop withdrawals were de-escalation.[116]

The United States repeatedly updated its assessments and warnings to counter Russia's claims of innocence and keep the focus on the threat posed by the Russian buildup. Biden announced on January 19 his belief Putin would invade, which was at odds with the intelligence community's continued assessments that a decision hadn't been made.[117] This change in public assessment took place soon before the beginning of new weapons deliveries, suggesting Biden was reinforcing the idea that the United States was responding to Russia rather than provoking it. The Pentagon shared its assessment on January 28 that Russia was militarily prepared for a full invasion.[118]

On January 22, the United Kingdom announced its intelligence showed a Russian plan to attack Kyiv and depose Zelensky, an assessment that was supported by the US revelation of a Russian hit list right before the invasion began.[119] Although the administration had predicted the Russian invasion would probably start in late February after the Beijing 2022 Olympic Winter Games had ended and the ground had frozen, the United States revealed on February 11 it had intelligence suggesting an earlier invasion to start five days later.[120] It continued to warn of a Russian invasion as Russia claimed its troops were demobilizing and as Russia promised more diplomacy in the final days before the attack.[121]

US and allied intelligence releases were also geared toward exposing Russian attempts to stage incidents. Early in the crisis, Blinken warned that Russia would accuse Ukraine of provocations as an excuse for war.[122] In one early incident, Russia intercepted a Ukrainian ship in the Black Sea for what it claimed was provocative behavior. As Russian media publicized the incident as a potential act of war, the US embassy in Kyiv refuted the Russian claims and accused the Russian government of distracting from its military buildup.[123]

US and allied efforts to undermine Russian provocations by publicizing intelligence continued throughout the crisis. On January 14, the United States accused Russia of infiltrating saboteurs into eastern Ukraine to stage an incident that could provide a pretext for invasion.[124] Ukrainian military intelligence similarly accused Russia of preparing provocations in Transnistria, southwest of Ukraine, and one week later of infiltrating mercenaries into the disputed territories of eastern Ukraine.[125] On February 2, the United States announced it discovered a Russian plan to stage and film a Ukrainian attack against Russia or Russian speakers.[126]

As fighting in eastern Ukraine ramped up in the days preceding Russia's invasion, Biden, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg all claimed Russia was staging "false flag" attacks to justify invasion.[127] The invasion was preceded by claims from separatists that Ukraine was planning to retake territory in the breakaway republics, including from a video of a supposed Ukrainian spy describing the plot.[128] Russia ended up justifying its intervention based on invitations from separatists after unsubstantiated reports of Ukrainian attacks.[129] These stories were dismissed in Europe and the United States. As noted by Haines, however, Putin went to extraordinary lengths to propose a legal justification for the invasion based on collective self-defense.[130]

Having dealt with Russian disinformation and deception repeatedly in the past decade, the United States appeared ready for it this time.[131] The tactic of publicizing the Russian military buildup through intelligence disclosures was innovative. The credibility of US claims was helped by the existence of commercial satellite imagery and social media video showing the buildup, as well as other countries' intelligence agencies exposing Russian plans.[132] Exposing Russian attempts to provoke war also seemed to shape interpretations of other events. For instance, reports about a January 27 shooting at a Ukrainian rocket factory included speculation that it may have been part of an attempt to provoke war.[133]

Of course, exposing these incidents requires excellent intelligence that may not be available in future crises. The United States appeared to have very good intelligence, a point that has been emphasized by American officials.[134] American credibility was helped by Russia's clumsy, transparent, and incredible claims, and its reputation for covert operations. The downside of the strategy the intelligence community seemed the most concerned with was that it could reveal intelligence sources and methods, so intelligence agencies limited the details in the disclosures to prevent these kinds of revelations.[135]

Counterjustification Lessons

The Biden-Harris administration found success in gaining domestic and allied support for Ukraine, at least in the early part of the war. Throughout the war, a majority of the American people have supported either maintaining or increasing aid to Ukraine and supporting Ukraine in reclaiming its territory.[136] The United States has provided about $75 billion in military assistance since the war began, supported by congressionally approved supplemental appropriations.[137] European countries combined have sent more total aid to Ukraine than the United States, even though many face domestic resistance to increasing investment in national security.[138] Moreover, major security changes have followed the invasion, like Sweden and Finland joining NATO and German reversals on military spending, arms sales, and energy policy.[139] Favorable public attitudes toward Russia and Putin in Europe have dropped.[140] Allied unity has even seemed to surprise government officials.[141]

Of course, directly linking these changes to any element of American strategy or diplomacy is difficult. The invasion could have been sufficient on its own to create such a reaction. The change in public attitudes following the invasion seems to have followed existing, long-term trends.[142] Linking the public and allied reaction specifically to the counterjustification strategy adopted in the months leading up to the war is even more difficult. Nor should the administration's success be overstated. Globally, many countries have maintained normal relations with Russia, and public attitudes have not changed much.[143] Public support for Ukraine aid in the United States is also slipping, and Congress struggled to pass the most recent aid bill of $60 billion for Ukraine.[144]

Still, evidence suggests the administration's strategy helped expose the nakedness of Russian aggression and deny Putin any reasonable excuse for war. Even if Russia's pretexts were more for domestic consumption, they certainly did not gain traction in Europe or the United States. American and European officials regularly describe the invasion as "unprovoked" and "unjustified," language that has also been adopted by governments around the world from Australia to Ghana to Singapore.[145] The American press has been overwhelmingly favorable to Ukraine and has regularly portrayed Russia as the aggressor.[146] Though some may dismiss government and media narratives as propaganda, the fact that these narratives persist over two years into the war suggests they have been broadly convincing to the public, and alternative narratives have fallen flat.

The strongest evidence for the effectiveness of the US strategy is that, even among critics of American support for Ukraine, none of the arguments rely on claims about American or European responsibility for the immediate outbreak of the war. Instead, critics usually acknowledge Putin's immediate responsibility for the war. After perfunctory condemnations, they are instead forced to rely on more complicated historical arguments about NATO expansion or less morally compelling ones about the United States' lack of interest in Ukraine. John J. Mearsheimer, a prominent academic critic of the United States' support for Ukraine, wrote "there is no question that Vladimir Putin started the war" before explaining how the United States is responsible for the long-term situation that led to the war.[147]

Former TV personality Tucker Carlson is probably the leading public critic of American support for Ukraine. Many of his arguments defending Russia's actions sound like the justifications discussed in this paper: Russia's motives are defensive, the United States and Ukraine are a direct threat to Russia, and the United States sabotaged diplomacy when a peace treaty was possible.[148] He has also baselessly claimed the existence of nefarious plots like the United States giving Ukraine biological weapons.[149] Even Carlson, however, admitted that "Vladimir Putin started this war . . . He fired the first shots."[150] He has not made events surrounding the immediate outbreak of the war central to his criticisms, aside from vague claims that Biden "effectively encouraged" Putin to invade.[151] His criticisms would have probably been more effective if he could convincingly claim Ukraine started the war.

Given this apparent success, what lessons can be learned from the administration's strategy? I again divide the lessons into military, diplomatic, and informational. I argue that restraint in military deployments, aid, and operations ensured that all provocative and aggressive actions were taken by Russia; continued diplomacy based on previously agreed upon principles united the allies and exposed Russia's counterfeit diplomacy; and intelligence disclosures exposed Russia's military preparations and attempts to frame Ukraine for starting the war. These actions helped ensure that Russia received the blame for the war, and that Ukraine's decision to fight was seen as a last resort.

But these tactics all came with trade-offs. Military restraint also resulted in military vulnerability. Diplomatic flexibility created a risk of allied disunity and appeasement. Intelligence disclosures risked disclosing important intelligence secrets, among other drawbacks. Although these drawbacks turned out not to be critical in the current case, they could be in future cases. As a result, these counterjustification tactics may not always be realistic options. But their potential value should be considered in future crisis decision-making calculations.

Military Lessons

The United States exercised a great deal of restraint in the lead-up to the invasion of Ukraine. Regardless of whether it was motivated by fears of escalation or by a desire to expose Russian intentions, the American restraint in the face of Russia's military buildup made the responsibility for the war clear. American foreign policy is often criticized as being reactive instead of proactive, and some argue a more proactive response could have deterred Russian aggression. But being reactive can make clear to the world which side is the aggressor.

The pattern of American deployments and aid made Russia always appear as the party escalating the crisis. Russia certainly would have seized upon any disproportionate acts or major aid shipments as justification for further so-called defensive measures. It did so anyway, claiming American intelligence flights were preparation for a Ukrainian offensive, but its claims lacked credibility.[152] Some claims, like those about the United States planning a chemical attack, were particularly far-fetched. The restraint that has been exercised in the war itself, also meant to avoid precipitous escalation, may have helped keep the narrative focused on Russian aggression.[153] Russian claims since the invasion, like Ukraine seeking nuclear weapons and the United States providing biological weapons, have similarly lacked credibility.[154]

One factor that has made such restraint possible was the decision not to intervene directly in Ukraine. Preparing for a massive military offensive, or placing forces in locations where clashes with Russian forces were likely, was not necessary. The United States was willing to refuse equipment to the Ukrainian military to avoid being too provocative. This did not come without risks. It may have left Ukraine more vulnerable than necessary. Had Ukraine's military collapsed under the Russian assault, critics would surely have blamed the United States' stinginess. Eastern European NATO allies also may have felt exposed, with only a small contingent of American troops sent as reassurance. Still, the United States didn't have to face fully the dilemma of choosing between remaining vulnerable to a major offensive or exacerbating the crisis.

In future crises, the United States may not always have the luxury of being so patient. It may have to forward deploy its forces to prepare for military action. Convincing audiences that these deployments have solely defensive intent is extremely difficult. The preinvasion crisis suggests that deployments appear defensive when they are timed to follow the enemy and are proportional to their preparations. Such a strategy relinquishes the initiative to the adversary, whereas successfully deterring attack or prosecuting a defensive war

may demand that the defender retain the initiative. Balancing these considerations at the outset of war will have to be done at the highest levels. Neither the military dangers of being underprepared nor the political value of avoiding blame for war should be underestimated.

Perhaps the most important political question at the outset of war is which side shot first. Its political relevance can greatly outweigh its actual relevance to events on the ground. The decision to fire upon an enemy or initiate a military operation is usually not the thing that makes war inevitable. It may simply be a tactical decision taken once war is already determined to be inevitable or a calculated risk given strong evidence the enemy is preparing an attack. Nevertheless, the public can be expected to assign great importance to the question of who shot first in assigning blame for the war. Despite the military wisdom of taking the initiative, military leaders must expect that they will find themselves subject to the political restraint of not being allowed to fire the first shot, or taking other actions that could get their side blamed for starting the war.

Diplomatic Lessons

The United States was willing to conduct diplomacy throughout the crisis. This approach allowed the United States to avoid the trap of counterfeit diplomacy, in which it would reject demands and give Russia an excuse to resort to force. The United States and its allies instead attempted to negotiate right up until the end. It publicized these efforts, too, even responding to Russia's demands in writing as Russia had requested. Russia protested that its demands had not been met and NATO was still deceiving it as it had been for decades, an apparent reference to NATO's supposed promise in the early 1990s not to expand the alliance.[155] Nevertheless, the United States made offers to meet Russia's legitimate security concerns while still ensuring the sovereignty of Ukraine. Russia was ultimately the party responsible for ending negotiations by starting the war.

Russia may have fallen victim to the trap of counterfeit diplomacy in having its bluff called. The extreme nature of Russia's demands made it easy for the United States to reject them and still appear reasonable by attempting to address other concerns. The United States was wise not to simply reject Russian demands but to attempt to continue negotiating. By showing a willingness to return to previously discussed or agreed-upon arrangements, the United States was able to use precedent to show that it was neither rejecting diplomacy nor appeasing Russia. It also raised its own outstanding grievances to highlight Russia's violations

of agreements and principles. These grievances were also probably counterfeit in the sense the United States did not realistically expect Russia to evacuate Crimea, for example. But they served to reinforce the precedents to which the United States was attempting to return.

Taking Russia's security concerns seriously and returning to previous agreements as a starting point for negotiation appeared effective at parrying Russia's counterfeit diplomacy. Russia's rejection of principles it had agreed to in the past showed that Russia was the party that had changed its attitude. At the same time, the United States reiterated its commitment to fundamental principles like Ukraine's sovereignty and security early in the crisis. This showed a willingness to negotiate but not to cave into unreasonable demands. That does not necessarily imply the United States did everything possible to avoid war. Perhaps negotiating away the possibility of a future Ukrainian alignment with NATO could have prevented war. Opponents of American support for Ukraine have made that argument. But that argument has not clearly resonated with the public, likely because Russia so clearly rejected basic principles like nonaggression and national sovereignty.

Information Lessons

The United States' approach to information operations provides an excellent starting point for thinking about future crises. Russia had decided both to deny it intended war and to stage incidents to justify military action. The United States had solid evidence that the claims were false and knew about the plans to stage or provoke incidents. By describing the plots beforehand, the United States would inform the public that any incident that matched the description was manufactured. Even without revealing a great deal of detail, these revelations undermined Russian attempts to create pretexts for the invasion.

The American tactics recalled some of the most famous moments of the Cuban Missile Crisis, where UN Ambassador Adlai E. Stevenson presented satellite photos of Soviet missiles after denials from the Soviet ambassador. Of course, Secretary of State Colin Powell infamously repeated this performance at the UN before the Iraq War, using intelligence that was later discredited. This history highlights one of the pitfalls of publicly revealing intelligence. The intelligence may be ambiguous, incorrect, or even politically manipulated, in which case the government's credibility could be undermined.

The information also needs to be somewhat specific for pre-bunking to work. The fact that the United States could predict the incidents before they happened

was itself evidence that the incident was planned rather than spontaneous. After-the-fact claims about enemy plots carry less inherent credibility. The United States may not have detailed information in future crises. Some justification tactics, like seizing on accidental military incidents, may not be planned ahead of time. Even without specific information, though, warning the media and the public about the possibility of these kinds of incidents can prepare them to approach incidents with skepticism. In fact, preparing the public with descriptions of the types of deceptive tactics states can engage in, as this monograph has done, may have some inoculating effect against those tactics. Still, without specifics, judging the credibility of claims and counterclaims around possible incidents is difficult for the public.

Of course, these considerations must be balanced against the drawbacks of disclosure. Some may think the United States unnecessarily revealed important intelligence or risked exposing sources and methods. It is difficult to definitively determine if the revelations were worthwhile. The crisis also showed that raising the alarm can upset allies and adversaries. Ukraine did not appreciate the constant stream of intelligence revelations because of the panic it could create and the economic pain that could result. Zelensky instead asked the United States to keep its voice down and quietly provide planes and ammo. Russia claimed the constant stream of warnings was itself provocative, presumably because it could be part of an American effort to generate a pretext for war.[156] Warnings could even backfire by provoking allies to take preemptive action against threats. These are legitimate concerns in any decision to reveal intelligence.

Nevertheless, there is no evidence that pre-bunking backfired, and the strategy should probably be considered a success. The United States and its allies have massive intelligence capabilities. The main functions of these capabilities are advance warning for political leaders and tactical analysis for the military. But putting them to political use can be just as important. The success of pre-bunking also highlights the importance of credibility. The United States treated its reputation poorly in the past and had to battle through skepticism to convince allies of the threat posed by Russia. The United States is not automatically trusted, nor should it be, and that will be a reality with which it has to deal. In this case, Russia's lack of credibility and the existence of satellite images and online videos surely helped.

The United States must also anticipate, since it has used this strategy once already, adversaries will have a response ready in the future. Adversaries will probably be more secretive about any plots or attempts to provoke incidents. They may prepare to seize upon spontaneous events as a pretext so the

United States is unable to predict them in advance. They may also attempt to accuse the United States of preparing incidents as an excuse for war or portray American intelligence revelations as a form of pretext-seeking behavior. To maintain the credibility needed to win in an information competition like this, the United States will probably have to be more cautious about its claims and revelations.

On the other hand, the United States may face pressures to make more revelations. The success of disclosures in this case could set a precedent where the international community expects disclosures in every case. In future crises, there might be pressure to reveal more and more secret information to give credibility to claims. To avoid increased pressure to reveal more intelligence it may want to protect, the United States may also have to seek ways to gain outside confirmation of its claims. Adversaries may engage in this competition of intelligence disclosures and might even start to fabricate information. They may also find that flooding the media with disinformation is an effective tactic against attempts to expose deception.

Conclusion

The United States' strategy in the preinvasion crisis contained many elements that worked well as counterjustification. Like all strategies, these choices came with trade-offs. The military restraint the United States practiced, and insisted Ukraine practice, complicated Russia's attempts to blame NATO for war but at the cost of increased vulnerability for Ukraine. The diplomatic strategy undermined Russian attempts at counterfeit diplomacy, but accommodation risked undermining allied unity, and the commitment to precedent may have shut out possibilities for a negotiated settlement. The information strategy was particularly innovative, though revealing declassified information also has several drawbacks as detailed above.

This case highlights the complicated nature of crises, the many motivations driving the actors, and the trade-offs they have to make. Not everything was driven purely by appearances. Managing escalation was probably a more important reason for military restraint than avoiding blame. Providing weapons may have been risky or wasteful for other reasons. The diplomatic approach may have been motivated by allies' seemingly genuine hope for a settlement and belief it was possible, even if the United States was more skeptical and went through the motions for appearances' sake. Nevertheless, judging by the language the administration used, counterjustification was a factor in their strategic calculus.

The circumstances may have also made the counterjustification strategy possible. The crisis afforded the United States the luxury of patience and transparency. The United States did not intend a direct military intervention in Ukraine, and despite worries from allies, must have judged that preparation for immediate and massive combat operations was not necessary to protect NATO. The expectation of diplomatic success was also low, which perhaps freed the United States from having to provide face-saving off-ramps or make painful compromises. The intelligence the United States and its allies had was very good and made the information strategy possible.

Even then, the Biden-Harris administration was criticized for not doing enough to deter Russian aggression. Probably the most important outstanding question about the crisis period is whether a more forceful response could have deterred Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Critics wanted immediate sanctions, more military aid, and even a threat of direct military intervention.[157] Defenders of the policy of restraint believe the United States could have done little to deter Russia once the decision had been made to invade.[158] The debate is complicated and will not be settled here. But military restraint may be unwise if a more assertive response could deter aggression. Policymakers must also keep

in mind, however, that in a crisis where war isn't a foregone conclusion, assertiveness can also risk exacerbating the crisis and provoking war.

The debate over the failure of deterrence seems to suggest that practicing restraint is at odds with deterring aggression. But counterjustification is not always inconsistent with deterrence. Eric Edelman believed the Biden-Harris administration was engaged in "deterrence by disclosure," robbing Putin of his pretexts in the hope it would head off an attack.[159] States frequently do go to war even if their pretexts are thin or their deception fails, as Russia did, suggesting that deterrence by dissuasion is a risky strategy. In justification of hostility crises, the decision for war has already been made and the crisis is just a performance. But that doesn't imply that counterjustification could have no deterrent effect. Even Hitler delayed invading Czechoslovakia after the appeasement at Munich robbed him of his excuse for war.[160]

Certain actions that served the goal of counterjustification may have also served the goal of deterrence. Explicitly promising not to intervene in Ukraine because it was not a NATO ally may have robbed Russia of an excuse to invade while also giving credibility to US promises to react strongly if NATO allies were attacked. Waiting to impose sanctions, provide weapons, or deploy military forces made Russia appear as the aggressor and may have been a way to reassure Russia that it could escape punishment if it withheld its attack. Deterrence requires threatening punishment for acts of aggression *and* reassuring the opponent that it will not be punished if it cooperates.

Beyond the issue of trade-offs, the case also highlights the need for different elements of the strategy to work together—military, diplomatic, and informational. Messaging is not a weapon that can be deployed like a bullet. Shaping the narrative is more effective when all the pieces are consistent with the narrative. When messaging is inconsistent with actions, it is easy to dismiss that messaging as mere propaganda. If the United States wants to convince the world that it is the good guy, at least to some extent it has to act like it. To be sure, deception does sometimes work, and the Biden-Harris administration, like all administrations, probably engaged in some. But counterjustification is usually about refuting deception. A counterjustification strategy should be guided by transparency and acting in good faith even if that demands actions that may otherwise appear unwise, like delaying military deployments and negotiating with aggressors.

Democracies have a potential advantage in that autocratic nations lack mechanisms of accountability and are therefore inherently less trustworthy. Autocratic nations have shown that they can use disinformation to influence the open political debates that take place in democracies. The Biden-Harris

administration showed how a democracy can respond to the deception of an autocrat like Putin. Instead of trying to beat China and Russia at their own games, the United States can respond with facts and transparency. The information still must be deployed wisely and strategically, and deception will sometimes be appropriate, but sunlight may still be the best disinfectant. This tactic plays to the United States' advantages against autocratic rivals and is consistent with the United States' democratic values.

Endnotes

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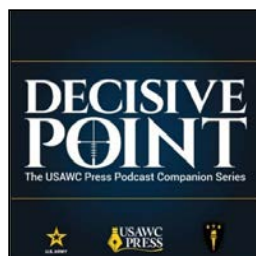

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