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SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN PRE-WAR CRISIS: A COMPARATIVE TEST OF RATIONAL
CHOICE, EXPECTED UTILITY, POLIHEURISTIC, AND PROSPECT THEORIES TO
EXPLAIN THE WAR'S OUTBREAK

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS PROGRAM
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY
DANIEL J. REISNER

NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

SEPTEMBER 2023

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations	iv
Acknowledgments.....	vi
List of Abbreviations	vii
Abstract	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	16
Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology	63
Chapter 4: Crisis Overview and Critical Decisions	96
Chapter 5: Theory Testing and Analysis	130
Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations	206
Appendix.....	225
Bibliography	227

List of Illustrations

Figures

3.1. Theoretical propositions & specific explanations for the crisis outcome	69
3.2. Depiction of dissertation's research design	80
3.3. Putin's unscored pre-crisis composite decision matrix.....	86
5.1. Critical Decision #1: Putin's preference ranking & sensitivity level	160
5.2. Critical Decision #2: Biden's preference ranking & sensitivity level	173
5.3. Critical Decision #3: Biden's preference ranking & sensitivity level	183
5.4. Critical Decision #4: Zelensky's preference ranking & sensitivity level	195
5.5. Critical Decision #5: Putin's preference ranking & sensitivity level	202
5.6. Summary of prediction accuracy & sensitivity levels by decision theory.....	204
5.7. Sensitivity levels by theory when including only correct predictions	204
5.8. Sensitivity distribution by theory.....	204
6.1. PLM prediction accuracy & sensitivity compared to baseline findings	215
6.2. Prediction accuracy with all dimensions vs. Political dimension removed.....	216
6.3. Sensitivity with all dimensions vs. political removed	217
6.4. Accuracy & Sensitivity: PLM vs. all others with political dimension removed	218

Tables

Table A.1. Critical Decision #1 Decision Matrix	225
Table A.2. Critical Decision #2 Decision Matrix	225
Table A.3. Critical Decision #3 Decision Matrix	225

Table A.4. Critical Decision #4 Decision Matrix	226
Table A.5. Critical Decision #5 Decision Matrix	226

Acknowledgments

The first person I would like to recognize is Dr. Joeseeph Rallo, who encouraged me to pursue a Ph.D. as I was approaching the end of my 20-year military career. Without his inspiration, I likely would not have pursued this challenging but highly rewarding endeavor. Thank you to Colonel James “Cobra” Finlayson and Dr. Clifton Jones for writing letters of recommendation for my Ph.D. program and for their support and mentorship over the years.

Further, as any Ph.D. candidate will attest, having a quality committee is paramount while working through the dissertation process. In this regard, I was extremely fortunate with Dr. Symeon Giannakos and Dr. Bruce Bechtol Jr. serving on my committee and providing me with insightful feedback and challenging questions throughout the writing process and defense. Finally, no words adequately convey my gratitude to Dr. Kirk Buckman, my exceptional committee chair. I could not have asked for a better scholar to guide, encourage, and focus me throughout the dissertation process. His advice and mentorship throughout this experience made this dissertation a reality.

Lastly, but most importantly, to my family, Jessica, Sophia, and Guy. I am forever grateful for their patience as I spent countless hours taking classes, studying for language proficiency tests and comprehensive exams, and, most of all, writing my dissertation. I would not have made it without their love, encouragement, and support. You give me love, joy, and meaning.

List of abbreviations

AD – Agree to Demands

ADA – Applied Decision Analysis

AT – Ambiguous Troops

CD – Critical Decision

CN – Coerce NATO

EBA – Elimination-by-Aspect

ED – Escalate in the Donbas

EU – European Union

EUT – Expected Utility Theory

FI – Full-Scale Invasion

HS – High Sensitivity

LEX – Lexicographic

LS – Low Sensitivity

MG – Middle Ground

MS – Moderate Sensitivity

NP – NATO Path

NF – Negotiate Framework

NA – Non-alignment

NT – No Troops

PH – Poliheuristic Theory

PLM – Political-Lexicographic Model

PT – Prospect Theory

RAM – Rational Actor Model

RC – Rational Choice

RD – Reject Demands

SQ – Status Quo

TT – Threaten Troops

VLS – Very Low Sensitivity

VHS – Very High Sensitivity

Abstract

Given the tremendous suffering created by the Russo-Ukrainian war and its profound international security implications, policymakers and international relations scholars must fully grasp why the three-month pre-war crisis erupted and ultimately ended in conflict instead of de-escalation. Accordingly, this mixed approach study seeks to identify the most likely crisis-related decision-making strategies adopted by President Biden, Zelensky, and Putin. The dissertation tests rational choice, expected utility, poliheuristic, and prospect theory frameworks against the critical decisions made by the three presidents. The dissertation's findings indicate that a Prospect Theory-based framework provides the most accurate predictions of the four models tested to explain five critical decisions made immediately before and during the crisis. The Prospect Theory model consistently preferred the non-conciliatory alternatives available to each President, thus steering the crisis into war, which all actors would have preferred to avoid. Further, and to an unexpected degree, the study's incidental finding highlights the salience of politics in decision-making, concluding that a simple lexicographic decision rule grounded in political interests accurately predicts and explains each leader's choices more reliably and parsimoniously than the four tested frameworks and just as elegantly. This decision strategy, conceptualized as the *political-lexicographic model* (PLM), is offered as an alternative framework that most aptly explains and predicts the three Presidents' crisis decision-making strategies. Additionally, the dissertation's comparative approach, which evaluates multiple political leaders involved in the crisis and tests competing decision theories through qualitative and quantitative lenses, demonstrates the value of incorporating several theoretical models and overweighting the political dimension when explaining or attempting to forecast a crisis outcome. The conceptual framework offered in this study is practical, intuitive, and easily

adaptable by policymakers, analysts, and scholars. The conclusions and recommendations in this dissertation will ideally contribute to more accurate and reliable predictions and accounts of foreign policy decisions, especially those that involve the potential for inter-state conflict.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Overview

This dissertation leverages decision analysis to explain the Russo-Ukrainian crisis and its deterioration into war. None of the stakeholders in the Russo-Ukrainian pre-war crisis viewed war as their preferred outcome, yet paradoxically, that was the result. Similarly, in July 1914, none of the great powers wished for a continental or world war, yet both occurred.¹ Therefore, the study's individual-level analysis framework answers two critical questions through decision analysis. First, why was the crisis initiated? Second, why did it result in war and not de-escalation through a negotiated settlement once it began? The dissertation adopts a mixed approach, leveraging qualitative and quantitative methodologies. It offers scholars and analysts a new decision-making framework, the *political-lexicographic model* (PLM), and modifies the applied decision analysis (ADA) methodology to enable parallel testing of expected utility, rational choice, poliheuristic, and prospect theory-based models against real-world foreign policy decisions. The study's conceptual framework highlights the value of integrating multiple decision theories to predict or explain crisis outcomes.

The beginning of this chapter provides a contextual overview of the crisis in a way relevant to the study and its goals. Next, the problem statement, purpose, and the dissertation's research questions are introduced. Following this is an overview of the research approach, researcher assumptions, and perspectives. Finally, the chapter concludes by discussing the study's rationale and significance, hypotheses, and definitions of key terminology used in this study.

¹ Although Austria-Hungary and Germany preferred a "localized Austro-Serbian war in the Balkans," none of the great powers "wanted a general European war with British involvement." See Jack S. Levy, "Preferences, constraints, and choices in July 1914," *International Security* 15, no. 3 (1990): 154, 162.

Contextual Background

In November 2021, President Putin engaged in coercive diplomacy when he massed over 100,000 Russian forces along the Ukrainian border and then, in December, delivered a list of demands to Washington and Brussels. The Biden administration responded with its allies by threatening severe economic sanctions to deter Russian escalation. However, on February 24, 2022, the Kremlin conducted a full-scale invasion, attempting to topple the government in Kyiv. After more than a year of fighting, Ukraine and Russia have suffered over 500,000 military casualties, thousands of Ukrainian civilians are dead, and millions are displaced. The physical damage to Ukraine is at a level not seen in any European country since World War II. Similarly to World War I, there was an extended pre-war crisis involving multiple states in which costly diplomatic and military signaling occurred, but ultimately, the crisis devolved into war.

Moreover, the war is the most dramatic reshaping of the European security environment since the end of the Cold War, as evidenced by Finland's ascension into the NATO alliance, Sweden's application to join, and multiple alliance members pledging significant increases to their defense spending.² In addition, the West has implemented severe economic sanctions against Russia across technology, energy, and other sectors. Given the magnitude of this conflict, the following study seeks to explain why the crisis escalated and descended into war.

The outbreak of significant interstate conflict challenges international relations scholars to understand its origins and why war, not peace, resulted. On this, historical context is essential. Before the acute crisis erupted at the end of 2021, Putin had previously seized and annexed

² Finland was formally granted membership in NATO on April 4, 2023. See NATO's announcement, "Finland Joins NATO as 31st Ally," April 4, 2023. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_213448.htm; and, Maria Sheahan and Sarah Marsh, "Germany to increase defence spending in response to 'Putin's war' – Scholz," Reuters, February 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/germany-hike-defense-spending-scholz-says-further-policy-shift-2022-02-27/>.

Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and done so without incurring any significant penalties, which would have endangered his political survival. Indeed, much the opposite occurred, with his popularity reaching all-time highs and sustaining those levels for almost four years. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic began the year before the crisis, which hurt Putin's popularity initially in 2020 and increased unemployment globally and in Russia. Further, the psychological effects of the pandemic on Putin were visible to the world when he met with his advisors and foreign officials, requiring them to sit on opposite ends of exceptionally long tables and his virtually non-existent foreign travel schedule.

Moreover, at the start of 2021, Putin faced large, widespread protests across hundreds of Russian cities as he imprisoned the popular opposition leader Alexei Navalny upon his return to Russia after recovering from an assassination attempt.³ Putin witnessed firsthand the power of popular protests in the former Soviet republics, contributing to the dissolution of the USSR, and the *color* Revolutions in the early 2000s. Consequently, he viewed these protests as a key threat to eliminate, resulting in over 11,000 people arrested by security forces in more than 125 cities across Russia.⁴

Undoubtedly, these three events would have significantly affected Putin's decision calculus. Much like Munich in 1938, the West's response to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea would likely have emboldened Putin.⁵ The global instability caused by the pandemic

³ Evidence shows that many who participated in the protests were not necessarily Navalny supporters. Instead, many were fed up with declining living standards and perceived inequality and corruption endemic in Putin's Russia. See Anton Troianovski, "As Protests Grip Russia, Putin Critics of Many Stripes Rally Around Navalny," *New York Times*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/30/world/europe/russia-protests-navalny-putin.html>.

⁴ See OVD-Info, "Suppression of peaceful protests in January-February 2021 in Russia," accessed July 6, 2023, <https://en.ovdinfo.org/winter-2021-suppression-en#12>.

⁵ Margaret MacMillan, "How Wars Don't End: Ukraine, Russia, and the Lessons of World War I," *Foreign Affairs*, June 12, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/how-wars-dont-end>.

placed new pressures on Putin domestically, and the challenge to his power posed by the Navalny opposition would certainly give Putin a reason to reconsider the effectiveness of his state-run propaganda strategy to maintain Russian unity around his regime.⁶

From Biden's perspective, he remained focused on economic recovery due to the pandemic, strengthening the NATO alliance after its usefulness was questioned by his predecessor, and recovering politically after a chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan. Similarly, Zelensky's domestic popularity had steadily declined after being elected in 2019, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and only recovered after Russia launched its country-wide invasion in 2022. Nevertheless, the U.S. remained economically and militarily superior to Russia, and the Ukrainian military had grown significantly in size and capability since losing Crimea.

During the crisis, there was an approximately three-month period where diplomatic engagement and messaging were pervasive and transparent, and leaders of the most influential states met with or spoke directly with the Russian President on several occasions throughout the crisis. Further, unique to this pre-war crisis, a significant amount of classified Western intelligence was publicly and intentionally released, diminishing opportunities for misperceptions and miscalculations. Consequently, unlike some wars that begin due to incomplete information, loss of political control, misperceptions, or crisis mismanagement, this study's findings suggest that the Russo-Ukrainian war resulted from the three essential leaders adopting decision strategies grounded in political survival, which sufficiently narrowed the range of acceptable options so that de-escalation was no longer viable.

⁶ Navalny is particularly popular with the 18-24 Demographic, with 36 percent approving his activities in February 2021. Interestingly, during the same timeframe, 51 percent viewed Navalny's return to Russia positively if they received their news from the popular messaging app "Telegram," but only 14 percent had a favorable view of his return if their primary news source was state-run television. See Levada-Center, "The Return of Alexey Navalny," February 8, 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2021/02/08/the-return-of-alexey-navalny/>.

Problem Statement

No scholarly consensus exists explaining the Russo-Ukrainian pre-war crisis and the war's outbreak. Instead, various reasons have been suggested, which range from Putin's quest for revanchism, his misreading of the security situation, NATO's expansion, a failure of deterrence, or the threat of a stable and thriving democracy on its borders, particularly one that shares close historical and cultural ties with Russia. Moreover, there is a paucity of literature that systematically attempts to explain and identify the crisis-related decision-making strategies of the three presidents, which this study seeks to address in detail.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

This dissertation aims to explain Putin's decision to initiate a militarized crisis and the subsequent result of the war approximately three months later. Therefore, to achieve this goal, the study poses two research questions. First, *why did Putin attempt to coerce NATO into banning Ukraine from joining the alliance instead of pursuing other alternatives to achieve his goals vis-à-vis Ukraine?* Second, *why did the three-month pre-war crisis end in war and not de-escalation?* Accordingly, this study suggests that the most meaningful answer to both questions is achieved by identifying the decision strategies or rules employed by President Biden, Zelensky, and Putin.

Research Approach

This dissertation combines a quantitative analysis of alternatives, utilities, and preferences with the qualitative single case-study tradition. Accordingly, the dissertation looks at the individual level of analysis through a mixed approach combined with a causal process tracing format to understand and identify the decision-making strategies of the three presidents. The dissertation's conceptual framework tests two cognitive-based models, Poliheuristic Theory and

Prospect Theory, against two rationalist frameworks, Rational Choice (RC) and Expected Utility Theory (EUT).⁷ The four decision theories tested each have unique axioms and are evaluated in parallel. The predicted results of each theory are then compared to the observed real-world decision to determine which one(s) most closely aligns with the actual outcome.

The study identifies five crisis-related *critical decisions*, which had the Presidents chosen differently, would have likely changed the crisis trajectory. Decision matrices at each critical decision evaluate the most viable alternatives given what was known at the time to each leader. Ultimately, the combined decisions of these three heads of state collectively led to the crisis's outcome, and gaining insights into their decision rules and strategies aids scholars in better understanding the *why* and *how* of the decisions that led to the war. While neorealism, liberalism, and constructivism have demonstrated their usefulness and remain the dominant theoretical traditions in international relations (IR) scholarship, the dissertation's findings suggest that those approaches offer an incomplete explanation of the crisis initiation and unfolding. Accordingly, leveraging decision analysis provides a more comprehensive explanation. Primarily, this is due to the salience of the political dimension, that is, political survival, in each President's calculus, a factor not emphasized in the other three theories.

Assumptions

The researcher must make several assumptions when constructing the study's theoretical and methodological framework. First, the three presidents under analysis are assumed to be free to execute foreign policy as they see fit within the constraints of their specific government type and, as such, are responsible for the final decisions made during the crisis.⁸ Second, it is assumed

⁷ All four theories are descriptive, while EUT is both descriptive and normative.

⁸ For example, President Biden was constitutionally free not to punish Putin after he invaded. Of course, had he chosen that path, he would have paid a heavy price politically, both internationally and domestically.

that each leader is principally motivated to advance his interests, namely, maintain their hold on office, which may or may not be aligned with the national interest.⁹ Put another way, the Presidents prioritize the political dimension (political survival) more than other dimensions, such as economic, military, or diplomatic.¹⁰ Indeed, each of the four theoretical models tested assumes that individuals are attempting to do what they believe is in their best interest, even though poliheuristic and prospect theories predict that those decisions are often not made in a so-called *rational* or *compensatory* way that always maximizes overall utility. Third, the researcher assumes that analyzing the decisions of individual leaders driven by domestic politics provides a more robust explanation of the crisis outcome than analysis focused at the international level of analysis.¹¹ Nevertheless, international factors are considered in this study through the lens of the individual making the decisions.

Researcher

The author of this dissertation was not employed or associated with the U.S. government while this study was being researched and written, nor did the author rely upon or have access to any sensitive information while producing this dissertation. However, as a former U.S. military officer, the author has previously provided decision recommendations to senior military

⁹ History is full of examples of national leaders putting their interests above the national interest. For example, Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, Castro in Cuba, Mugabe in Zimbabwe, and North Korea's Kim family. Moreover, democracies are not immune to this phenomenon. For example, democratic leaders have falsely claimed electoral fraud, despite the courts rejecting their cases, simply to maintain their political survival. They do so without regard to the detrimental effects of such claims on the credibility and public trust in their country's democratic institutions. Examples include former U.S. President Trump in 2020 and Brazilian President Bolsonaro in 2022.

¹⁰ This assumption is based on the tenets of Selectorate Theory, to be discussed later, which considers each national leader, regardless of culture or ideology, to be principally motivated to hold onto power.

¹¹ Levy and Thompson have proposed that the *systems-level analysis* is more appropriate for studies attempting to explain what processes led to a crisis. Conversely, at the other end of the analytic spectrum, the *individual level of analysis* is typically better matched when explaining a specific crisis. See Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson. *Causes of war*. John Wiley & Sons, 2011, 211.

commanders and U.S. policymakers, which could potentially lead to cognitive biases affecting the study's research design and analysis. Accordingly, the study seeks to fully articulate the justification for the analysis provided, identify its limitations, and remain transparent in all quantitative calculations and qualitative assertions to ensure other scholars can readily screen for subjectivity and biases that may impact the study's findings and conclusions.

Rationale

In addition to providing a credible and valid explanation for the crisis, this dissertation aspires to highlight the value of integrating multiple decision theories into one's research. It will ideally aid subsequent studies to uncover additional insights regarding this and other conflicts. Moreover, this study illustrates the perils of limiting one's analysis to a singular decision theory, which should give pause to analysts and policymakers who are committed to one particular paradigm of foreign policy analysis. Furthermore, the methodology presented here offers a unique approach to testing the four theoretical frameworks in ways not previously attempted. By significantly modifying the applied decision analysis (ADA), a procedure pioneered by Alex Mintz,¹² the study produces rational choice, expected utility, poliheuristic, and prospect theory calculations and predictions that are intuitive, transparent, and less cumbersome than other quantitative attempts using those theories in isolation. As a result, this research benefits scholars, analysts, and policymakers attempting to predict foreign leaders' intentions and decisions accurately and reliably.

¹² See Alex Mintz, "Applied decision analysis: Utilizing poliheuristic theory to explain and predict foreign policy and national security decisions," *International Studies Perspectives* 6, no. 1 (2005).

Significance

Over a hundred years after World War I, scholars continue to debate why the pre-war crisis escalated as it did when a continental or world war was not the preferred outcome for any of the major powers. As Bueno de Mesquita explains, war is “always *ex post* inefficient,” meaning that there always exists an “*ex ante*, Pareto improving outcome...that at least could have avoided the transaction costs for each side associated with conducting and concluding the war.”¹³ Indeed, before the Russo-Ukrainian crisis, Putin would have preferred that Ukraine voluntarily align itself with Moscow over the West or, at the very least, adopt a non-alignment stance. During the crisis, Putin would have favored that Brussels and Washington would have acquiesced to his demands vis-à-vis NATO expansion and its presence in post-soviet states. Likewise, Zelensky would have preferred to avoid the tremendous suffering and destruction wreaked on his state and avoid the risk to his life and family. Biden would have favored not spending billions on economic and security aid to prevent Kyiv’s collapse and instead use those funds on domestic initiatives to boost his own popularity.¹⁴

As with World War I, a divergence in theoretical explanations has emerged concerning the causes of the Russo-Ukrainian crisis and war within the context of the post-Cold War international system. As discussed in the next chapter, some of these arguments include the realist view that NATO created a security dilemma that pushed Putin to respond. Others in the

¹³ Bruce Bueno De Mesquita, “Foreign policy analysis and rational choice models.” In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. 2010, 6.

¹⁴ In all three cases, the non-war option provided a less risky outcome for each President’s political future. In the case of Putin, war is inherently risky, as the Russo-Ukrainian war has demonstrated, and achieving a political win without launching a costly invasion would have been preferable. For Zelensky, despite his dwindling popularity at home, he ran the risk of being deposed and killed by Russian forces if Putin’s invasion succeeded. Finally, Biden risked being perceived as incompetent and weak if Putin invaded and rapidly deposed Zelesnky. Such an outcome, coming so close to the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, would have undoubtedly hurt his approval ratings and re-election prospects.

rationalist camp suggest imperialist designs or point to a failure of Western deterrence that drove Putin. Those in the cognitive school of thought contend it resulted from misperceptions and miscalculations mainly on the part of Putin and, to a lesser degree, the West. Finally, another non-rationalist explanation comes from prospect theory, arguing that Putin was in a domain of losses regarding Ukraine and, thus, took exceptional risks.

None of the above solutions are particularly satisfying, primarily because they are overly focused on Putin, marginalize Biden's decisions, and often disregard Zelensky's perspective and choices. Therefore, this dissertation adopts a causal process-tracing methodology to examine and identify each leader's critical decisions. Moreover, comprehending the President's perceptions, preferences, and constraints is pivotal in accurately assessing their crisis strategies.

Consequently, the study offers a practical and valuable explanation of the crisis by evaluating the known alternatives for each critical decision through the lens of the four decision models.

Finally, it is easy to overly simplify the outbreak of the crisis by simply casting the conflict in terms of good and evil, as both sides have done, or simply suggesting it was the result of an autocrat seeking more territory and power. Such crude views are dangerous when they become the mainstream and accepted position. Indeed, when cast in zero-sum terms, wars become protracted, delaying constructive negotiations to end the conflict since it becomes more politically costly for leaders to make concessions. Further, just as it is essential to realize that the conflict started due to multiple interactions between several actors and their interdependent decisions, the same is valid for ending a conflict. Unilateral cessation of hostilities is rare without

some level of reciprocity from one's opponents. Equally rare are examples in the post-World War II era when a conflict ends in the total subjugation of one side by the other.¹⁵

Consequently, this study seeks to provide a thorough and objective analysis of the crisis so the causal factors can be properly understood. What is at stake is no less than finding a peaceful and enduring end to the war and perhaps preventing the next one. Additionally, the insights from this study may help leaders better predict each actor's most likely decisions, which could lead to more effective crisis strategies and peaceful resolutions. Nevertheless, in some crises, leaders may prefer war over other alternatives regardless of the possible costs, all while fully aware of their adversaries' preferences, leading to conflict.

Hypotheses

The four hypotheses below are tested during this study to determine which theoretical framework most accurately, reliably, parsimoniously, and elegantly explains the decision strategy of each President and, as a result, the crisis genesis and outcome.

Hypothesis #1 (H1) – Rational Choice: The President's decisions are consistent with a rational choice decision strategy when alternatives are preference ranked based on the highest net utility across multiple dimensions, but without conducting explicit outcome probability calculations. As a result, the highest-scoring alternatives were non-conciliatory, leading to crisis initiation and escalation.

Hypothesis #2 (H2) – Expected Utility: The President's decisions are consistent with an expected utility framework and alternatives selected after assigning subjective probabilities and

¹⁵ Here, total subjugation indicates one state is fully absorbed into another state after defeat, or the victor establishes a puppet government before withdrawing their military forces.

utilities to each possible outcome. Accordingly, the alternatives that provided the maximum *expected* utility were non-conciliatory, leading to crisis initiation and escalation.

While H1 (Rational Choice) and H2 (Expected Utility) appear similar, decision-makers operating under a broad rational choice framework do not necessarily explicitly assign probabilities to possible outcomes. Instead, for this study, the rational choice model assigns scores to each alternative's possible positive and negative outcomes, which are averaged to provide a total utility score. In contrast, H2 uses the identical positive and negative outcome scores produced under rational choice but takes the additional step of assigning a subjective probability to each outcome. Thus, H2 provides a probabilistic variable to the leader's decision calculus, whereas H1 does not.

Hypothesis #3 (H3) – Poliheuristic Theory: The President (s) decisions are consistent with a poliheuristic decision strategy when alternative elimination occurs as a result of the “avoid-major-political-loss” (AMPL) principle. The AMPL principle first eliminates the conciliatory options, and the remaining alternatives are preference ranked according to a non-probabilistic highest net utility decision rule, leading to crisis initiation and escalation.

Hypothesis #4 (H4) – Prospect Theory: All three President's reference point is the status quo, and President Biden framed it as a domain of gains, but President Zelensky and Putin framed it as a loss. The presidents' decisions were consistent with the predictions of prospect theory in that a leader in the domain of gains will be risk-averse, and those in a domain of losses will be risk-seeking. The conciliatory options were eliminated based on the alternatives available and each President's domain, leading to crisis initiation and escalation.

Depending on the critical decision under evaluation, the preceding four decision models provide different predictions concerning which alternatives a decision-maker will select. For

example, the rational choice model, which does not explicitly operationalize a leader's subjective probability for a particular alternative, sometimes predicts a different preference ranking than the expected utility model, which incorporates probabilities. Similarly, an alternative preferred under rational choice is sometimes immediately discarded under poliheuristic decision rules when a particular alternative is likely to cause significant political risks to the leader, even if the alternative holds the highest overall net utility. Finally, Prospect Theory predicts leaders in a loss domain would select the riskier alternatives if they felt it gave them a greater chance of creating an acceptable status quo. On the other hand, it predicts leaders in the domain of gains choose less risky alternatives since they see the status quo as acceptable and do not wish to lose what they have already gained, even though the alternatives selected may not maximize utility.

Definitions of Key Terminology Used in This Study

Accuracy – This is a measure of alignment between each decision theory's predictions and the observed real-world choice made by each President.

Alternative – An available option that must be decided upon by the President. There are three competing alternatives for each critical decision considered in this study.

Compensatory – Decision theories can be compensatory or non-compensatory. A compensatory theory allows for a holistic evaluation of all relevant considerations or dimensions and allows negative implications associated with one dimension to be offset by positive implications in a different dimension. The two compensatory models evaluated in this study are Rational Choice and Expected Utility. In contrast, a non-compensatory theory implies that specific dimensions are so crucial to the decision-maker that no degree of positivity in other dimensions can adequately compensate for the negative implications associated with the most critical dimension.

Critical Decision – A choice with a higher potential of changing the crisis trajectory.

Decision Rule – A specific criterion or procedure that determines the alternative selection. Examples in this study include selecting the alternative with the highest expected utility (EU), Elimination-by-Aspect (EBA) and Lexicographic (LEX) decision rules used by Poliheuristic Theory, and risk-acceptance and risk-aversion associated with Prospect Theory.

Decision Strategy – A strategy is the cumulative set of choices made by a decision-maker based on the individual's motivation and adopted decision rules. For example, a decision-maker motivated to maximize their personal outcomes may adopt a different set of decision rules than someone seeking to select the most beneficial decision overall, even if it carries some negative implications for them.

Decision Theory – Provides descriptive, explanatory, or normative models for decision-making phenomena. These theories are then further supported with logical premises and empirical research to justify their associated decision rules.

Dimension – An aspect of an alternative that holds significance for the decision-maker. For example, a President must consider the political dimension when considering a significant foreign policy decision. Hence, the President will evaluate the political implications that may affect her ability to stay in office. Other dimensions evaluated in this study include diplomatic, economic, and military.

Elegance – A theory that is easily understood and has broad explanatory power.

Preference Ranking – The ordering of alternatives for each decision-maker from most to least desirable.

Parsimony – Refers to the simplicity of the theory and the number of required assumptions.

Reliability – The degree to which others will likely replicate this study’s findings when conducting similar analysis. For each theory being tested in this study, its predicted preference ranking is subjected to a sensitivity analysis, indicating how susceptible the prediction is to minor shifts in the underlying values. For example, a predicted preference ranking order associated with a *very high sensitivity* rating indicates that the prediction is likely to be less reliable.

Utility – A subjective measure of individual satisfaction with a particular outcome.

Summary

This chapter has provided the reader with a brief overview of the study’s goals, scope, and approach and a preview of some of its conclusions. Chapter 2 explores IR and decision theory literature to provide a sufficient foundation for later analysis, and Chapter 3 presents the study’s research design and methodology. Chapter 4 presents a synopsis of the crisis and identifies the critical decisions. Chapter 5 comprises the dissertation’s quantitative and qualitative analysis and decision framework testing. Finally, Chapter 6 summarizes the findings and offers recommendations based on the study’s conclusions.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Introduction

This dissertation attempts to explain why a militarized crisis erupted and why it resulted in war instead of de-escalating. It suggests that identifying decision-making strategies adopted by President Biden, Zelensky, and Putin provides a parsimonious and useful explanation of the crisis-related choices and outcomes. However, before examining individual-level decision theories in detail, this chapter begins with an introduction to leading IR theoretical perspectives for explaining conflict, *realism*, and its various forms.¹ Establishing the *realist* position is relevant to this study as prominent IR scholars repeatedly invoke its foundational principles to explain Putin's decision to initiate the crisis. The chapter then explores several rationalist-based theories, including rational choice, expected utility, and selectorate theory. Next, a review of critiques of rationalism and alternative models are presented, including biases and misperceptions, bounded rationality, prospect theory, and poliheuristic theory. Rational choice (RC) theory, expected utility theory (EUT), prospect theory (PT), and poliheuristic (PH) theory are tested later in this study against the observed decisions made by the three presidents prior to and throughout the crisis. Finally, the chapter concludes with a critique of the relevant literature, attempting to explain the Russo-Ukrainian crisis through various theoretical lenses and expound Putin's motivations for prompting the crisis.

The theories and empirical research related to international crisis decision-making are varied and extensive; therefore, many approaches could be employed to review the relevant

¹ Two other notable IR theories are *liberalism* and *constructivism*, but will not be discussed in detail in this review. For more on liberalism theory, see Robert O. Keohane *After hegemony: Cooperation and discord in the world political economy*, Princeton University Press, 2005; and Francis Fukuyama "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, 16 (1989): 3-18. For perspectives on constructivism, see Wendt, Alexander. *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge University Press, 1999; Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin: Honor in international relations*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

literature. However, given that this study focuses on the three presidents and their decision-making strategies, the review examines theoretical models tailored for *individual* decision-making. Other decision-making theories that go beyond the individual level of analysis and focus on group dynamics are outside the scope of this dissertation and not included in this chapter.²

The author relied upon various sources to conduct this review, including books, scholarly journals, and periodicals. These references were accessed through institutional libraries, ProQuest, EBSCOhost, and Google Scholar. No demarcating time frame was selected to conduct searches as doing so may have excluded seminal works and significant contributions in the subject area.

Rationalist Perspectives on Conflict:

Realism

The dominant international relations (IR) school of thought in the modern age, emerging in the mid-20th century, was *realism*, or *classical realism*. It contends that the actions of states are best explained by innate human traits such as the pursuit of power, which in turn becomes the

² Examples of group-based decision-making theories include organizational, bureaucratic, groupthink, and polythink. For examples of organizational research, see Graham T. Allison, "Conceptual models and the Cuban missile crisis," *American Political Science Review* 63, no. 3 1969: 689-718. Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 1971; and Sagan, Scott D. *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons*. Vol. 177. Princeton University Press, (1993). For studies on the bureaucratic approach, see Steve Smith, "Policy preferences and bureaucratic position: the Case of the American hostage rescue mission." *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944)* 61, no. 1 (1984): 9-25; Daniel W. Drezner, "Ideas, bureaucratic politics, and the crafting of foreign policy." *American Journal of Political Science* (2000): 733-749; Martha S. Feldman, *Order without design: Information production and policy making*, Vol. 231. Stanford University Press, 1989; Martin Hollis and Steve Smith. "Roles and reasons in foreign policy decision making." *British Journal of Political Science* 16, no. 3 (1986): 269-286. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvzsmf8r>. Some examples of Groupthink theory include Irving L. Janis, "Psychological studies of policy decisions and fiascos." *Boston: Houghton Mifflin* (1982); Paul Hart, *Groupthink in government: A study of small groups and policy failure*. Swets & Zeitlinger Publishers, 1990; and Alison McQueen, "A groupthink perspective on the invasion of Iraq." *International Affairs Review* 14, no. 2 (2005): 53-79. For discussions on Polythink, see Alex Mintz, Shaul Mishal, and Nadav Morag. "Evidence of Polythink? The Israeli delegation at Camp David 2000." Unpublished paper, Yale University, UN studies (2005); Alex Mintz and Karl DeRouen Jr. *Understanding foreign policy decision making*. Cambridge University Press, 2010; Alex Mintz and Carly Wayne. *The polythink syndrome: US foreign policy decisions on 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and ISIS*. Stanford University Press, 2016.

so-called national interest. As Hans Morgenthau put it in his seminal 1948 book *Politics Among Nations*, “statesman think and act in terms of interest defined as power.”³ While classical realism’s theoretical foundations are no doubt parsimonious, it is problematically rooted in the amorphous phenomenon of human nature and, over time, fell out of favor as new theories were proposed that were less philosophically oriented and more focused on the nature of the international system.

Alternatively, in 1959, Kenneth Waltz suggested three possible images, or levels of analysis, for understanding war: individual, state, and system levels.⁴ Then, in 1979, he proposed a new theory of international politics, which came to be known as *structural realism*, also referred to as *neorealism*. Neorealism is a systems-based theory and, in contrast to classical realism, argues that states are unitary rational actors whose behavior responds to the insecurity associated with the anarchic structure of the international system. Accordingly, the principal motivation of states is survival, and thus, they necessarily pursue policies of “self-help” because, in an anarchical system, security is pursued at all costs since, without it, the state’s very existence will be in question.

Moreover, according to Waltz, an anarchical system drives states to *balance* against more powerful ones instead of *bandwagoning* to their side. He claims that if this were not the case, a so-called world hegemony would emerge, but of course, that is not observed. As a result, states are primarily concerned with maintaining their relative positions within the international

³ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 4th ed. New York: Knopf, 1967, 5.

⁴ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. Vol. Anniversary edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ez-salve.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=1941538&site=ehost-live>.

system.⁵ Neorealism, therefore, is not based on the classical realist view of humans seeking power maximization. Instead, it takes a system-based approach to explain state-level behaviors and outcomes through the anarchical system's intrinsic motivators and constraints and shifting balance-of-power structures. Despite structural realism's influence and utility, it has self-imposed limitations, as Waltz articulated on multiple occasions. He conceded that while neorealism can make broad predictions about the general trajectory of international politics, for example, the consistency of great power competition, it is not intended to explain specific foreign policy choices.⁶ Therefore, as scholars looked to understand specific foreign policy outcomes, they built upon the theoretical framework of neorealism and its systems-based approach. The result was three additional strands: *defensive and offensive realism and neoclassical realism*.

Defensive realism, which follows closely with Waltz's earlier perspectives, proposes that explicit threats to states are relatively rare, and when they do occur, states will balance against those threats to deter further aggression. The tendency to balance rather than bandwagon with emerging threats tends to limit the prevalence of war.⁷ However, when conflicts erupt, according to defensive realists, it stems from a rational response to the security dilemma. The security dilemma is a concept in which one state seeks to increase its security but, in doing so, indirectly threatens the security of other states, particularly their rivals.⁸ Two conditions can lead to a

⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of international politics*, Waveland Press, 1979; and Kenneth N. Waltz, "Structural realism after the Cold War," *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 104, 126.

⁶ Waltz, "Structural realism," 27.

⁷ Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical realism and theories of foreign policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 149.

⁸ Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the security dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 169-170.

security dilemma spiraling out of control, which include when there are real incentives for a state to strike first or when a state miscalculates those incentives.⁹

On the other hand, *offensive realism* assumes states to be in a continual struggle to alter the current distribution of power and that “This unrelenting pursuit of power means that great powers are inclined to look for opportunities to alter the distribution of world power in their favor. They will seize these opportunities if they have the necessary capability. Simply put, great powers are primed for offense.”¹⁰ For the offensive realist, a state can best achieve its security needs if it can achieve regional or global hegemony, which necessarily means seizing on the perceived weaknesses of other states. Moreover, while defensive and offensive realists view the anarchical international system as a critical determinant behind state behavior and outcomes, they assign different underlying reasons for conflict when it occurs. For the Defensive realists, conflict is not the normal state of things, and when it does occur, it results from misperceptions and miscalculations, which either stem from structural pressures, manifesting as a security dilemma, or by way of misplaced internal influences. On the other hand, offensive realists assume conflict and power maximizing is the norm, and it is only when states lack sufficient capabilities to forcibly increase their share of power that periods of relative peace appear.

The final strand of realism is *neoclassical realism*, which claims influence, not security, as the primary motivator of states. According to this tradition, as states’ power increases, they seek more significant influence in their region and, if their power permits, globally. When a state’s relative power declines, the theory predicts a more docile foreign policy will emerge. Like defensive and offensive realists, neoclassical realists acknowledge that systemic influences are

⁹ Rose, “Neoclassical realism and theories,” 150.

¹⁰ John J. Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power politics*, WW Norton & Company, 2001, 3.

essential but propose instead that it is at least equally relevant to understand the perceptions of national leaders and other domestic factors such as public opinion and governmental institutions. These perceptual and domestic “intervening variables” distinguish neoclassical realism along with their emphasis on the pursuit of influence over security.¹¹ Neoclassical theorists’ attempts to blend aspects of all three of Waltz’s levels of analysis allow for more comprehensive explanations of international behavior. However, as a result, the theory becomes much less parsimonious and can easily be used to explain anything if one decides to pick and choose which of the many variables to emphasize. Nevertheless, despite the theory being loosely bounded and defined in many respects, it parallels aspects of the theoretical model adopted in this study, which considers multiple dimensions, including political, military, economic, and diplomatic, along with individual leaders’ perceptions, constraints, and preferences.

While neorealism and its sub-strands of defensive and offensive realism are no doubt parsimonious in their explanations and have often done well in explaining international outcomes, they all minimize the significance of the second and first-level images, that is, the role of domestic politics and individual-level tendencies in shaping international behavior. Several studies have been conducted that directly challenge the neorealism premise and demonstrated that explanatory effectiveness increases if one includes domestic considerations.¹² Indeed, the findings from this study – at least in the case of the Russo-Ukrainian crisis – suggest that not

¹¹ Rose, “Neoclassical realism and theories,” 152.

¹² For example, in Paul Huth’s quantitative analysis of 129 territorial disputes between 1950 and 1990, he identified 17 significant variables that affect dispute initiation, escalation, and settlement. Huth’s findings indicate that realism would not have predicted a causal relationship for seven variables despite playing an essential role in territorial disputes. Of those seven, five fell within the domestic context; see Paul Huth, *Standing your ground: Territorial disputes and international conflict*. University of Michigan Press, 1996. Similarly, Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman conclude, after testing the realist paradigm against one constrained by domestic politics – both based on rationalist assumptions – that “domestic imperatives, rather than international considerations alone, play a prominent role in foreign policy choices.” Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and David Lalman. *War and reason: Domestic and international imperatives*. Yale University Press, 1992, 266.

only does the exclusion of political considerations significantly weaken accuracy and reliability results for the Russo-Ukrainian crisis, but relying solely on the political dimension produces the most reliable results.

The above discussion on realism and the security dilemma concept is particularly relevant to this dissertation. Since structural realism does not predict specific inter-state actions, adopting decision analysis is necessary to derive a complete picture of the crisis. Later in this chapter, we will evaluate the merits of some realist scholars' claim that NATO created a security dilemma for Putin, which, according to these scholars, led to his predictable reaction of fomenting a crisis and, eventually, his decision to invade Ukraine.

Rational Choice (RC) Theory

In contrast to structural-based theories, in the early 1960s, while classical realism was still dominant in IR studies, rational choice theory at the individual level was introduced as an effective method of explaining and predicting various foreign policy decisions and outcomes.¹³ It began with the idea that a fuller appreciation of decision-makers' perceptions is required to understand foreign policy decisions properly. Moreover, system and state-level theories are inadequate for explaining foreign policies, and thus, it was necessary "open the 'black box' of individual decision-making."¹⁴ Therefore, while neorealism and RC theory assume rationality and are grounded in microeconomic theory principles,¹⁵ the importance of the system is emphasized in the former and the individual in the latter.

¹³ Richard C. Snyder, H. W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin, eds. *Decision-Making as an Approach to the Study of International Politics*, New York: Free Press of Glencoe (1962).

¹⁴ Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, *Causes of war*, John Wiley & Sons, 2011, 128 - 129.

¹⁵ Specifically, actors are utility maximizers seeking to outcomes to their benefit.

Accordingly, rational choice theory and its numerous adaptations center on four concepts outlined by Allison and Zelikow:

“[1] The interests and values of the agent are translated into a ‘payoff’ or ‘utility’ or ‘preference’ function, which represents the desirability or utility of alternative sets of consequences...[2] The rational agent must choose among a set of alternatives...[3]. To each alternative is attached a set of consequences or outcomes....[4] Rational choice consists simply of selecting that alternative whose consequences rank highest in the decision maker’s payoff function.”¹⁶

Put another way, RC predicts that actors will select the most advantageous alternative after a thorough cost-benefit analysis. However, what is considered most “advantageous” will vary for each decision maker based on their values. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita explains that if one assigns instrumental rationality¹⁷ to a decision-maker, she may not always choose the option in her nation’s best interest. Moreover, contrary to misperceptions, the decision maker is not assumed to have complete freedom of action and instead must consider constraints that come in the form of nature, such as geography and the reaction of other actors.¹⁸ This last point—anticipating how other actors will respond to one’s decisions – leads to the integration of game theory into many rational actor models. Many models rely upon non-cooperative game theory, first developed by John Nash in 1951.¹⁹

Nonetheless, there remains disagreement within the RC school of thought regarding assumptions related to an individual’s preferences and beliefs and the role of information. So-called “thin rationality” only assumes that individuals are capable of efficiently employing “the

¹⁶ Graham T. Allison, and Philip Zelikow. *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Second ed. New York: Longman, 1999, 18.

¹⁷ *Instrumental rationality* assumes that each person makes decisions based on what they think is in their best interest. Conversely, *value rationality* is focused on choosing what is right according to one’s values, even if doing so negatively affects one’s self-interest.

¹⁸ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, “Foreign policy analysis and rational choice models.” In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. 2010, 2.

¹⁹ John Nash Jr., “Non-cooperative games,” *Annals of Mathematics* 54, no. 2 (1951): 286-295.

means available to pursue their ends,” whereas “thick rationality” adds a “description of agent preferences and beliefs.” Despite differences among scholars in how far one can credibly assign preferences and beliefs, most political science studies leveraging rational choice assume thick rationality.²⁰

Concerning the function of information, most scholars have abandoned the idea of an agent achieving perfect information. As a result, a challenge for the RC model is determining to what degree individuals attempt to maximize information relevant to their decision before making their selection. Green and Shapiro write that this presents a conundrum for RC theorists since “the agent has to assess the value of information that she does not yet have to determine whether it is worth taking the trouble to gather that information.”²¹ Consequently, inherent ambiguity associated with the level of information each actor obtains before deciding on a particular course of action may weaken confidence behind analytic assessments regarding agent beliefs and preferences.

Notwithstanding internal disagreements within the RC school, rational actor models have been used to explain various topics, including international cooperation and the role of institutions,²² wartime negotiations during Vietnam,²³ and how and why wars eventually

²⁰ Donald Green and Ian Shapiro, *Pathologies of rational choice theory: A critique of applications in political science*, Yale University Press, 1994, 17-18.

²¹ Green and Shapiro, *Pathologies of rational choice*, 19.

²² Barbara Koremenos, Charles Lipson, and Duncan Snidal, “The rational design of international institutions,” *International organization* 55, no. 4 (2001): 761-799.

²³ Frank C. Zagare, “A game-theoretic analysis of the vietnam negotiations: preferences and strategies 1968-1973,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 21, no. 4 (1977): 663-684.

concluded.²⁴ However, those that seek to explain or predict international conflicts are particularly relevant to this dissertation.²⁵

Expected Utility Theory (EUT)

Initially developed in economics,²⁶ expected utility theory (EUT) was subsequently adapted by political scientists as a formal methodology to explain foreign policy decision-making.²⁷ Importantly, EUT is both normative and descriptive and details a mathematical formula for identifying the alternative with the greatest net utility under conditions of uncertainty.²⁸ As a result, rational actor models that rely upon EUT depend on probabilities, particularly on the assumption that decision-makers are making decisions based on probabilistic assessments before making their selection.

One of the earliest and most innovative attempts at explaining international conflicts through EUT is in Bruce Bueno de Mesquita's seminal book *The War Trap*. He suggests that if three conditions are known, the expected utility for any given decision-maker can be determined concerning the initiation of a war.²⁹ These conditions are then supported with extensive

²⁴ D. Wittman, (1979) How a War Ends: A Rational Model Approach, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 23, no. 4 (1979): 743–63.

²⁵ For example, see James D. Fearon, "Domestic political audiences and the escalation of international disputes," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (1994): 577-592; and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, "An expected utility theory of international conflict," *American Political Science Review* 74, no. 4 (1980): 917-931.

²⁶ John Von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern. "Theory of games and economic behavior, 2nd rev." (1947).

²⁷ EUT is more restrictive than rational choice theory and necessarily requires the calculation of probabilities. For a comparison of the two, see Levy, Jack S. "Prospect theory and the cognitive-rational debate." In *Decisionmaking on war and peace: The cognitive-rational debate* (1997): 34.

²⁸ The simplest expression of the expected utility formula is $EU = \sum P(x) U(x)$, where: EU = expected utility; \sum = summation of all outcomes; $P(x)$ = probability of outcome x; $U(x)$ = utility of outcome x

²⁹ The three conditions are "(a) the relative strengths of the attacker and defender; the relative value the attacker places on changing the defender's policies, relative to the possible changes in policies that the attacker may be forced to accept if it loses; and (c) the relative strength and interests of all other states that might intervene in the war" Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce. *The War Trap*. Yale University Press, 1983.

mathematical formulas grounded in EUT to allow analysts to input corresponding values to explain or predict why the decision-maker made or will make a particular choice.³⁰ The specific mathematics vary depending on whether the decision concerns a bilateral or multilateral war or whether the leader is risk-averse or risk-acceptant. Nevertheless, the necessary assumptions are few and are theoretically applicable to most foreign policy decisions and outcomes involving conflict. He tests his version of EUT theory against all wars between 1816 and 1974. Most relevant for this study, he suggests that his findings “strongly support...positive expected utility is necessary – though not sufficient – for a leader to initiate a serious international dispute.”³¹

Critiques of a purely EUT approach claim that by “black-boxing the domestic political environment,” the EUT approach serves less to predict “whether a war can occur” and instead reveals the “timing of the war, once the factors promoting war are in place.”³² Indeed, to reach the point when a decision is about to be made regarding initiating a war, multiple events will have to arise to bring such a decision to the fore. Moreover, some have criticized this approach for not adequately considering nuclear weapons’ implications when considering utility for one-sided or mutual nuclear deterrence.³³ Thus, one of the main critiques of early EUT-based theories was its overly simplistic approach and minimization of other levels of analysis outside the decision maker, such as domestic and international factors. However, it is essential to note that the EUT approach above does not necessarily ignore domestic or international factors, as

³⁰ One weakness of this approach is that the values assigned may vary depending on the analyst.

³¹ Bueno de Mesquita, *The War Trap*, 129.

³² John A. Vasquez. *The War Puzzle*. Cambridge Studies in International Relations. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 218 - 19. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ez-salve.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=55215&site=ehost-live>.

³³ Erich Weede, “Extended Deterrence by Superpower Alliance,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 27, no. 2 (1983): 231–54 (232), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/173703>.

both are calculated into the expected utilities and probabilities of each alternative under consideration. In other words, the decision-maker considers the constraints and incentives at the national and international levels. Still, they may do so poorly and, in doing so, select a sub-optimal decision.

Selectorate Theory

In subsequent years, scholars continued refining the theoretical assumptions based on rationality, specifically instrumental rationality. Selectorate Theory was a fascinating theory to emerge, developed by Morrow, Siverson, Smith, and Bueno de Mesquita. They contend that regardless of the type of government, culture, ideology, or nationality, political leaders' principal aim is to remain in power, and their decisions reflect that desire.³⁴ They conclude that every political leader, whether autocrat or democratic, depends on a *winning coalition* to secure and maintain their position. The winning coalition is the minimum number of individuals from within the national *selectorate* – those who are notionally responsible for selecting a leader – required to acquire and retain the leadership position. Therefore, political leaders make decisions based on how those choices will affect their winning coalition. Consequently, leaders tend to avoid decisions that will negatively affect their winning coalition, and decisions to go to war are no exception.³⁵ Selectorate Theory is, therefore, analogous to Waltz's second-level image of analysis in that its primary focus is domestic variables, namely the leader's winning coalition

³⁴ The theoretical premise grounded in political survival is intended to provide a framework to explain political behavior generally. Of course, there are cases when a political leader may step down due to health reasons, old age, or wishing to hand off power to a successor who will continue their policies to ensure the incumbent's legacy. Additionally, some leaders step down "voluntarily" because they fear they are about to or already have lost the necessary support to maintain a winning coalition.

³⁵ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James D. Morrow. *The Logic of Political Survival*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2003. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ez-salve.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=100040&site=ehost-live>.

size; however, it largely ignores Waltz's third image, the international system, and the first image, namely an individual's proclivities.

In addition to explaining decisions to initiate conflict, the authors of selectorate theory have used their framework to explain a wide range of political decisions at the international and domestic levels, from foreign aid, economic policies, democratic peace, and corruption.³⁶ Nevertheless, extensive mathematical formulas – underpinned by expected utility premises – are necessary to determine the likelihood a leader will initiate a war or choose to negotiate, which include payoffs, expected probabilities, and military assets.³⁷ Appropriately, the formulas change depending on the winning coalition's size, typically larger in democracies and smaller in autocracies. As a result, the creators of Selectorate Theory conclude that autocrats “do not depend on military victory to keep their jobs to the same extent as do democrats.” In contrast, this makes democratically elected leaders less likely to initiate wars unless they are nearly certain their state will win.³⁸ Consequently, democratic leaders are less inclined to go to war with other democracies since both know the other's political survival depends on winning.³⁹

An excellent example of the tenets of selectorate theory at work was seen after Yevgeny V. Prigozhin, the leader of the Russian mercenary group Wagner, waged a brief rebellion against the Kremlin in June 2023. In the immediate aftermath, Putin authorized a 10.5 percent raise for

³⁶ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith. *The Dictator's Handbook: Why bad behavior is almost always good politics*. Public Affairs, 2022.

³⁷ For the full mathematical expressions, see Bueno de Mesquita et al, *The Logic of Political Survival*, 265-272, Chapter 6 appendix.

³⁸ Bueno de Mesquita et al., *Logic of Political Survival*, 237.

³⁹ As Alastair and Bueno de Mesquita write, “When they need to, democracies try hard [in war]. However, often they don't need to,” and “Autocratic leaders are wary of expending resources on the war effort, even if victory demands it. They know their fate depends more on the loyalty of their coalition than success on the battlefield. They don't generally make that extra effort.” See Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair “The Dictators Handbook,” 266-267.

military and security services personnel, including the police.⁴⁰ The military and security apparatus are key members of Putin's winning coalition, and he wisely chose to reward them for their loyalty during the Prigozhin rebellion and to secure their allegiance in the event of future revolts.⁴¹

Critics of the selectorate theory contend that the theoretical claims do not apply well to all government types as the theory's originators claim. Specifically, authoritarian governments and the authors' measurements of a state's selectorate and winning coalitions are methodologically flawed, and the necessary assumptions are cumbersome compared to more simplified theories.⁴² Others have argued that the assumption that leaders' principal goal is to remain in power is too narrow, instead suggesting that leaders "consider a broader range of private costs and benefits. Specifically, leaders choose a policy with an eye not only on the probability but also the *manner* and *consequences* of losing office" (emphasis in original).⁴³ Nevertheless, mathematical-based models nested within RC and game theory are effective, while not perfect, analytic tools to explain and predict international behavior and outcomes.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Russian Federation, "Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation of 28.06.2023 No. 1046: On Increasing the Monetary Allowance of Military Personnel and Employees of Certain Federal Executive Bodies," June 28, 2023. <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202306300026?index=1>.

⁴¹ Prigozhin subsequently died in late August 2023 when his plane exploded after takeoff. Most outside observers concluded that Putin arranged for the plane's destruction as retaliation for Prigozhin's failed mutiny.

⁴² Mary E. Gallagher, and Jonathan K. Hanson. "Power tool or dull blade? Selectorate theory for autocracies." *Annual Review of Political Science* 18 (2015): 367-385.

⁴³ Some have argued that the assumption that leaders' principal goal is to remain in power is too narrow, instead suggesting that leaders "consider a broader range of private costs and benefits. Specifically, leaders choose policy with an eye not only on the probability, but also the *manner* and *consequences* of losing office" (emphasis in original). Giacomo Chiozza and H.E. Goemans, *Leaders and International Conflict*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Accessed April 1, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁴⁴ Examples of successful rational actor and game theory-based models include Jacek Kugler, Ronald L. Tammen, and Siddharth Swaminathan. "Power Transitions and Alliances in the 21st Century." *Asian Perspective* 25, no. 3 (2001): 5-29. [doi:10.1353/apr.2001.0011](https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2001.0011), where proponents of power transition theory, which is heavily based on rational choice theory and game theory, predicted at the turn of the century that the most likely

Preferences and Game Theory

Other proponents of the rational actor model have avoided elaborate mathematical formulas and instead relied upon preference rankings for each actor. For example, Jack Levy's influential analysis of the outbreak of World War I incorporated a simple preference ranking framework for the great powers to successfully unpack the July 1914 crisis and effectively explain the root causes of the war's outbreak.⁴⁵ Levy's analysis highlights that actors' choices are often not aligned with their first preference. Indeed, none of the great powers sought a continental war or global war as their preferred outcome, yet that was the result. Constraints at the international and domestic levels often force decision-makers to select alternatives that are not ideal but provide the greatest net utility given how they expect other actors to behave.

Consequently, non-cooperative game theory is valuable in accounting for these constraints and the strategic interactions among actors. These "player" interactions can be shown as a series of decision points and outcomes referred to in game theory as the extensive form. When fully mapped out, the extensive form will depict all the choice nodes, terminal nodes, and available player strategies. Choice nodes represent a decision point for a player, and terminal nodes depict the end of a game based on the previous set of choices. At the terminal node, the payoffs are listed for each player's chosen strategy. A player's strategy is simply the sum of all sequential decisions made by the player. It is then possible to identify the *subgame perfect*

challengers to U.S. dominance would come from Asia, specifically China; Scott Sigmund Gartner, *Strategic Assessment in War*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1997. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ez-salve.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=53008&site=ehost-live>; and Alastair Smith, and Allan C. Stam. "Bargaining and the Nature of War." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 6 (2004): 783–813. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4149796>.

⁴⁵ Jack S. Levy, "Preferences, constraints, and choices in July 1914," *International Security* 15, no. 3 (1990): 151-186.

equilibrium,⁴⁶ accomplished through backward induction, assuming each player is rational, seeking to maximize their payoffs, and choosing a strategy that considers their opponent's relative preferences and payoffs.⁴⁷ Therefore, identifying the subgame perfect equilibrium allows an analyst to ideally predict each player's game strategy, given that the assumptions are valid. Accordingly, non-cooperative game theory can ideally predict international crisis outcomes, which, importantly, always involve multiple competing actors.

Critiques and Alternatives to the Rationalist Perspective

While the rationalist approach is elegant and often useful, its universal assumption that decision-makers are rational has been extensively challenged.⁴⁸ As a result, additional competing models have been developed that emphasize different decision-making factors, which include the role of institutions,⁴⁹ culture,⁵⁰ psychology,⁵¹ and identities.⁵² The psychological school of

⁴⁶ There are two common types of equilibria in game theory. Nash Equilibrium "is a set of strategies in a game such that no player has a unilateral incentive to switch to another ...given the expectation about what the other player will do in each contingency." Whereas "all subgame perfect equilibria are Nash equilibria...not all Nash equilibria are subgame perfect. Subgame perfection adds a useful element in that it eliminates those Nash equilibria that are based on incredible threats (i.e., threats that are not believable)." Bruce Bueno De Mesquita, *Principles of international politics: People's Power, Preferences, and Perceptions*, Congressional Quarterly Inc. 2010, 48-49.

⁴⁷ Bueno De Mesquita, *Principles of Politics*, 46-50.

⁴⁸ For a cautionary argument that rational choice should not attempt to explain all political behavior by the same causal mechanisms, for example, instrumental rationality, see Donald Green and Ian Shapiro. *Pathologies of rational choice theory: A critique of applications in political science*. Yale University Press, 1994. Accessed April 6, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁴⁹ Douglass C. North *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance*. Political Economy of Institutions and Decisions. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ez-salve.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=510978&site=ehost-live>.

⁵⁰ Ronald Inglehart, "The Diminishing Marginal Utility of Economic Determinism: The Decline of Marxism." In *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*, 248-88. Princeton University Press, 1990. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv346rbz.13>.

⁵¹ James D. Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war." *International organization* 49, no. 3 (1995): 379-414. In this article, Fearon challenges the traditional rationalist explanation of war because, due to the costs of war, rationally led states should be able to negotiate a settlement in lieu of conflict.

⁵² For a constructivist perspective that emphasizes beliefs, norms, and identities among elites to explain international behavior and outcomes, see Wendt, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge

thought, which emphasizes the individual role of biases and misperceptions, is of particular interest to this study and alternative theories specifically grounded in observed deviations from rationality, namely bounded rationality, prospect theory, and poliheuristic theory.

Cognitive and Psychological Biases and Misperceptions

That perceptions of actors often fail to align with reality was an accurate and enduring observation by Robert Jervis over four decades ago.⁵³ These misperceptions lead policymakers to miscalculate the true cost-benefits of waging war, and thus, what a defender would consider sufficient deterrence on their part ends up falling short in the eyes of the challenger. These biases and misperceptions depart from what is predicted under rational actor models. To illustrate this point, Jervis uses the Japanese decision to attack Pearl Harbor and Hitler's decision to invade Poland. In the case of the former, "many of Japan's leaders" believed the US would merely fight a "limited war" after being attacked, eventually leading to a stalemate and Japan maintaining control of East Asia. Hitler "expected Britain and France to fight in September 1939 but doubted that they would continue to do so after Poland was defeated."⁵⁴ Of course, neither aggressors' assumptions proved correct, and therefore, an argument can be made by proponents of the psychological school of thought that deterrence failed not because of deterrence shortfalls on the part of the US, France, or Britain but due to cognitive biases on the part of the attacker.⁵⁵

Studies in International Relations. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2006. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ez-salve.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=55674&site=ehost-live>.

⁵³ See Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics: New Edition*, Revised. Princeton University Press, 1976, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77bx3>; and "Deterrence and perception." *International security* 7, no. 3 (1982): 3.

⁵⁴ Jervis, Robert. "Deterrence and perception." *International security* 7, no. 3 (1982), 7.

⁵⁵ For a rationalist interpretation of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, see Bruce M. Russett, "Pearl Harbor: Deterrence Theory and Decision Theory." *Journal of Peace Research* 4, no. 2 (1967): 89-105.

Other scholars have made similar arguments invoking psychological biases leading to miscalculations.⁵⁶ The example of the Egyptian decision to attack Israel in 1967 is one of the more compelling historical cases in which the Egyptian leadership planned to attack despite “only a few weeks earlier they had been pessimistic about the probability of winning and skeptical of their military capabilities.” What changed the Egyptian calculus was not a shift in the “balance of power,” but instead, the leadership was “reacting to pressing needs at home and in the Arab world,” which led to a “motivated distortion.”⁵⁷ In other words, a motivated bias superseded an objective and rational cost-benefit calculus of the military situation. Moreover, adherents to this school of thought contend that psychological and subjective influences are the *predominant* aspect of decision-making and typically lead to sub-optimal and non-maximizing choices.⁵⁸

While the psychological perspective helps identify departures from rationality, it can typically only be effectively applied after the outcome of the crisis is known when each decision-maker's thinking processes are revealed in greater detail. Thus, the lack of predictive utility is undoubtedly a limitation of the psychological approach. Furthermore, there are dozens of biases to consider, and little effort “to systematically compare biases to each other with respect to origin, similarity, and impact on decision making,” and there has yet to be a “review of biases in

⁵⁶ Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and deterrence*, JHU Press, 1989.

⁵⁷ Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, “Rational deterrence theory: I think, therefore I deter,” *World politics* 41, no. 2 (1989): 216.

⁵⁸ See Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American foreign policy: Theory and practice*, Columbia University Press, 1974, 50.

decision making as applied to foreign policy and national security decisions.”⁵⁹ Consequently, a unified theory of cognitive biases has yet to surface.

Despite criticisms, rationalist models have repeatedly effectively explained foreign policy outcomes. Most models are parsimonious in the number of critical assumptions, some are mathematically grounded,⁶⁰ and many integrate game theory to evaluate the impacts of multiple interactions among non-cooperative actors effectively. Nevertheless, as the psychological perspective has highlighted, the rational approach’s simplicity and elegance are sometimes weaknesses when predicting and explaining complex and uncertain events: bounded rationality and the Cybernetic theory of decision-making attempt to provide a solution.

Bounded-Rationality and Cybernetic Theory

Herbert Simon challenged the limits of human rationality and the inability to make fully maximizing and objective decisions in the mid-20th century when he suggested that rational choice models were incapable of accurately replicating human cognitive processes.⁶¹ John Steinbruner later adapted his ideas as he crafted his “Cybernetic” decision-making theory. Steinbruner concluded that while the rational actor model is effective, it cannot be used exclusively to explain the decisions of governments because the individuals making decisions

⁵⁹ Steven B. Redd and Alex Mintz. “Policy perspectives on national security and foreign policy decision making,” *Policy Studies Journal* 41 (2013): S28.

⁶⁰ While mathematical expressions can arguably add logical rigor to a scholar’s findings, they also risk creating levels of abstraction that disconnect the analyst from a closer approximation of what occurs in decision-makers’ minds. For example, if six variables require values to complete an equation, but the real-world decision-maker fails to consider one or two conditions, then the formula may produce logically sound but inaccurate predictions or explanations.

⁶¹ Herbert A. Simon, *Models of Man: Social and Rational; Mathematical Essays on Rational Human Behavior in Society Setting*, New York: Wiley, 1957.

within those organizations are constrained by cognitive factors, which produce “anomalies” that sometimes deviate from predicted rationality.⁶²

He explains such irregularities by using the example of a tennis player who, when deciding how to return a ball, has at least 4,200 different solutions, yet the player’s mind does not consciously process each possibility before deciding on a response. Consequently, when humans deal with highly complex situations within the inherent limitations of the mind, they avoid preference ranking, nor do they typically conduct extensive cost-benefit calculations of all available alternatives and payoffs. Consequently, a cybernetic hardwiring in the brain simplifies complex and uncertain situations so that decisions are made that are sufficient to achieve the task and do so through information feedback.⁶³

Some scholars have adapted the cybernetic and bounded-rationality approach to explain US presidential decisions to use force in the post-World War II era.⁶⁴ Their model includes the valuations of ten variables across the international, domestic, and political environments. They conclude that the importance of international-related variables is significantly reduced when overlaying with domestic concerns and that domestic support for using force is the “most important influence” on a President’s decision to initiate significant military actions.⁶⁵ Their

⁶² John D. Steinbruner, *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision: New Dimensions of Political Analysis*, Princeton University Press, 1974, 327. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1nxctxf>.

⁶³ Steinbruner, *Cybernetic Theory of Decision*, 50-53.

⁶⁴ Ostrom and Job examine American Presidential decisions regarding the use of force from 1948 – 1976 based on the assumption that they are “boundedly rational, cybernetic decision makers.” See Ostrom, Charles W., and Brian L. Job. “The president and the political use of force.” *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 2 (1986): 543.

⁶⁵ Ostrom and Job, “The President and Force,” 559.

findings have been used extensively to support the diversionary war theory, which suggests political leaders initiate many conflicts to divert attention away from domestic issues.⁶⁶

The principles underpinning the bounded rationality and cybernetic approach have found substantial empirical support,⁶⁷ specifically, limited processing capacity and the tendency to quickly adopt sufficient options versus exhaustively selecting options optimized to maximize utility. However, the cybernetic model, which aims to address the deficiencies of purely rational models, adds complexity to what should be a more streamlined process, given the assumptions associated with the cybernetic theory.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the cybernetic paradigm served to advance the development of cognitive-based decision-making models. Further, increasingly precise formulations of the deviations observed in rational models, particularly in situations involving risk, can be found in prospect theory to which we now turn.

Prospect Theory (PT)

Introduced by Kahneman and Tversky in 1979, Prospect Theory (PT), which received a Nobel Prize in economics, is an essential counter to the rationalist approach. Their findings are particularly germane to international decision-making as their psychological experiments focused on individual choices when confronted with risk and uncertainty. The descriptive theory and its conclusions are counterintuitive and conflict with EUT. They convincingly demonstrate

⁶⁶ For examples of diversionary war theory, see Scott S. Bodderly and Graig R. Klein. "Presidential use of diversionary drone force and public support." *Research & Politics* 8, no. 2 (2021): 20531680211019904; Yao-Yuan Yeh and Charles KS Wu. "Diversionary behavior for weak states: A case study of Taiwan." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 55, no. 2 (2020): 221-234; and Dennis M. Foster, and Jonathan W. Keller. "Single-party government, Prime Minister psychology, and the diversionary use of force: theory and evidence from the British case." *International Interactions* 46, no. 2 (2020): 227-250.

⁶⁷ Bryan D. Jones, "Bounded rationality," *Annual review of political science* 2, no. 1 (1999): 297-321; and Filipa Figueira and Benjamin Martill. "Bounded rationality and the Brexit negotiations: Why Britain failed to understand the EU," *Journal of European Public Policy* 28, no. 12 (2021): 1871-1889.

⁶⁸ For example, the ten variables required for the Ostrom and Job analysis discussed above.

that when people face financial risk, they place themselves into a domain of gains or losses based on a neutral reference point, a phenomenon known as *framing*. When people situate themselves in a domain of gains, they tend to be risk averse, not wanting to lose what they already possess. On the other hand, when individuals see themselves in a domain of losses, they tend to be risk-seeking to reverse or eliminate their perceived losses. This behavior is a manifestation of a phenomenon known as *loss aversion*, which entails people assigning a higher negative value to a loss than a positive value for an equivalent gain.⁶⁹

For example, in Kahneman and Tversky's experiment, participants were asked to choose between an 80% chance of a 4,000 gain or 100% certainty of a 3,000 gain. Faced with that choice, 80% of participants chose the sure gain. Conversely, when faced with an 80% chance of losing 4,000 and a 100% certainty of losing 3,000, an overwhelming 92% selected the 4,000 option, risking a larger loss but hoping for a small probability of zero losses. In this case, participants chose the riskier option to potentially avoid any losses over selecting the certain but lesser loss.⁷⁰ The choices made above contradict the normative and descriptive precepts of EUT.

Kahneman and Tversky's concepts of framing and loss aversion have been used to explain decisions beyond financial risk. These include "taxpayer compliance...[and] the selection of medical procedures"⁷¹ and have been successfully applied to international relations by various scholars.⁷² For example, Jack Levy suggests, "If a state perceives itself to be in a

⁶⁹ Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica*, Vol. 47, No. 2. (Mar., 1979), 263-292. <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0012-9682%28197903%2947%3A2%3C263%3APTAAOD%3E2.0.CO%3B2-3>.

⁷⁰ Kahneman and Tversky, "Prospect Theory," 268.

⁷¹ Jeffery D. Berejikian, *International Relations under Risk: Framing State Choice*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004, Accessed April 16, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁷² For past reviews see, Jack S. Levy, "Loss aversion, framing effects, and international conflict: Perspectives from prospect theory." *Handbook of war studies II* (2000): 193-221; Rose McDermott, "The

deteriorating situation, it might see the status quo as a certain loss, overweight that loss, and therefore be willing to take excessively risky actions.”⁷³ Furthermore, both Levy and Jervis argue that the concept of loss aversion in a crisis may lead states to take “preemptive action and accept the risks inherent in initiating a war.”⁷⁴ Consequently, knowing whether an adversary is in the domain of gains or losses will help predict their risk tolerance and thus potentially be a valuable tool for crafting a successful foreign policy strategy. In international relations, the reference point for most actors is usually, but not always, the status quo, whereas other times, it may be to “regain past glories.”⁷⁵

Notably, scholars have attempted to operationalize prospect theory to help explain the choices of two states when engaged in a military standoff. For example, when one state (Y) is satisfied with the status quo and state (X) is not, Y is considered in the domain of gains, and X is the domain of losses. Given the following assumptions, Berejikian, using game theory, suggests that when there is a territory that is necessary for X to create an acceptable status quo, but that same territory holds less strategic importance for Y, and X forcefully attempts to seize the territory, Y will not retaliate since it is in a domain of gains and is risk averse.⁷⁶ If we assume Washington is Y and Moscow X, then the above predictions align well with the US policy to

psychological ideas of Amos Tversky and their relevance for political science,” *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 13, no. 1 (2001): 5-33; and McDermott, “Prospect theory in political science: Gains and losses from the first decade,” *Political Psychology* 25, no. 2 (2004): 289-312.

⁷³ Levy, “Loss aversion, framing,” 189.

⁷⁴ Robert Jervis, *The meaning of the nuclear revolution: Statecraft and the prospect of Armageddon*, Cornell University Press, 1989, 171; See also Levy, “Loss Aversion,” 189.

⁷⁵ Jeffery W. Knopf, *Rationality, Culture and Deterrence*, Naval Postgraduate School Monterey CA, Center on Contemporary Conflict, 2013, 31.

⁷⁶ Jeffrey Berejikian, “A cognitive theory of deterrence,” *Journal of Peace Research* 39, no. 2 (2002): 176.

avoid military retaliation against Russia after Putin seized Crimea in 2014 and when Moscow invaded Ukraine in 2022.⁷⁷

Furthermore, Berejikian argues that issuing deterrence threats alone is inadequate to inhibit war, citing cases of failed extended deterrence in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Iraq. Instead, he proposes that leaders must provide inducements that may shift a target's view of the status quo from a domain of losses to one of gains.⁷⁸ Others, such as Davis, agree, suggesting threats may be appropriate when opponents are in the domain of gains since they fear losing what they already have, whereas promises and assurances are most helpful when a rival views the status quo as a loss.⁷⁹ Furthermore, Davis's evaluation of multiple case studies of German foreign policy during the 19th and 20th centuries suggests that the psychological experiments of Kahneman and Tversky appear equally suited when applied to national leaders.⁸⁰

Therefore, prospect theory offers a potential alternative approach to the rational actor model. It accounts for and predicts when deviations from the maximum utility are likely to occur in risk situations and demonstrate applicability within the more complex international system. The theory also provides a structured theoretical foundation for those who criticize rational choice from a psychological perspective. For example, the Japanese decision to attack Pearl Harbor discussed earlier, if made from a domain of losses, appears less irrational and more

⁷⁷ Indeed, during the seizure of Crimea Washington feared a military confrontation with Russia to the extent that it reportedly advised Kyiv to not avoid military confrontation with the Russian military. Josh Rogin and Eli Lake, "U.S. Told Ukraine to Stand Down as Putin Invaded," *Bloomberg*, August 21, 2015. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2015-08-21/u-s-told-ukraine-to-stand-down-as-putin-invaded#xj4y7vzkg>.

⁷⁸ Berejikian, "Cognitive theory of deterrence," 179.

⁷⁹ James W. Davis, *Threats and Promises: The Pursuit of International Influence*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. Accessed January 4, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁸⁰ Davis, *Threats and Promises*, 152.

aligned with what prospect theory would predict. Consequently, prospect theory holds promise in helping better understand a challenger's likelihood of accepting risks and may help craft more effective deterrence strategies and even aid efforts to explain why some strategies failed.

On the other hand, for prospect theory to be helpful to policymakers and scholars, one must be able to identify the actor's domain of reference accurately and systematically identify risk levels among alternatives, which may not always be straightforward.⁸¹ Moreover, Karl Sörenson cautions that when applying prospect theory to the international domain, one "should proceed with caution since some of the reported effects may not exist or be exaggerated."⁸² Others have echoed similar concerns with their research, concluding that "claims derived from prospect theory hold generally, but not unconditionally, and in some cases are simply false."⁸³ Finally, an additional limitation of the theory, readily acknowledged by its proponents, is that, unlike rational choice models, PT has not "generated an integrated set of theorems about international politics that might rival rational choice."⁸⁴

Nevertheless, it has been pointed out that the challenges associated with operationalizing PT are no more problematic than those associated with rational choice.⁸⁵ Moreover, subsequent experiments intended to replicate or refute the findings of Kahneman and Tversky generally

⁸¹ Knopf, *Rationality, Culture and Deterrence*, 32.

⁸² Karl Sörenson, "Prospects of Deterrence: Deterrence Theory, Representation and Evidence," *Defence and Peace Economics* (2022): 9-10.

⁸³ Lisa J. Carlson, and Raymond Dacey, "Sequential analysis of deterrence games with a declining status quo," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 23, no. 2 (2006): 196.

⁸⁴ Berejikian, "Cognitive theory of deterrence," 180.

⁸⁵ See Berejikian, *International Relations under Risk*, 16; and Jonathan Mercer, "Prospect theory and political science," *Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci.* 8 (2005), 17.

reach similar conclusions.⁸⁶ Furthermore, it is essential to remember that even in the physical sciences, the most successful theories, such as quantum theory, remain fundamentally probabilistic. This a noteworthy fact that social science scholars should consider when evaluating a theory's potential usefulness when attempting to explain the complexities of international relations and human decision-making. Indeed, PT remains "the most influential behavioral theory of choice in the social sciences"⁸⁷ and offers an essential advancement in understanding and predicting international outcomes, potentially leading to more effective decision-making strategies and foreign policies, especially during crises.

Poliheuristic (PH) Theory

The simplicity and effectiveness of rational choice theory juxtaposed against the cognitive-based critiques highlighted above suggest a potential need for a decision-making theory that integrates both approaches' strengths to more accurately reflect how and why decisions arise. In 1993, Alex Mintz proposed such a synthesis when he crafted a non-compensatory decision-making theory. Unlike RC, EUT, and cybernetic approaches, which are compensatory, Mintz suggested that specific decision criteria (dimensions) are so crucial to decision-makers that they are non-compensatory. For example, Mintz's descriptive PH theory suggests that leaders' political survival is a non-compensatory dimension. Therefore, no matter

⁸⁶ For example, Grether and Plott conducted a study intending to refute the findings of Kahneman and Tversky, but unexpectedly their findings ultimately supported the conclusions of prospect theory. David M. Grether and Charles R. Plott, "Economic theory of choice and the preference reversal phenomenon," *The American Economic Review* 69, no. 4 (1979): 634.

⁸⁷ Mercer, "Prospect theory," 16.

how sizeable the benefits are in other dimensions, that choice will be eliminated if an alternative risks a leader's political prospects.⁸⁸

For instance, if a decision maker's choice to use force poses political risks to the leader but significantly enhances her nation's military and economic security, the non-compensatory principle of PH theory predicts the leader would not choose the use of force alternative. This is an example of the elimination-by-aspects (EBA) decision rule created by Amos Tversky.⁸⁹ Conversely, RC and EUT involve a holistic and exhaustive analysis of all available dimensions and alternatives by selecting the option that provides the greatest overall net utility to the decision maker.⁹⁰

PH theory, however, proposes that leaders follow a two-stage process, and consequently, only the first step is purely non-compensatory. The second step follows "analytic, expected utility, or lexicographic rules of choice to minimize risks and maximize rewards."⁹¹ For example, an analytic rule could be followed when little uncertainty is involved, and a straightforward cost-benefit analysis is appropriate without explicitly needing to assign probabilities to outcomes. As discussed above, expected utility is ideal when facing uncertainty and necessarily involves probabilities. Lexicographic (LEX) is a cognitive heuristic used to select alternatives based on maximizing a specific dimension, and the alternative that scores best on that single dimension is

⁸⁸ Alex Mintz, "The decision to attack Iraq: A noncompensatory theory of decision making," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 37, no. 4 (1993): 599.

⁸⁹ Amos Tversky, "Elimination by aspects: A theory of choice," *Psychological review* 79, no. 4 (1972): 281.

⁹⁰ Importantly, suppose the decision maker is motivated by instrumental rationality and weights the political dimension sufficiently high to minimize the importance of other dimensions. In that case, the expected utility and poliheuristic theories may each predict the same choice selection, but by different methods.

⁹¹ Redd and Mintz, "Policy perspectives," S17.

selected. In the event of a tie in the first dimension, the next most important dimension is evaluated.

The word Poliheuristic reflects its underlying assumptions. First, “Poli” indicates decision makers use “many” different heuristics (mental shortcuts). Second, “Poli” conveys the importance of the “political” dimension in that political leaders prioritize this dimension above all others.⁹² Indeed, EBA and LEX are cognitive heuristics, and poliheuristic theory suggests that decision-makers may use one or both when making decisions. Moreover, the avoid-major-political-loss (AMPL) principle associated with poliheuristic theory represents political leaders overweighting the value function of loss associated with potential risks related to their political survival.⁹³ Consequently, poliheuristic theory incorporates aspects of *loss aversion* advanced in prospect theory discussed above and is an example of a third cognitive heuristic.

One of the appeals of poliheuristic theory is that it remains relatively parsimonious in that it only adds one additional layer to the assumptions of rational choice theory and captures some, but certainly not all, of the concerns outlined by the cognitive perspective against rational choice. A further attraction to the theory is its apparent applicability to a wide range of decision-making scenarios, which include the use of force, initial crisis reaction, war termination, level of force used in a crisis, negotiations, coalition formation, and intraparty rivalry.⁹⁴ Moreover, scholars

⁹² Mintz and DeRouen, *Foreign Policy Decision Making*, 79.

⁹³ Mintz and DeRouen propose the following indicators to operationalize political leader’s non-compensatory political loss aversion: “Prospects of an electoral defeat; Threat to a leader’s survival; Significant drop in public support for a policy; Significant drop in popularity; Domestic opposition; Threat to regime survival; Intraparty rivalry and competition; External challenge to the regime; Potential collapse of the coalition government, or regime; Threat to political power, dignity, honor, or legitimacy of a leader; Demonstrations, riots, and so forth; The existence of veto players (e.g., pivotal parties in parliamentary systems)” Mintz and DeRouen. *Foreign Policy Decision Making*, 80.

⁹⁴ For a more comprehensive list, see Alex Mintz, “How do leaders make decisions? A poliheuristic perspective,” *Journal of conflict resolution* 48, no. 1 (2004): 4.

have successfully used PH to explain the decisions of leaders of both democratic⁹⁵ and autocratic⁹⁶ leaders.

Of particular interest to this dissertation are studies evaluating poliheuristic theory during crises and which involved the decision to use force. Examples of these studies include Eisenhower's decisions regarding Dien Bien Phu (1954)⁹⁷ and his actions regarding Guatemala (1954),⁹⁸ Reagan on Grenada (1983),⁹⁹ George H.W. Bush on Iraq (1991),¹⁰⁰ Clinton on Kosovo (1998),¹⁰¹ and Saddam's decision to remain in Kuwait.¹⁰² These studies provide evidence of a poliheuristic perspective being adopted by those leaders.

Concerning autocrats, Kinne specifies how the political dimension operates differently across the three distinct autocratic regime types: single-party, personalist, and military autocracies. He suggests that the primary political mechanisms each government is forced to respond to vary by regime type. In the case of personalist regimes, such as Putin's, the leader's

⁹⁵ Alex Mintz and Dmitry Dima Adamsky, eds. *How Do Leaders Make Decisions?: Evidence from the East and West, Part A*, Emerald Group Publishing, 2019.

⁹⁶ Alex Mintz and Dmitry Dima Adamsky, eds. *How Do Leaders Make Decisions?: Evidence from the East and West, Part B*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019, Accessed February 24, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁹⁷ Karl DeRouen Jr., "The decision not to use force at Dien Bien Phu: A poliheuristic perspective," In *Integrating cognitive and rational theories of foreign policy decision making*, pp. 11-28. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2003.

⁹⁸ Michelle M. Taylor-Robinson and Steven B. Redd, "Framing and the poliheuristic theory of decision: The United Fruit Company and the 1954 US-led coup in Guatemala," *Integrating cognitive and rational theories of foreign policy decision making* (2003): 77-100.

⁹⁹ Karl R. DeRouen, *Politics, economics, and presidential use of force decision making*, Vol. 23. Edwin Mellen Press, 2001.

¹⁰⁰ Mintz, "Decision to attack Iraq."

¹⁰¹ Steven B. Redd, 2000. The effect of advisors on strategy and choice in foreign policy decision making. Ph.D. diss., Political Science, Texas A&M University.

¹⁰² Brandon J. Kinne, "Decision making in autocratic regimes: A poliheuristic perspective." *International Studies Perspectives* 6, no. 1 (2005): 122-123.

status among his peers is paramount. Peers are rival factions, the military, regional actors, and the public.¹⁰³ While Kinne's autocratic regime typology is a valuable integration within the poliheuristic umbrella, it is arguably a less precise version of the selectorate theory's *winning coalition* and *selectorate* discussed above. Nevertheless, he effectively demonstrates the potential relevance of PH for each type of autocracy, bringing to the theory greater explanatory power.

A significant limitation of PH is that it lacks precision when considering decisions with uncertainty and dichotomous outcomes. Indeed, decisions to use military force are often clouded with uncertainty, and the range of outcomes can vary significantly. According to PH's first analysis stage, an option that risks political damage will be avoided. However, the theory is unclear if that includes minor or moderate risks. For instance, consider if country X plans to invade country Y and country X estimates it has an 80 percent chance of easily winning the war, but in the 20 percent chance that it loses, the leader will almost certainly be forced from office. Is that alternative's 20 percent risk to political survival sufficient to invoke the AMPL principle and EBA decision rule to eliminate the alternative? As seen in the above example, PH's poorly defined thresholds for risk in the first stage may complicate the operationalization decision calculations.

In contrast, a decision-maker adhering to EUT would likely select the invasion alternative if the associated positive utilities for a successful invasion were sufficiently high relative to the negative utilities of an unsuccessful invasion. The result is that some alternatives may be prematurely eliminated by analysts adhering to the tenets of PH, whereas the real-world decision maker would more often than not select the invasion option. Ultimately, each individual's

¹⁰³ Kinne, "Decision making in autocratic regimes," 121.

political risk likely varies and, as such, may lead the analyst to craft inaccurate predictions and explanations when not adequately characterized.

Indeed, the Applied Decision Analysis (ADA) procedure, which Mintz suggests as a methodology for analysts to adopt when evaluating PH against real-world decisions, does not mention probabilities for the first analysis stage.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the ADA is a superb methodology for creating multi-dimensional decision matrices, albeit without probabilities. Therefore, the next chapter will suggest modifying the ADA procedure to enable probability calculations, interoperability with EUT, and non-probabilistic RC and PT frameworks.

Another critique of PH is that it does not always conform to historical observations. Indeed, unlike in America, where a substantial majority of Americans supported invading Iraq in 2003 (65%), only a slim majority (54%) of UK citizens supported the potential invasion, yet the UK's Prime Minister decided to proceed with the war.¹⁰⁵ Undoubtedly, there was a sizeable risk that Blair's political survival would be in danger if the war did not go as intended. However, while the Prime Minister survived in office until 2007, it remains likely that many analysts using polling data prior to the war and adopting PH theoretical assumptions would not have predicted Blair supporting the war, given significant public opposition and associated moderate threat to his political survival.

Others critique PH on the grounds that it does not achieve what it claims, namely, combining rational choice and cognition meaningfully. According to Neack, PH's integration of heuristics is, at best, a limited and superficial version of the cognitive functions generally

¹⁰⁴ Alex Mintz, "Applied decision analysis: Utilizing poliheuristic theory to explain and predict foreign policy and national security decisions." *International Studies Perspectives* 6, no. 1 (2005): 94-98.

¹⁰⁵ Will Dahlgreen, "Memories of Iraq: did we ever support the war?" YouGov. June 3, 2015. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2015/06/03/remembering-iraq>.

associated with the shortcomings of rational choice. Moreover, she suggests that “PH scholars just change our focus from national interests to regime interests and borrow the idea of ‘shortcuts’ from cognitive scholars.” She argues that the “promotion and protection of interests is still what drives decision makers in this theory, whether in the first step or the second.”¹⁰⁶

The critiques are, in some respects, valid. For instance, many biases and cognitive shortcomings are not incorporated into PH but undoubtedly play a role in choice selections. Still, as discussed above, the non-compensatory avoid-major-political-loss principle reflects the cognitive heuristic of loss aversion identified in prospect theory and represents an important, albeit limited, blend of rational and cognitive decision theories. Moreover, scholars such as Levy have described PH’s two-stage process as “intriguing” and “well suited” for situations involving dimensions of extreme importance, such as political survival.¹⁰⁷ Integrating known cognitive heuristics into a decision-making model anchored in rational choice helps advance decision theory toward a more realistic model of how and why decisions are made, providing predictive and explanatory promise.

Russo-Ukrainian Crisis Literature

Having reviewed the decision-making theories to be tested later in this study, evaluating some of the leading explanations for why Putin initiated the crisis and why it devolved into war is necessary. Interestingly, most analyses focus on Putin and his motivation, biases, and misperceptions, with significantly less attention to Biden or Zelensky’s decisions. Nevertheless, in subsequent chapters, the decisions of all three presidents will be thoroughly evaluated against rational choice, expected utility, prospect, and poliheuristic theories.

¹⁰⁶ Laura Neack, *Studying Foreign Policy Comparatively: Cases and Analysis*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, 31.

¹⁰⁷ Levy and Thompson. *Causes of war*, 155.

Realist Perspective on the Russo-Ukrainian Crisis

Some realist scholars view NATO's steady expansion and its continued receptiveness to adding new members, such as Georgia and Ukraine, as a classic example of the security dilemma discussed above. These scholars contend that this security dilemma – of the West's making – predictably led to Putin's decision to invade Ukraine.¹⁰⁸ Stephen Walt makes his position clear when he writes:

“...we cannot lose sight of the dangers that realism highlights, including the risks that arise when you threaten what another state regards as a vital interest. It is no accident that realists have long emphasized the dangers of hubris and the perils of an overly idealistic foreign policy, whether in the context of the Vietnam War, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, or the naïve pursuit of open-ended NATO enlargement. Sadly, in each case their warnings were ignored, only to be vindicated by subsequent events.”¹⁰⁹

Other realist scholars like Mearsheimer are even more direct in how he apportions blame for the war:

“There is no question that Vladimir Putin started the war and is responsible for how it is being waged. But why he did so is another matter. The mainstream view in the West is that he is an irrational, out-of-touch aggressor bent on creating a greater Russia in the mould of the former Soviet Union. Thus, he alone bears full responsibility for the Ukraine crisis. But that story is wrong. The West, and especially America, is principally responsible for the crisis which began in February 2014. It has now turned into a war that not only threatens to destroy Ukraine, but also has the potential to escalate into a nuclear war between Russia and NATO.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Realism draws upon the rationalist school of thought and shares the assumption of the rational model that states are rational actors. However, realists view the state as a unitary rational actor, de-emphasizing the role played by individual decision-makers. Therefore, they attempt to maximize security through military and economic means rather than maximize the leader's self-interest, which may or may not coincide with the national interest.

¹⁰⁹ Stephen M. Walt, "An international relations theory guide to the war in Ukraine," *Foreign Policy*. March 8th, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/08/an-international-relations-theory-guide-to-ukraines-war>.

¹¹⁰ John Mearsheimer, "John Mearsheimer on why the West is Principally Responsible for the Ukrainian Crisis," *The Economist*. March 19th, 2022. <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2022/03/11/john-mearsheimer-on-why-the-west-is-principally-responsible-for-the-ukrainian-crisis>. See also Mearsheimer, John J. "Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault: the liberal delusions that provoked Putin." *Foreign Affairs*. 93 (2014): 77.

Indeed, NATO expansion had long annoyed Putin, and ending the alliance's growth was his leading demand throughout the pre-war crisis.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, one must make some critical assumptions for the realist line of argument to remain logically consistent. For example, for a traditional security dilemma to arise in the mind of Putin, he must have believed there was a realistic probability of NATO conducting a pre-emptive and unprovoked attack against Russia during his tenure. This assumption is problematic for historical, institutional, and motivational reasons.

First, when NATO has historically used significant military force, it has only done so against vastly inferior opponents, as in Bosnia and Kosovo, Libya, and Afghanistan. Moreover, in the case of the first three campaigns, the use of force was mostly limited to air power. In Afghanistan, NATO involvement resulted from invoking the alliance's collective defense statute (Article 5) and was exercised after the United States was attacked by al Qaeda in 2001. Further, these scenarios were in reaction to conflicts unfolding in the target countries and not a pre-emptive use of force prior to intra-state violence.

Second, Putin is undoubtedly aware of the constraints on democratic leaders when deciding to use force and the inherent limitations of NATO as an institution.¹¹² In the case of

¹¹¹ In Putin's 2021 essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," he complained, "we are witnessing not just complete dependence but direct external control, including the supervision of the Ukrainian authorities, security services and armed forces by foreign advisers, military" development "of the territory of Ukraine and deployment of NATO infrastructure." Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians." Kremlin, July 12, 2021. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>. In his February 21, 2022 speech, he protested that "The United States and NATO have started an impudent development of Ukrainian territory as a theatre of potential military operations. Their regular joint exercises are obviously anti-Russian" and "...the choice of pathways towards ensuring security should not pose a threat to other states, whereas Ukraine joining NATO is a direct threat to Russia's security." Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," Kremlin, February 21, 2022. <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

¹¹² For perspectives on the significance of public opinion on constraining US foreign policy, see Richard Sobel, *The impact of public opinion on US foreign policy since Vietnam: Constraining the colossus*, Oxford University Press, 2001, 239; Matthew A. Baum and Philip BK Potter, "War and democratic constraint," In *War and Democratic Constraint*. Princeton University Press, 2015; and Thomas Wallace Graham, "The politics of failure:

Bosnia, Kosovo, and Libya, the decision to limit major offensive operations to air power only reinforces the well-understood concept that democratic leaders are risk-averse to high casualties. Moreover, Moscow's military capability has long been considered one of the most substantial in the world, and its nuclear supremacy is rivaled only by Washington's. As a result, any large-scale pre-emptive war initiated by NATO against Russia would result in extremely high casualties and potentially escalate to a nuclear conflict. Thus, any effort of one NATO state to convince the other 30 members to pre-emptively launch an assault on Moscow is hard to contemplate realistically.

Further, there remains no potential motivational catalyst for NATO to take such drastic action in the foreseeable future. Surely, NATO would respond if one of its member states were attacked by Moscow, but that would be reactive, not pre-emptive. Perhaps if Putin began a widespread genocidal purge of ethnic minorities, there would be a reason for NATO to act, but even that would be unlikely to move NATO members to action, given the threat of nuclear escalation and the West's mixed record responding to genocides.¹¹³ Furthermore, what would be the goal of such a hypothetical military campaign? A ground offensive into Moscow to depose Putin and install a new leader? If Washington and its allies have yet to attempt military regime change against the nascent nuclear regime of North Korea, whose domestic atrocities far exceed that of Putin, then it remains bizarre to consider the scenario above.

Finally, the Bush administration's attempt to solicit vital European allies to support the invasion of Iraq only further highlights the difficulties involved in unifying democratic nations for *pre-emptive* war. Putin witnessed firsthand the effect consolidated democratic institutions had

strategic nuclear arms control, public opinion, and domestic politics in the United States: 1945-1980," PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1989.

¹¹³ Specifically the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the early 2000s in Darfur Sudan.

on its leaders when Paris and Berlin joined Moscow in refusing to support Washington's Iraq military initiative in the UN, with the public highly opposed in both states.¹¹⁴

Considering NATO's historical track record of only targeting weak states, Russia's military prominence and nuclear arsenal, democratic constraints on war in general and pre-emptive war in particular, and the absence of any potential motivational catalyst, it remains an unconvincing premise that Putin believed he was at any risk of an unprovoked pre-emptive attack by Brussels or Washington. However, such an assumption is necessary if one argues, as Mearsheimer and Walt have done, that NATO expansion genuinely posed a national security risk to Russia in the mind of Putin.

Alternatively, the specter of an aggressive, expanding, and hostile NATO has served as the perfect diversionary tactic to stoke domestic fears and mask Putin's genuine security concerns related to NATO. For Putin, more significant influence in Brussels limits his ability to operate unhindered in his near-abroad and brings unwanted democratic influences from Ukraine on ordinary Russians. Indeed, as Vindman and Bustillos wrote just prior to Russia's invasion, "Putin loathes the prospect of a thriving and prosperous democratic model in the cradle of East Slavic civilization, a development that could provide Russian citizens with an increasingly palatable and inspiring framework for a democratic transition in their own country."¹¹⁵

Moreover, the security guarantees of NATO afford young democracies the ability to consolidate. In a sense, the steady expansion of NATO eastward and into Russia's near-abroad

¹¹⁴ Opposition in Germany and France was in the mid-70th percentile, see Hoge, Warren. "Blair sees Iraq Weakening as France Resists Early War," The New York Times, January 22, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/22/world/threats-responses-europe-blair-sees-iraq-weakening-france-resists-early-war.html?searchResultPosition=4>.

¹¹⁵ Vindman, Alexander and Dominic Cruz Bustillos. "The Day After Russia Attacks: What War in Ukraine Would look like – and How America Should Respond." <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-01-21/day-after-russia-attacks>.

demonstrates the slow but growing success of democracy over autocracy, which is not a principle Putin wishes his populace to witness or embrace. Further, as the Ukrainian historian Serhii Plokhy writes, “The success and durability of Ukrainian democracy was a threat to the Putin regime since it encouraged whatever remained of the pro-democratic forces in Russia and, in geopolitical terms, brought democratic institutions closer to Russia’s borders. In Putin’s eyes, this was not just undesirable but unacceptable.”¹¹⁶ Thus, Putin’s security dilemma posed by NATO is not one of *missiles* but of democratic *ideas* and their spillover effect to undermine his autocratic power in Moscow. As McFaul and Person argue, “[NATO] has never attacked the Soviet Union or Russia, and it never will. Putin knows that. But Putin is threatened by a flourishing democracy in Ukraine...[it] would undermine the Kremlin’s own regime stability...”¹¹⁷ Margaret MacMillan agrees, suggesting one of Putin’s motives for escalation was the fear of democracy infecting Russian society.¹¹⁸ Therefore, one could more appropriately argue that the expansion of NATO undoubtedly presented a security dilemma for Putin, but not in the traditional sense of a national security threat against Russia, as realist scholars suggest, but instead a threat to the long-term survival of his personalist regime.

Realist arguments that leverage the security dilemma’s theoretical premises achieve a parsimonious systems-level explanation for Putin’s invasion. However, in doing so, they are forced to assume that Putin is so paranoid that he is irrationally ignoring the historical track

¹¹⁶ Serhii Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return to History*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2023), 83.

¹¹⁷ Indeed, McFaul and Person argue that Putin has not always been hostile to NATO. Instead the pro-democratic “color revolutions,” the Arab Spring and finally the 2014 EuroMaidan revolution in Ukraine is what motivated Putin to seize Crimea and then use NATO expansion as the false-justification. See McFaul, Michael, and Robert Person. “What Putin Fears Most.” *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development* 21 (2022): 38.

¹¹⁸ Margaret MacMillan, “How Wars Don’t End: Ukraine, Russia, and the Lessons of World War I,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 12, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/how-wars-dont-end>.

record of NATO's military conflicts, Russia's significant conventional and military forces, and the constraints placed on democratic leaders that Putin has exploited and come to rely upon in past policy decisions.¹¹⁹ Further, Putin had already effectively prevented Kyiv's entry into NATO after he annexed Crimea in 2014 and fomented a violent separatist movement in Eastern Ukraine.¹²⁰ For these reasons, it is more likely that Putin's prolonged fixation on NATO expansion is intended for domestic consumption to present a scapegoat for the Russian people to rally against and not as a legitimate threat to the Russian state or citizens. Ultimately, self-interest and political survival, not the Russian national interest, preoccupies Putin.

However, not all realists take the position of Mearsheimer and Walt. Felix Rösch has criticized Mearsheimer's position and argued that Putin's motivations are "imperialistic," and they are best explained by Putin's "desire to restore former Russian grandeur."¹²¹ Indeed, others, such as the Prime Minister of Lithuania, agree with Rösch, claiming Putin's motivation has always been to dominate his neighbors, and he never wanted peace in Ukraine.¹²² While imperialism is a more likely explanation for Putin's actions than a traditional security dilemma, it is more probable that restoring past glories serves as a means to an end, namely political survival.

¹¹⁹ Thus far, realists have not suggested Putin is irrational, just the opposite. He is fully rational, so the argument goes, for responding to the security threats posed by the expansion of NATO.

¹²⁰ The likelihood of all NATO members agreeing to admit Ukraine into the alliance with an active conflict in the Donbas region, which involved direct Russian support, and the status of Crimea still in dispute was essentially zero.

¹²¹ Felix Rösch, "Realism, the War in the Ukraine, and the Limits of Diplomacy," *Analyse & Kritik* 44, no. 2 (2022): 216.

¹²² Ingrida Simonyte, "Lithuania's Prime Minister, Ingrida Simonyte, says Russia's invasion was Predictable," *The Economist*, May 2nd, 2022. <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2022/03/02/lithuanias-prime-minister-ingrida-simonyte-says-russias-invasion-was-predictable>.

Furthermore, if we adopt the viewpoint of McFaul, Person, Vindman, Bustillos, Plokhy, and MacMillan above, we can conclude that Putin's end goal is regime survival and the suppression of neighboring democracies and their inevitable influence. Deposing Zelensky and installing a pro-Kremlin government would have reinforced the carefully crafted image of Putin as a strong leader endeavoring to regain Russia's rightful place in the world as a leading power against the decadent, corrupt West. No doubt, Putin wishes to rule over a more extensive and not smaller set of states and territories, but his so-called imperialist actions in Ukraine should be viewed as an attempt to eliminate democratic influences on his borders¹²³ and to secure additional wealth for himself and the elites which keep him in power.¹²⁴

Some experts have drawn upon the tenets of rational deterrence theory to explain the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For instance, John Bolton, one of the many National Security Advisors in the Trump Whitehouse, claims Western deterrence failed for three reasons. First, President Biden's public decision in early December to eliminate US military involvement as an option was an "unforced, unilateral concession, with no Russian reciprocity sought or given." Second, according to Bolton, the US strategy to threaten painful sanctions only after a Russian incursion did not tangibly change Putin's "Putin's cost-benefit calculus." Third, he proposes that the West lacked credibility in the eyes of Putin after it failed to enact effective sanctions against

¹²³ Consider "democratic diffusion theory" which posit that neighboring democratic states, especially ones culturally and economically aligned, have a positive effect on spreading democratic ideas and institutions to neighboring non-democratic states. For example, Bunce and Wolchik suggest that "postcommunist structural similarities...created opportunities, incentives and capacity for the successful diffusion of electoral revolutions," in Eastern Europe. See Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik. "International diffusion and postcommunist electoral revolutions." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 39, no. 3 (2006): 298.

¹²⁴ The previously discussed selectorate theory aligns nicely with the thesis that Putin was motivated by long-term political survival, and a successful subjugation of Ukraine would have led to increased streams of wealth to support his winning coalition through kleptocracy and corruption.

Russia after it invaded Georgia and Ukraine.¹²⁵ Instead, Bolton suggests that imposing “preinvasion” costs, including deploying more US troops to Ukraine and rapidly delivering weapons, may have deterred Putin successfully.¹²⁶

The theoretical underpinnings found in Bolton’s conclusions and recommendations are typical of a rational choice and an expected utility view of deterrence, assuming that if perceived costs are sufficiently high by the defender, the challenger will back down. Moreover, emphasizing the defender’s military capability and the local balance of forces indicates a rationalist perspective and a realist worldview. However, it is doubtful that Putin would have backed down without a solid military commitment from Washington or NATO to protect Ukraine. If poliheuristic theory is correct, after Putin initiated the crisis, he would have incurred severe reputational costs had he backed down without achieving any meaningful Western concessions, and thus the de-escalation alternative for Putin would have been eliminated outright. From a prospect theory perspective, if Putin is assumed to be in a domain of losses, then additional threats would only have provoked, not quelled, Putin’s desire to change the unacceptable status quo. Furthermore, Bolton fails to address the level to which Putin was motivated to invade Ukraine and his possible misperceptions and biases, which may have contributed to his inclination to invade, making successful deterrence more problematic.

¹²⁵ Notably, Bolton ignores any negative credibility implications associated with the statements of the Trump administration he served in, which likely contributed to a greater Western credibility gap in the eyes of Putin. Specifically, Trump’s regular minimization of the importance of NATO, the implication of a quid-pro-quo with President Zelensky for the release of security aid to Kyiv, for which President Trump was later impeached, and publicly undermining the U.S. Intelligence community’s assessment concerning Moscow’s interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election.

¹²⁶ Bolton, John. “How Putin Is Beating the West at Deterrence.” *TIME Magazine* 199, no. 11/12 (March 28, 2022), 30. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ez-salve.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=155795941&site=ehost-live>.

Psychological Perspective on the Russo-Ukrainian Crisis

While Bolton invokes familiar concepts from rational deterrence theory, significant disparities exist between theory and empirical observations. The psychological approach highlights cognitive factors such as misperceptions and biases to explain failures in deterrence and the outbreak of war.¹²⁷ For example, scholars like Lebow claim, “In most wars, information was available beforehand that indicated, or certainly suggested, that the venture would not succeed militarily or fail to achieve its political goals.”¹²⁸ For Lebow, Putin’s invasion of Ukraine is no exception. It was the pursuit of revanchism, according to Lebow, which clouded Putin’s judgment, leading him to irrationally convince himself that he could achieve his goal of bringing Kyiv back within Moscow’s control. As a result, he underestimated Ukrainian nationalism, military resolve, and capabilities. Moreover, Lebow suggests that Putin was “blind to the likely response of Ukrainians because effective resistance was utterly inconsistent with [his] deeply held belief that Ukrainians were not a people, Ukraine not a country, and its army not a worthy opponent.”¹²⁹

In addition to Lebow, Boris Bondarev, a Russian diplomat and post-war defector, points to Putin surrounding himself with sycophants, which prevented objective assessments and contrarian views from being openly discussed, which led to miscalculating the costs associated

¹²⁷ For more on the psychological approach toward deterrence and empirical deviations from what rational deterrence would predict, see Robert Jervis, "Deterrence and perception," *International security* 7, no. 3 (1982): 3-30; Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, "Rational deterrence theory: I think, therefore I deter," *World politics* 41, no. 2 (1989): 208-224; Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American foreign policy: Theory and practice*. Columbia University Press, 1974; and Michael J. Mazarr, Arthur Chan, Alyssa Demus, Bryan Frederick, Alireza Nader, Stephanie Pezard, Julia A. Thompson, and Elina Treyger. *What Deters and Why: Exploring Requirements for Effective Deterrence of Interstate Aggression*. Rand Corporation, 2018.

¹²⁸ Richard Ned Lebow, "International Relations Theory and the Ukrainian War," *Analyse & Kritik* 44, no. 1 (2022): 111.

¹²⁹ Lebow, "International Relations and Ukraine," 129.

with an invasion.¹³⁰ Similarly, Gleb Karakulov, a Federal Guard Service post-war defector, suggests that Putin operated in an information vacuum.¹³¹ Indeed, we had witnessed firsthand Putin's aversion to opposing views, perhaps best illustrated when Putin publicly ridiculed his intelligence chief after he suggested, prior to military escalation, another ultimatum be offered to the West.¹³²

Nevertheless, while the psychological perspective has identified several significant empirical shortcomings associated with rational deterrence paradigms, they are insufficient to explain the start of all wars. For example, according to Lebow's research, initiators of wars "won 46, lost 45, drew 3" of the wars they started.¹³³ An almost 50 percent failure rate is hardly sufficient to suggest that most wars are started due to miscalculations leading to their failure. Notably, Lebow's analysis to explain Putin's choice to invade fails to consider the decisions made by non-Russian leaders before and during the crisis, which limits its explanatory capability.

Conversely, Dumitru Minzarari broadens his scope of the pre-war crisis while staying within the psychological research tradition. For Minzarari, misperceptions are to be found on both sides of the crisis. Putin overestimated his Russian forces' capabilities and underestimated the Ukrainian military's resolve. He also misinterpreted Western resolve and willingness to

¹³⁰ Boris Bondarev, "The Sources of Russian Conduct: A Diplomat Defects From the Kremlin," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2022 Vol 101, number 6: (36-55). <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/sources-russia-misconduct-boris-bondarev>; and S. Kotkin, "What Putin Got Wrong About Ukraine, Russia, and the West," Interview by Daniel Kurtz-Phelan In *Foreign Affairs*. 31 May 2022.

¹³¹ Ilia Rozhdestvenskii, "The Russian President is a war criminal," The Dossier Center, <https://dossier.center/fso-en/https://dossier.center/fso-en/>.

¹³² Ricardo de Querol, "Sergey Naryshkin: The Russian spy boss humiliated by Putin. El Pais, February 23, 2022, <https://english.elpais.com/opinion/2022-02-23/the-russian-spy-boss-humiliated-by-putin.html>.

¹³³ This data set includes all wars since 1638 that involved at least one or more great or rising powers, see Lebow, "International Relations and Ukraine," 121, 125.

commit long-term to economic sanctions based on their “gradual return to business as usual” after Russia’s Crimea annexation. Moreover, according to Minzarari, Putin received mixed signals from Washington, Paris, and Berlin.¹³⁴ Regarding the West, its misperceptions stem from a misunderstanding of Russia’s foreign policy culture. What the West perceived was a positive and productive inducement to initiate and pursue diplomacy only reinforced the Russian perception of the West’s weak resolve and aversion to engaging in costly economic or military conflict with Russia.¹³⁵

Overall, the psychological perspective can too often turn into an exercise in tautology to explain every failed war through miscalculation. Certainly, one can miscalculate and misperceive and still initiate and win wars. It is doubtful that any conflict exists where miscalculations regarding some aspect of their enemy’s intent, strategy, capability, or resolve were absent on both sides. Instead, biases, miscalculations, and misperceptions are more apt at explaining the disappointing outcome of the war for Putin than why he decided to invade.

Prospect Theory Perspective on the Russo-Ukrainian Crisis

Other scholars attribute Putin’s decision to invade to cognitive factors from within the more precise framework of prospect theory. Before the 2022 invasion, some scholars attempted to explain Putin’s decisions involving using force through prospect theory, including the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, the annexation of Crimea, and Moscow’s intervention in Syria,¹³⁶ but scholarship using this approach for the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian crisis is limited.

¹³⁴ Minzarari, Dumitru. *Failing to deter Russia's war against Ukraine: The role of misperceptions*. No. 33/2022. SWP Comment, 2022, 3.

¹³⁵ Minzarari, *Failing to Deter Russia's*, 2.

¹³⁶ Brian Lampert, "Putin’s Prospects: Vladimir Putin’s Decision-Making through the Lens of Prospect Theory," *Small Wars Journal* (2016).

Walt briefly mentions a possible connection between prospect theory and Putin's motivation. He suggests that Ukraine's closer alignment with NATO placed Putin in a domain of losses, and consequently, Moscow was more willing to embark on a risky war to prevent Kyiv from permanently joining Brussels.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, the reasons for Walt remain centered on Russia's security and not regime stability. Certainly, Putin could have been concerned about both, but the position taken by this study is that the survivability of his regime and not Russia's national security was his most salient interest.

Haoze Zhang also attempts to explain Putin's invasion through the lens of prospect theory while also advocating a novel PT-based model for analyzing Russian foreign policy decision-making. Zhang suggests three mechanisms were at work that motivated Putin. First, Putin sought "certainty" in preventing Kyiv from joining NATO, which was achieved through the invasion. Second, he argues that the "sunk cost" effect was in play given the significant resources Moscow already invested in its activities in eastern Ukraine. Finally, the endowment effect motivated Putin as he views Ukraine as a "brother nation," with a permanent loss of influence that would come with greater European integration would be "absolutely unacceptable."¹³⁸ While this study concurs that Putin was in a domain of losses prior to the crisis, he had already achieved "certainty" in preventing Ukraine from joining NATO when he annexed Crimea and began supporting the conflict in the Donbas in 2014, and thus a full-scale invasion was unnecessary.

Nevertheless, this author agrees with Zhang that PT provides a practical framework to explain Putin's decisions. Indeed, President Putin likely viewed the status quo (*reference point*)

¹³⁷ Walt, "International Relations Theory Guide."

¹³⁸ Haoze Zhang, "Analysis of Russian Foreign Action Decision-Making under Prospect Theory," *International Journal of Frontiers in Sociology*, Vol. 4, Issue 9, DOI: 10.25236/IJFS.2022.040904, 24.

concerning Ukraine as an unacceptable and certain loss, given Kyiv's ever-closer military, economic, and diplomatic relationships with Washington and Brussels. Therefore, he was presented with the prospect of accepting a *certain loss* with Ukraine permanently aligning with NATO and the EU, leading to a prosperous and democratic nation on its border. Alternatively, Putin could take a riskier route of attempting to coerce Brussels and Washington to abandon Kyiv and, if that failed, invade Ukraine to install a pro-Moscow government. Although *higher risk*, the latter option provided an opportunity to avoid a *certain loss* and provide a *greater gain* by creating an acceptable status quo. Because Putin was in a domain of losses and therefore risk-accepting, he chose the coercion and invasion path.

In the end, we can never know with certainty what truly motivated Putin to initiate a militarized crisis on the Ukrainian border. We have considered whether it was a genuine fear of NATO's military power, imperialist ambitions, miscalculations, or anxiety about what closer NATO integration meant for Ukrainian democracy and, in turn, Russian perceptions of Putin's regime. While the possibility exists that it was a combination of all those factors, this study suggests that the latter played much more prominently in Putin's decision calculus.

Regardless of motivations, all observers agree Putin viewed greater Western influence in Kyiv as unacceptable. As will be shown in Chapter 5, Putin's available alternatives to prevent that looming outcome were limited. Considering those options, he felt his best chance to achieve his goal was to attempt a coercive gambit against Washington and Brussels and eliminate Kyiv from the discussion. Once he sent his forces to the border and made his demands of NATO public, Putin's political survival depended on the West's acquiescence or further Russian military escalation. Similarly, Biden and Zelensky's political prospects hinged on not backing

down to the Russian President's demands, which cumulatively led to the crisis ending in war instead of a negotiated settlement.

Summary

This chapter has reviewed and evaluated realism and rationalist explanations of conflict along with individual decision-making theories, including rational choice, non-cooperative game theory, expected utility, bounded rationality, prospect, and poliheuristic theories. Additionally, an evaluation of relevant literature regarding the Russo-Ukrainian crisis was conducted. This literature leveraged realist schools of thought, rational choice, rational deterrence theory, psychological perspectives, and prospect theory to explain Putin's motivations in initiating the crisis.

After considering multiple variables, the chapter suggests that Putin did not perceive NATO expansion and its greater integration with Ukraine as a threat to Russian national security or its citizens but instead as a threat to his long-term political survival. This danger to his personalist regime motivated Putin to attempt regime change in Kyiv. Indeed, as the findings later in this study demonstrate, political motivations and prospect theory provide a more accurate and reliable explanation for Putin's decision to initiate the crisis than considerations based on military, diplomatic, and economic factors. Like World War I, domestic variables and political constraints were pivotal in catalyzing the crisis and its outcome.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ As Levy concludes in his study of the 1914 pre-war crisis, "The primary causes of World War I were the underlying international and domestic forces which shaped the preferences of the great powers and the strategic and political constraints on their actions." Levy, "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices," 154.

The next chapter outlines the study's research design and methodology. It provides an overview of the dissertation's process for answering the research questions: why did Putin choose to coerce NATO into banning Kyiv from joining the alliance instead of pursuing other alternatives to achieve his Ukrainian goals, and why did the three-month pre-war crisis end in war and not de-escalation?

Chapter 3 – Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

The central objective of this dissertation is to answer why the Russo-Ukrainian pre-war crisis erupted and ended in war and not de-escalation. This study suggests that identifying the decision-making strategies of the Presidents of Russia, Ukraine, and the United States provides a useful answer to the above question. The chapter begins by providing an overview of the entire dissertation. Next, the research design provides the study's overall strategy to sufficiently answer the research question and effectively test the above hypotheses. The research design section explains the study's scope, level of analysis, approach, genre, format, theoretical framework, and methodology used in collecting and analyzing the data sample. Next, the analytic methodology is detailed, including specific techniques and procedures for collecting and analyzing data samples and how they provide the most effective means for testing the study's hypotheses and answering the research questions despite inherent methodological limitations.

Dissertation Organization

After introducing the topic and discussing its importance and relevance in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 provides an overview of the relevant literature concerning the four decision theories tested and reviews scholarly perspectives attempting to explain the cause of the Russo-Ukrainian crisis. Chapter 3 presents the research design and a methodological overview, including procedures to collect and analyze the data. Chapter 4 uses the causal process tracing method to outline the crisis and identify the five critical decisions. Chapter 5 conducts the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the critical decisions testing each theoretical framework. Finally, Chapter 7 summarizes the findings, answers the study's research questions, details the dissertation's conclusions, and provides recommendations for scholars, policymakers, and analysts.

Research Design

Scoping and Level of Analysis

When attempting to explain any war, a challenge for scholars is to determine how far back into the historical record is needed to explain the outcome adequately and what level of analysis is most appropriate.¹ In other words, which, in a long series of events, is the most appropriate starting point for the study to provide a compelling explanation, and at what level? For instance, consider this study's research question. Scholars could seek to explain the war's outbreak by examining the decision-making strategies adopted immediately before and during the crisis, which is the approach in this dissertation. Alternatively, one could go back even further to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 or start with the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and the West's tepid response to Putin's invasion. On the other hand, scholars adopting a realist view have argued that one must include the 2008 NATO declaration to include Ukraine and Georgia in the alliance and go back even further to the first round of NATO expansion in the post-Cold War era 1999.² Finally, others could claim that the path toward war began with the rise of Putin to the position of President and his worldview that the collapse of the Soviet Union was "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century," which resulted in a free and independent Ukraine.³

¹ For example, Levy and Thompson categorize levels of analysis for the study of war into three categories: (1) Systems-level, (2) dyadic-level, (2) state and societal-level, and individual-level, see Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson. *Causes of war*. John Wiley & Sons, 2011.

² See Stephen M. Walt's "An international relations theory guide to the war in Ukraine." *Foreign Policy*. March 8th, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/08/an-international-relations-theory-guide-to-ukraines-war>; John Mearsheimer, "John Mearsheimer on why the West is Principally Responsible for the Ukrainian Crisis." *The Economist*. March 19th, 2022. <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2022/03/11/john-mearsheimer-on-why-the-west-is-principally-responsible-for-the-ukrainian-crisis>.

³ Vladimir Putin, Annual State of the Nation Address. Quoted in, "Putin address to the Nation: Excerpts," *BBC*. April 25th, 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/EUTrope/4481455.stm>.

The exercise above highlights that there is no perfect answer to this predicament. Social science phenomena are inherently complex and dependent upon countless independent variables, each holding shifting levels of importance depending on the context.⁴ Still, it is infeasible to include all those variables as scholars' explanations become useless if they attempt to capture all aspects of reality.⁵ As a partial solution, we can turn to those who rightly advise that the timeframe under analysis is essential for selecting the most effective scope and level of analysis. Indeed, Levy and Thompson have proposed that *systems-level analysis* is more appropriate for studies attempting to explain what processes led to a crisis. Conversely, at the other end of the analytic spectrum, *individual-level analysis* is typically better matched when explaining a specific crisis.⁶

Therefore, each researcher must impose appropriate delimitations that properly scope the study. Consequently, given this dissertation's research question, the individual level of analysis framework is adopted. In doing so, we will focus on analyzing the specific foreign policy decision-making of the three key leaders of the crisis, namely, Presidents Biden, Zelensky, and Putin. The study selects November 10, 2021, as the starting point of analysis, which was the first public⁷ high-profile warning from the U.S. regarding a build-up of Russian forces along the

⁴ For instance, additional contributing factors not mentioned in the illustration above include energy prices, NATO member positions, the strength of opposition movements in Russia, domestic support for Putin, ideological perspectives of Biden, Zelensky, and Putin, and anti-Moscow policies enacted in Kyiv.

⁵ As Kenneth Waltz astutely observed, "Explanatory power, however, is gained by moving away from 'reality,' not by staying close to it." Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of international politics*. Waveland Press. 1979, 7.

⁶ Levy and Thompson, *Causes of war*, 211.

⁷ The first *non-public* warning took place in Moscow on November 2, 2021, between the CIA Director, the U.S. Ambassador to Russia, and Moscow's Secretary of the Russian Security Council, when the CIA Director revealed the U.S. had discovered its plans to invade Ukraine. See Dara Massicot, "What Russia Got Wrong: Can Moscow Learn From Its Failures in Ukraine?" *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/what-russia-got-wrong-moscow-failures-in-ukraine-dara-massicot>.

Ukrainian border,⁸ and the crisis end date as February 24, 2022, the first day of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.⁹ Further, this timeframe allows for an analysis of Putin's alternatives and his decision to formally initiate the crisis in December when he submitted his demands through diplomatic channels. Scoping the research questions and crisis timeframe in such a way provides a more manageable approach and, ideally, a parsimonious explanation of the crisis events and their outcome. Nevertheless, while achieving greater parsimony, narrowing the scope necessarily reduces the causal significance of contributing factors in the historical record. Therefore, this study focuses on providing a simple yet useful explanation of the decisions immediately before and during the pre-war crisis.

Research Approach and Genre

Quantitative research on the causes of war and crisis escalation has yet to form a consensus on the most significant causal variables associated with war. Moreover, while many quantitative studies have identified *permissive* conditions that increase the likelihood of war, the body of war literature has thus far been unable to identify necessary conditions or sufficient conditions that apply to all war cases.¹⁰ Consequently, until a scholarly consensus forms, it becomes problematic to account for any one example of war using *purely* quantitative methods.¹¹

⁸ Michael Crowley, "Blinken Warns Russia Against Making a 'Serious Mistake' in Ukraine." The New York Times. November 10, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/10/us/politics/russia-blinken-ukraine.html>.

⁹ This amounts to 106 days or three months and two weeks.

¹⁰ *Sufficient* conditions guarantee that an outcome will occur. In contrast, if a *necessary* condition is not met, the outcome cannot happen regardless of other conditions. However, the outcome may still occur if a *permissive* condition is not met. However, the permissive conditions increase the probability of the outcome occurring. Fearon suggests three necessary conditions for war according to the neorealist perspective: asymmetric information and incentives, commitment problems, and issues of indivisibilities. For a fuller discussion on this topic, see James D. Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war." *International organization* 49, no. 3 (1995): 379-414.

¹¹ Even if an agreed-upon sufficient condition were to materialize, case study research would still be necessary to confirm that the condition remained valid.

Given the limited scope of the research questions and the crisis, a qualitative approach working within the single case study tradition may seem the most appropriate selection; however, quantitative calculations are inherent to some of the theories being tested. Therefore, a mixed approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods is appropriate to evaluate and test each theory adequately.

The qualitative case study approach allows for rich, in-depth analysis and permits the researcher to outline the necessary contextual factors distinctive to the phenomenon under study, which typically cannot be accomplished through purely quantitative methods. Arguably, when the qualitative approach is combined with quantitative analysis, it provides a complementary evaluation of the relevant variables; thus, adopting a mixed approach intends to strengthen the reliability and accuracy of the study's findings and conclusions.

Further, the case study will leverage a causal process tracing format, which allows the author to present the crisis as it unfolds from start to finish in a step-by-step approach.¹² Such an approach provides a representational view of the information available to each decision-maker at each crisis stage to identify the causal links that produced the observed outcome. This framework is essential to understanding and explaining the decision process and outcome by effectively isolating observable data to test the hypotheses. Moreover, the process tracing method is well suited when testing theories, as is being done in this study, and it allows for testing the presence or absence of the theory's causal mechanism.¹³

¹² Stephen Van Evera describes process tracing as when "the investigator explores the chain of events or the decision-making process by which initial case conditions are translated into case outcomes. The cause-effect link that connects independent variable and outcome is unwrapped and divided into smaller steps; then the investigator looks for observable evidence of each step." Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to methods for students of political science*, Cornell University Press, 1997, 64.

¹³ Adrian Kay and Phillip Baker. "What can causal process tracing offer to policy studies? A review of the literature." *Policy Studies Journal* 43, no. 1 (2015), 7.

Theoretical Framework

This dissertation posits a general theoretical explanation for crisis outcomes, followed by a specific explanation for the Russo-Ukrainian crisis. The first general theoretical assertion is that crises increase the probability of war (antecedent condition). Second, individual Political leaders adopt a specific decision-making strategy during a crisis (independent variable).¹⁴ Third, if conciliatory alternatives are incompatible with the chosen decision-making strategy, the probability of war becomes highly probable (intervening variable), thus causing the outcome, namely either war or de-escalation (dependent variable).

Accordingly, the specific explanation for the Russo-Ukrainian crisis erupting into war follows in line with the general theoretical propositions above. First, President Putin initiated the Russo-Ukrainian crisis (antecedent condition). Next, rational choice, expected utility, poliheuristic, prospect theory, or a combination of those theories best describe President Biden, Zelensky, and Putin's decision strategy. Finally, the chosen decision strategy eliminated the conciliatory alternatives (intervening variable), which led to war instead of de-escalation (dependent variable).

¹⁴ This *non-compensatory* principle adopted by leaders concerning their political survival is a core tenant of poliheuristic theory as outlined by Mintz. See Alex Mintz, "The Decision to Attack Iraq: A Noncompensatory Theory of Decision Making." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (1993) 37: 595–618.

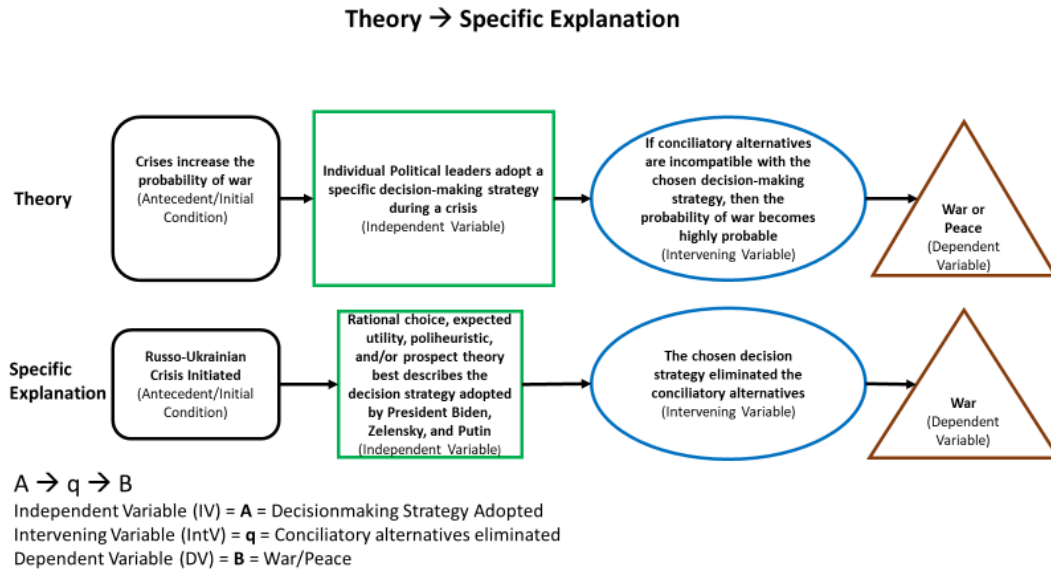


Fig. 3.1. Theoretical propositions and specific explanations for the crisis outcome.¹⁵

Therefore, rational choice (RC) theory, expected utility theory (EUT), prospect theory (PT), and Poliheuristic (PH) theory will be tested against the real-world decisions of the three presidents to identify which one(s) were likely adopted. Importantly, however, the theories tested are not presumed to be monolithic. Indeed, when this study refers to one of the “theories,” it does so in the context of a theoretical *framework* or *model* applied in this research and grounded in the fundamental tenets of the underlying theory.

RC theory is often incorporated into a formal rational actor model (RAM) of individual decision-making. The assumptions of most RAMs are few and generally include that actors make decisions that they feel are in their best interest, that they can rank-order their preferences consistently, and that they consider constraints and the likely actions of others.¹⁶ RAMs have

¹⁵ This model is based on the framework outlined in Van Evera, *Guide to methods*, Chapter 1.

¹⁶ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, “Foreign policy analysis and rational choice models.” In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. 2010, 2-3.

been used successfully across various international relations topics, including foreign policy decision-making.¹⁷

Notably, a critical difference between RAM and EUT is that the decision-makers subjective probabilities are not always required to be explicitly defined in RAMs, unlike when calculating EUT. Therefore, EUT provides a simple equation for treating uncertain outcomes.¹⁸ More elaborate mathematical formulations – many grounded in EUT's basic assumptions – have been used successfully to *predict* international outcomes.¹⁹

PT is another successful decision theory and a challenger to rational choice introduced by Kahneman and Tversky in 1979 in what would emerge as behavioral economics.²⁰ Their experiments focused on individual behavior when confronted with risk, and their findings conflict with the predictions of EUT. They conclude that individuals frame decisions involving risk around a neutral reference point, and how they frame their situation – either a gain or loss – will determine their tolerance to risk.²¹ For example, when offered a small but sure gain, individuals are risk averse to pursuing more considerable gains even with small amounts of risk

¹⁷ See James D. Fearon, "Domestic political audiences and the escalation of international disputes," *American political science review* 88, no. 3 (1994): 577-592.; Barbara Koremenos and Charles Lipson, and Duncan Snidal. "The rational design of international institutions." *International organization* 55, no. 4 (2001): 761-799.

¹⁸ The simplest expression of the expected utility formula is $EUT = \sum P(x) U(x)$, where: EUT = expected utility; \sum = summation of all outcomes; $P(x)$ = probability of outcome x; $U(x)$ = utility of outcome x

¹⁹ For a review of scholarly attempts to predict international outcomes see James Lee Ray and Bruce Russett. "The Future as Arbiter of Theoretical Controversies: Predictions, Explanations and the End of the Cold War." *British Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 4 (1996): 441-70. Accessed August 8, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/194092>; and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, "An expected utility theory of international conflict," *American Political Science Review* 74, no. 4 (1980): 917-931.

²⁰ See Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman. "Advances in prospect theory: Cumulative representation of uncertainty." *Journal of Risk and uncertainty* 5 (1992): 297-323; and Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman. "Advances in prospect theory: Cumulative representation of uncertainty." *Journal of Risk and uncertainty* 5 (1992): 297-323.

²¹ Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. "Prospect theory: An analysis of decision under risk." In *Handbook of the fundamentals of financial decision making: Part I*, 2013, 268-269.

involved. In contrast, individuals take excessive risks to protect even small but certain losses if there is a chance to avoid or reverse the loss altogether, even if doing so presents the possibility of an even greater loss.²² The example above illustrates the concepts of *framing* and *loss aversion*.

Kahneman and Tversky's PT has successfully been applied to the field of international relations.²³ Moreover, parallels have been made with declining states framing the status quo as a domain of losses and, in response, taking excessive risks to correct those losses.²⁴ Furthermore, both Levy and Jervis argue that the concept of loss aversion in a crisis may lead states to take "preemptive action and accept the risks inherent in initiating a war."²⁵

On the other hand, PH theory posits that political leaders follow a two-stage decision process. In the first stage, the decision maker applies a decision rule that non-holistically eliminates alternatives that would likely cause potential damage to their political status and survival, the so-called avoid-major-political-loss (AMPL) principle. This cognitive heuristic leads to the political dimension being considered *non-compensatory* in the eyes of the decision-maker, meaning even if substantial benefits are likely to result in other dimensions, they cannot *compensate* for adverse expected outcomes in the political dimension.²⁶ For example, suppose a

²² Kahneman and Tversky, "Prospect theory."

²³ See James W. Davis, *Threats and Promises: The Pursuit of International Influence*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. Accessed January 4, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central; and Jeffrey D. Berejikian, *International relations under risk: Framing state choice*. SUNY Press, 2004.

²⁴ Jack S. Levy, "Loss aversion, framing, and bargaining: The implications of prospect theory for international conflict." *International Political Science Review* 17, no. 2 (1996), 189.

²⁵ Robert Jervis, *The meaning of the nuclear revolution: Statecraft and the prospect of Armageddon*. Cornell University Press, 1989, 171; and Levy, "Loss aversion, framing, bargaining," 189.

²⁶ Alex Mintz and Nehemia Geva. 1997. "The Poliheuristic Theory of Foreign Policy Decisionmaking." In *Decisionmaking on War and Peace: The Cognitive-Rational Debate*, eds. Nehemia Geva, and Alex Mintz. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 81–101.

particular option provides a significantly positive economic and military benefit but at a negative political cost to the leader.²⁷ In that case, that option will be dismissed since high scores in other dimensions cannot compensate for a negative score in the political dimension.²⁸

In the second stage, the decision-maker selects one of the surviving alternatives by adopting a rational analytic process, which selects the alternative with the greatest net utility, or according to a preferred dimension, known as a lexicographic (LEX). When using a LEX decision rule, the agent selects the option that provides the most significant benefit for their preferred dimension, for example, military implications, even though the overall multi-dimensional score of that alternative may not score the highest of all remaining options.²⁹

Therefore, each of the preceding four decision theories potentially provides different predictions when considering which alternatives a decision-maker will select. For example, a RAM that does not explicitly operationalize a leader's subjective probability for a particular alternative may predict a decision that EUT would not select if probabilities are incorporated. Similarly, an EUT-predicted choice might have been immediately discarded under PH assumptions if that alternative was likely to cause significant risks to the leader, even if the alternative held the highest overall net utility. Finally, PT would predict that leaders in a loss

²⁷ One historical example of such a scenario can be found in the 1999 India-Pakistan Kargil Conflict, in which the Indian Prime Minister chose not to further escalate the conflict, largely due to political reasons, after retaking areas forcefully acquired by Pakistani forces. This despite the Indian military being "within days of opening another front across the LoC and possibly the international border, an act that could have triggered a large-scale conventional military engagement." See Peter René Lavoy, ed, *Asymmetric warfare in South Asia: the causes and consequences of the Kargil Conflict*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 2.

²⁸ "The first phase in the decision process typically involves a nonexhaustive search wherein decision makers process information across dimensions in an attempt to select "surviving" alternatives before the completion of the consideration of all alternatives along all dimensions." Steven B. Redd and Alex Mintz. "Policy Perspectives on National Security and Foreign Policy Decision Making." *Policy Studies Journal* 41 (April 1, 2013), S17. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ez-salve.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ecn&AN=1382977&site=ehost-live>.

²⁹ "The second phase, then, consists of a lexicographic or maximizing decision rule used in selecting an alternative from the subset of "surviving" alternatives." Redd and Mintz, "Policy Perspectives," S17.

domain would select the riskier alternatives if they felt it gave them a greater chance of creating an acceptable status quo. On the other hand, leaders in the domain of gains are predicted to choose less risky alternatives since they see the status quo as acceptable and do not wish to risk losing what they have already gained, even though the dismissed alternatives provide the overall highest net utility.

Nevertheless, given a sufficiently limited set of alternatives, all four theoretical frameworks may predict the same alternative to be selected. For example, an alternative with the highest net utility, even after probabilities are considered, did not carry a significant risk to the leader's political survival, and the most or least risky alternative was selected consistent with the President's reference domain. Therefore, in the case of all four models correctly predicting the observed outcomes, the group's most parsimonious and elegant theory will be seen as the most effective at explaining the crisis-related choices. Consequently, the following methodology is intended to test the predictions of each theory against real-world observations to determine which is better suited to explain the decision-making strategies of each President and, ultimately, the outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian pre-war crisis.

Furthermore, this study's conceptual framework integrates previous scholars' approaches to explain the outbreak of war and individual leaders' choices during crises. Accordingly, three interlinked concepts of *perceptions*, *preferences*, and *constraints* are aggregated to contextualize decisions across each theoretical framework.³⁰ First, understanding how perceptions are formed is essential for each decision-making researcher. An individual's experiences shape an

³⁰ The study's choice of "perceptions, preferences, and constraints" is a blend of Jack Levy's conceptual framework of "preferences, constraints, and choices" which he used to explain the outbreak of World War I, and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita's conceptual framework of "Power, preferences, and perceptions" intended to analyze international interactions. See Jack S. Levy, "Preferences, constraints, and choices in July 1914," *International Security* 15, no. 3 (1990): 151-186, and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *Principles of international politics: People's Power, Preferences, and Perceptions*, Congressional Quarterly Inc, 2010.

individual's perceptions, which include the perceived actions of other actors. As a result, perceptions shape leaders' decisions.³¹ This interdependent relationship is critical to comprehending why leaders choose specific options over others.

Additionally, each leader is assumed to be motivated by instrumental rationality, meaning their paramount *preference* is maintaining their political office.³² Finally, *constraints* come in both domestic and international varieties.³³ While a leader may prefer option A, they may *perceive* sufficient domestic and strategic constraints that preclude their selection of option A and instead choose B. Thus, throughout the study, the three President's perceptions, preferences, and constraints will be considered as the crisis unfolds.

Data Sample

To a large extent, the scope of the study dictates the topical and temporal bounds of the research sample. Therefore, in order to understand, explain, and contextualize each decision taken and not taken for the three stakeholders, three broad categories of data are collected and analyzed: (1) environmental factors, such as national leader summits, diplomatic signaling, military signaling, publicly released intelligence, and presidential approval ratings, (2) historical presidential speeches, writings, interviews, and press conferences, which provide insights into perceptions and preferences, and (3) expert analysis during the crisis including scholarly publications authored by policy and country experts.

³¹ Bueno de Mesquita, *Principles of International Politics*, 318.

³² Conversely, neorealist theorists who emphasize structural constraints and minimize the importance of individual decision-making, contend that the pursuit of *security* is the principal aim of every state, which can typically be observed in the form of security-seeking behavior in the form of military and economic power.

³³ Consider Levy's argument that it has become increasingly evident that neither actor preferences nor the constraints on their choices can be fully specified in the absence of domestic variables. Levy, "Preferences, Constraints, Choices," 153.

Data Sample (Collection)

The study considers five types of environmental factors that would likely play a role in constraining and shaping each leader's decision calculations: (1) National leader summits, (2) Diplomatic signaling, (3) Military signaling, (4) Publicly released intelligence (5) Presidential approval ratings. Through content analysis, these five environmental factors serve as a core data sample to be collected and integrated into the process tracing format to evaluate each leader's options and likely perceptions, preferences, and constraints before making each decision.

National leader summits during a crisis are essential to evaluate as they allow each leader to convey their perceptions, preferences, and intentions without intermediaries. Therefore, official readouts of those encounters provide valuable insights. Additionally, summit readouts with heads of state outside the U.S.-Russia-Ukraine trio are considered, such as with the UK, France, Germany, Turkey, and China. Additionally, direct comments from each President after their summits are as valuable if not more valuable than the official readouts as they grant outside observers a look into what each decision-maker found especially relevant.

Diplomatic signaling presents itself in various ways. First, presidential speeches, interviews, writings, press conferences, and official statements are highly relevant during the crisis. Secondly to Presidential signaling are communications from the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba. These three individuals meet regularly with their Presidents regarding the crisis and must make their state's diplomatic position clear in-between presidential appearances and statements on the matter. Third, these diplomats and their spokespersons episodically detail opportunities and friction points throughout the crisis and, perhaps most importantly, communicate potential consequences to the various stakeholders if rivals select specific policy

options. For the most part, a diplomat's word selection, whether written or verbal, is carefully chosen to reflect their executive's positions accurately. Additionally, from the U.S. perspective, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan played a significant role in the crisis, and his comments are regularly referenced in the study's analysis.

Moreover, diplomatic signaling can also be intentionally costly to display resolve. For example, in December 2021, after Moscow formally communicated their list of demands to Brussels and Washington, the Kremlin publicly released the details of its requests. In doing so, President Putin deliberately chose to set aside confidential diplomatic negotiations and, as a result, increased his reputational costs for de-escalating if he failed to gain tangible concessions from the West commensurate with his demands. Thus, Putin demonstrated a costly signal, which should have helped establish his determination to the West. Also included under diplomatic signaling are threats of economic sanctions; however, use-of-force threats, articulated by either the President or their chief diplomat, will be categorized under military signaling, which we now examine.

In all three states under consideration, their President is the ultimate decider on if and how to apply military force; therefore, their positions on that topic are most relevant.³⁴ Each state's chief diplomatic minister or secretary also conveys the nation's military position, which is typically in line with the previously stated positions of the chief executive. However, in the case of military signaling, official announcements from the Pentagon or the Ukrainian or Russian Ministries of Defense will often provide more granular details regarding capabilities, numbers,

³⁴ While some constraints exist with the U.S. President in the form of congressional funding and the War Powers act, for the most part, President Biden could pursue a military option had he chosen to do so. In the case of President Putin, he faced very little if any, institutional constraints on the decision to invade Ukraine.

locations, and timelines. Therefore, the data sample includes formal military disposition announcements to accurately capture the relevant details for military signaling.

The fourth important factor that likely influenced decision-makers came from publicly disclosed intelligence. Unique to this crisis was the amount of intelligence publicly released by the West, particularly by the U.S., to potentially pre-empt alleged actions planned by Moscow. Intelligence disclosure details were typically presented in a press conference or as an official statement. Importantly, especially for Biden and Zelensky, intelligence assessments became ever clearer on Putin's intentions as the crisis progressed, eventually culminating in the high confidence intelligence community assessment, which Biden endorsed, that Putin had decided to invade.

The fifth environmental factor is the approval ratings for each President. Statistical trends and averages are significant when considering polling data. Therefore, polling data for the entirety of each President's term allows for more meaningful and accurate assessments of numbers relevant to the decision-maker before and during the crisis. Polling approval rating data, which indicate the degree of latitude a President may have, public opinions regarding possible solutions to the crisis, and perceptions on each President's handling of the crisis are undoubtedly factors in the President's thought process.

The combined output of the abovementioned environmental factors produces parallel event timelines for factors during each crisis month. Notably, the timeline allows for the identification of critical decisions. Critical decisions are points in the crisis which, had the President chosen differently, would have likely changed the crisis trajectory. A decision matrix for Biden, Zelensky, and Putin will be compiled and scored for each critical decision to

determine if their decisions are consistent with one or more of the four decision-making theories' predictions.

Most data samples are within the crisis timeframe; however, historical sources are used outside the defined period. Such sources include any significant foreign policy-related speeches or writings the presidents made prior to the crisis, which would provide insight into their general perceptions and preferences regarding NATO, Ukraine, and Russia. For example, President Putin's 2014 speech to the Duma requesting the annexation of Crimea, Putin's 2021 essay espousing the historical and cultural unity between the Russian and Ukrainian people, and his February 2022 speech as the invasion into Ukraine commenced. Similarly, after serving as Vice President in the Obama administration, Biden outlined his views on Russia and Putin in interviews and other publications. Lastly, President Zelensky has made key speeches regarding territorial sovereignty, NATO integration, and resolving the conflict in the Donbas and the lost territory of Crimea.

In addition to environmental factors, historical presidential preferences, and perceptions, it is necessary to draw upon scholarly perspectives during the crisis, particularly from country and regional experts. Their crisis analysis aids the study's attempt to accurately characterize the issues at stake, the international and domestic contexts, the perceptions and preferences of Putin, Biden, and Zelensky, and the recommendations to resolve the crisis peacefully. Dozens of articles are included in the data sample, most written and published within the crisis timeframe. Other sources include periodicals that reported on the crisis. These sources help supplement official sources, which sometimes do not fully account for a particular event and include perspectives from senior government officials in the form of confidential sources.

Data Sample (Analysis)

The study leverages a highly modified version of Alex Mintz's applied decision analysis (ADA) methodology³⁵ to derive the associated decision-making strategies for the three presidents at each critical decision. The ADA method offers a multi-dimensional decision matrix to evaluate each decision-maker's possible alternatives. Moreover, it allows for specific weighting of dimensions tailored to each decision-maker and the numerical weighting of the implications for each decision alternative. Numerous studies have successfully used the ADA method to explain foreign policy decisions.³⁶ Thus, an ADA decision matrix will be completed for each President at each critical decision, explaining the process and selection of choices for all three leaders. After completing the ADA decision matrix, the predicted RC, EUT, PH, and PT decisions are identified and compared to each President's real-world selections.

Finally, two questions must be asked to test the hypothesis and the covariance of the associated independent, intervening, and dependent variables: (1) Which decision-making theory's predictions were most consistent with the observed real-world decisions? (2) Did the adopted decision-making strategy tend to eliminate the conciliatory or de-escalatory options? If the answer is yes to both questions for only one theory, then we can conclude – with sufficient confidence – the identified decision-making strategy's causal role in the outbreak of war. However, a third contingent question may be required if multiple theories' predictions match each leader's decisions. In that event, it must then be asked which remaining theory is most

³⁵ Alex Mintz, "Applied decision analysis: Utilizing poliheuristic theory to explain and predict foreign policy and national security decisions." *International Studies Perspectives* 6, no. 1 (2005): 94-98.

³⁶ See David J. Brulé, "Explaining and Forecasting Leaders' Decisions: A Poliheuristic Analysis of the Iran Hostage Rescue Decision." *International Studies Perspectives* 6: (2005) 99-113; Steven B. Redd, "The Influence of Advisers and Decision Strategies on Foreign Policy Choices: President Clinton's Decision to Use Force in Kosovo." *International Studies Perspectives* 6: (2005) 129-50; Brandon J. Kinne, "Decision Making in Autocratic Regimes: A Poliheuristic Perspective." *International Studies Perspectives* 6: (2005) 114-28.

elegant, parsimonious, and shown to be most reliable. Accordingly, the answer to that question would be offered as the most effective framework to explain the dependent variable.

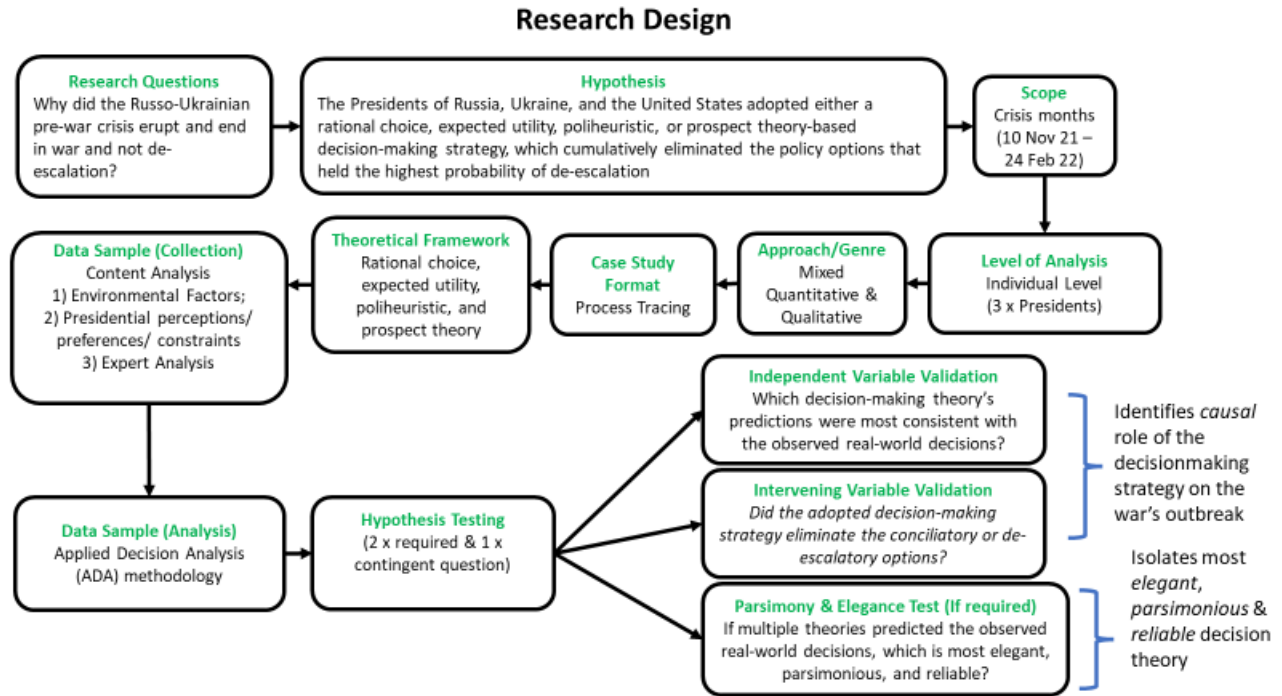


Fig. 3.2. Depiction of the study's research design

Methodology

The following discussion on methodology details the data collection procedures and methods used to identify critical decisions. Additionally, this section provides an overview of the process used to complete and score the decision matrices and the subsequent procedures to determine which decision strategies align with the observed real-world outcome. The following section explains how the decision matrix scoring results are used to test the study's hypotheses effectively. Finally, it concludes with some advantages of the methodology chosen to answer the research question and discuss its limitations.

Data Collection Methodology

Concerning data collection methods, *content analysis* was the primary approach to collect and categorize the data samples described in the research design.³⁷ In order to develop the salient environmental factors, searches of The New York Times database using the keyword “Ukraine” between November 1, 2021 – February 24, 2022. The New York Times database returned 816 results when limiting sections to “Briefings, Opinions, U.S., and World” and included options for video, interactive graphics, and articles. These results were refined to 95 articles, considered germane to the Ukraine crisis. The New York Times was selected because its search function permits exact date ranges. Similar searches were conducted with Reuters, BBC, The Economist, Associated Press, Al Jazeera, and the Congressional Research Service.

Additionally, a keyword search using the term “Ukraine” was used in the McKillop Library for all known source formats contained within the HELIN libraries and Salve Regina University Library for the entire year of 2022. Accordingly, there were 191 results from 130 eBooks, 22 print books, 30 eVideos, six music recordings, five internet resources, four journal articles, and one archival material, with over a dozen relevant sources.

Further, applicable dates on The White House, State Department, Pentagon, Kremlin, and Russian and Ukrainian Ministries of Defense and foreign affairs were searched for official statements, readouts, and press briefing transcripts. These searches provided dozens of essential documents that provided empirical evidence of each President’s perceptions, preferences, and constraints.

³⁷ When leveraging the ADA methodology, it is recommended to use content analysis of publications for data collection. See Steven B. Redd and Alex Mintz. "Policy perspectives on national security and foreign policy decision making." *Policy Studies Journal* 41 (2013): S27. The Redd and Mintz article also provides examples of past studies that have used content analysis with the ADA model effectively.

A Google Scholar “title only” search parameter with the exact phrase “Ukraine Crisis” with the date range of 2021 and 2022. This search produced 324 results, which were then manually reviewed to filter out articles of no interest to the study. Similarly, a ProQuest search was conducted for the terms “Ukraine” and “crisis” in the abstract sections and delimited to March 2022 – March 2023. It produced 89 results, of which four were relevant to the dissertation. These searches and others led to the incorporation of numerous scholarly articles from various peer-reviewed journals, think tanks, and other periodicals, including *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *Analyse & Kritik*, *Horizons*, *The Economist*, *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, *Defence*, and *Peace Economics*, *International Journal of Frontiers in Sociology*, United States Institute of Peace, Brookings Institute, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Data Sample Analysis Methodology

Applied Decision Analysis (ADA)— This study leverages a highly modified version of the multi-dimensional decision matrix methodology associated with the ADA model to operationalize each decision-maker’s available policy options and identify the adopted decision strategy. The ADA model uses four variables to assess decision-making strategies: alternatives, dimensions, implications, and weighting.³⁸

The *alternatives* include the range of realistic options available to the decision-maker. For example, before the crisis began, Putin may have considered the following alternatives: 1)

³⁸ Except where deviations are noted, the following section detailing this study’s ADA decision matrix procedures follows the step-by-step instructions outlined by its creator Alex Mintz. See Alex Mintz, "Applied decision analysis: Utilizing poliheuristic theory to explain and predict foreign policy and national security decisions." *International Studies Perspectives* 6, no. 1 (2005): 94-98.

Continue with the status quo, 2) Attempt to coerce NATO, and 3) Escalate military activity in the Donbas region.

The *dimensions* serve as the criteria used to evaluate each alternative. For example, when leaders are confronted with a decision regarding using force, Mintz recommends using military, economic, political, and diplomatic dimensions. In subsequent chapters, these dimensions are more specifically tailored to each decision-maker's preferences and goals, although they fall within one of the four categories above.³⁹

A significant deviation from the standard ADA model is including a "Risk-index" in the dimension column to enable prospect theory testing. The risk index evaluates each alternative from highest to lowest regarding overall risk. In order to operationalize risk levels, this study will leverage McDermott's definition, which in turn borrows from economics. Thus, "risk will be analyzed in terms of relative variance in outcome. A choice is relatively risk seeking if it has greater outcome variance in promoted values than alternative options."⁴⁰ According to prospect theory, decision-makers believed to be in a domain of gains should select the options with lower risk profiles, and the reverse for leaders in a domain of losses.

Further, each alternative has unique *implications* aligned with each dimension. The study provides a thorough narrative describing the related implications for each dimension, which are translated into a numerical rating. The rating range is from 1 (highly negative) to 9 (highly positive).⁴¹ For example, an alternative that would undoubtedly result in the leader losing her

³⁹ For example, for Putin, the military/security dimension is framed around decreasing the influence and power of NATO, and the diplomatic dimension is centered on Moscow's strategic relationship with Beijing.

⁴⁰ Rose McDermott, *Risk-taking in international politics: Prospect theory in American foreign policy*, University of Michigan Press, 2001.

⁴¹ The scale range used in this study constitutes another deviation from the Mintz ADA model. He recommends a scale of (-10) to (+10), however, using a wider value of ranges would likely lead to less reliable

position would be rated a 1 in the political dimension. Consequently, the dimensions and associated implications represent the perceived international and domestic constraints on the leader's preferences and alternatives.

Lastly, each dimension is *weighted* depending on its value for the specific leader. Consider, for example, Putin's valuation of the diplomatic dimension. Based on Putin's past behavior, such as assassinating his opponents on foreign soil, human rights abuses against his citizens, and annexing Crimea, he places a lower value on Russia's worldwide diplomatic status than Moscow's perceived national security concerns. Therefore, we would assign him a higher weight to the military than the diplomatic dimension. Moreover, it is reasonable to argue that President Biden placed a higher value on foreign diplomatic relations than President Trump,⁴² and therefore, Biden would receive a relatively higher rating in that dimension than his predecessor.

After determining alternatives, dimensions, and weights, the implications of each alternative are considered, and numerical ratings are assigned to each implication, as discussed above. Notably, the four variables align well with the conceptual framework of perceptions, preferences, and constraints adopted by this study. For example, dimensional weighting

results, especially when other scholars are attempting to replicate the study's findings. Additional justification behind this modification is offered in Chapter 5.

⁴² For example, President Trump repeatedly and publicly questioned the value of alliances such as NATO, and with Japan, and South Korea. See Schuette, Leonard August. "Why NATO survived Trump: the neglected role of Secretary-General Stoltenberg." *International Affairs* 97, no. 6 (2021): 1863-1881; Jorge Benitez, "US NATO policy in the age of Trump: Controversy and consistency." In *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, pp. 179-200. The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, 2019; Paul O'Shea and Sebastian Maslow. "Making the alliance even greater:(Mis-) managing US-Japan relations in the age of Trump," *Asian Security* 17, no. 2 (2021): 195-21; Leif-Eric Easley, "Doubling Down on the US-South Korea Alliance: Olympics Diplomacy Did Not Breach Trust, but Trump-Moon Confidence Is in Jeopardy." *Korea Economic Institute Joint US-Korea Academic Studies* 29 (2018): 33-47. For a contrast to the Trump perspective outlined in the articles above with that of Biden's view on alliances see Joseph R. Biden Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again." *Foreign Affairs*, January 23, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

considers the personal *preferences* of each leader. Furthermore, the dimensions reflect international and domestic *constraints*. Additionally, the intra-dimensional implications assigned to each alternative reflect the *perceptions* of each leader. Finally, the scoring for each alternative reveals the decision maker's rank order of preferences. Therefore, a completed decision matrix and the corresponding analytic narrative, which provides the rationale for its contents, visually represent the leader's perceptions, preferences, and constraints.

An additional deviation from Mintz's ADA model is that the author produces two tables for each decision in which two opposing outcomes could result. Consider, for example, that *after* Putin initiated the crisis, his options became more limited. To illustrate, let us assume his options included three alternatives: 1) Negotiate a new security framework with the West, 2) Escalate military activity in the Donbas, or 3) Launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine to achieve regime change. There are dramatically different *implications* for an invasion that is quickly successful and results in a pro-Moscow regime installed versus a protracted high-casualty conflict. Therefore, one decision matrix is completed under the assumption that the war goes poorly (negative matrix), and a second matrix with the war unfolding in Putin's favor (positive matrix). The ratings from both matrices are then averaged to create a *composite matrix* and scores.

Calculating Preference Rankings – RC will be ranked in order based on the highest to the lowest overall score for each alternative on the composite matrix. PH will follow the same decision rule *after* eliminating all alternatives with negative ratings in the political dimension. For EUT, the negative and positive matrix scores are used as the utilities for each outcome for the alternative considered to determine the preference rankings. Then, the leader's expected and subjective probabilities are assigned to each outcome and inputted into the EUT equation, and the expression is solved. The above process is repeated for each alternative to produce the

preference rankings for EUT, from highest to lowest utility. Finally, PT considers the same alternatives in the composite decision matrix, but preference orders are based on the leader's domain of reference (gains or losses) and the risk index scores. Subtracting each alternative's negative and positive matrix scores determines the degree of outcome variance and the risk index relative to the other alternatives. Accordingly, the highest risk is the alternatives with the most significant potential outcome variance. Those leaders in a domain of gains prefer the lowest-risk alternatives and the reverse in a domain of losses.

Finally, once the preference order is complete, a sensitivity analysis is performed on each theory's predicted preference order. The intent is to determine how susceptible each theory's rankings are to shifts in the underlying values, which indicates how reliable the results are and how well they will stand up to small to moderate shifts in the underlying values assigned by different analysts. Reliability levels are categorized as very sensitive, highly sensitive, moderately sensitive, low, and very low, with lower sensitivity preferred.⁴³ See Figure 3.3 below for an example of an unscored but weighted decision matrix for Putin before initiating the crisis.

	Alternative	Alternative	Alternative	
Dimensions	Maintain Status Quo (SQ)	Escalate in Donbas (ED)	Coerce NATO (CN)	Weight
P-Diminish Domestic Opposition to Regime	Implications	Implications	Implications	1
E-Stable Economic Conditions	Implications	Implications	Implications	0.9
M-Prevent NATO's Presence & Expansion in Near-Abroad	Implications	Implications	Implications	0.8
D-Strengthen Chinese Partnerships	Implications	Implications	Implications	0.5
Rational Choice (RC) Score	0.00	0.00	0.00	
Poliheuristic (PH) Score	0.00	0.00	0.00	
Expected Utility (EUT) Score	0.00	0.00	0.00	
Prospect Theory (PT) Risk-Index (L)	0.00	0.00	0.00	
Decision Theory	RC	PH	EUT	PT
Preference Ranking	X>Y>Z	X>Y>Z	X>Y>Z	X>Y>Z
Sensitivity Level	VLS/HS/MS/LS/VLS	VLS/HS/MS/LS/VLS	VLS/HS/MS/LS/VLS	VLS/HS/MS/LS/VLS

Fig. 3.3. Putin's unscored pre-crisis composite decision matrix

⁴³ Chapter 5 provide additional details concerning specific rationale for how matrices are constructed to include assigning implication values, weights, ratings, subjective probabilities, preference rankings, and sensitivity levels.

Critical Decisions – Finally, identifying critical decisions is necessary to determine when to complete a decision matrix for the appropriate President. A critical decision (CD) is defined as one in which, had the President chosen differently, would have likely changed the crisis trajectory. Chapter 4 will provide an overview of the crisis and, in doing so, will identify the five CDs for the four decision theories tested.

Strengths and Limitations of Chosen Methodology

Mixed Approach – The mixed approach adopted in this dissertation intends to add reliability and credibility to the study's findings. However, a drawback to this approach – as it is for all single case studies – is that the results are inherently limited to explanations for this crisis and are not generalizable without further empirical testing against other crises. Nevertheless, a precise framing of the theoretical assumptions underpinning this study enables further testing, which would aid in determining the level of general covariance between the independent variable (decision-making strategy), the intervening variable (elimination of conciliatory options), and the dependent variable (war or de-escalation). Moreover, the quantitative procedures used in this study can be applied to any past or future international crisis.

Direct Comparisons of Multiple Decision Frameworks - An additional methodological advantage of this dissertation is the direct comparison of four competing decision frameworks underpinned with the tenets of well-developed decision theories. The modified methodology chosen for this study provides a novel approach to testing the frameworks in ways not previously attempted and does so intuitively, transparently, and in a less cumbersome way than other

quantitative attempts associated with these four theories. The author is unaware of any analytic adaptation of the ADA methodology to incorporate and test EUT and PT.⁴⁴

While it would be significant if one framework's predictions matched real-world decisions, it is far more impactful to take the additional step of demonstrating it does so, while at times, others do not. The side-by-side comparison of the four models and their different decision rules effectively highlights potential divergent outcomes. If each framework correctly predicts the observed outcome, then the most parsimonious, elegant, and reliable model will be selected as the best explanation for the crisis-related decisions. Moreover, using a single decision matrix for all four frameworks ensures identical inputs and outputs and avoids data inconsistencies that may arise if using differing matrices and values.

Transparency and Accessibility - Another benefit of the study's methodology is the integration of leaders' perceptions and preferences. The matrix includes a simple framework that is transparent and accessible. Unfortunately, some rational actor models, often underpinned with EUT, craft elaborate mathematical formulations that increasingly lead to elevated layers of abstraction, potentially detaching the analyst from the overall environmental context. In contrast, the modified ADA procedures used in this study allow analysts to tailor the matrix to each leader's preferences and perceptions clearly while revealing international and domestic constraints.

⁴⁴ While EUT is notionally incorporated into some studies using the ADA framework in that if a decision maker selects an alternative with the overall highest score or utility, then it is said she followed an EUT decision rule. However, no explicit subjective probabilities assigned to each leader's decisions and calculated according to traditional EUT mathematical formulas as done in the EUT framework adopted by this study. For examples of recent studies using the ADA methodology, see Alex Mintz and Dmitry Dima Adamsky, eds. *How Do Leaders Make Decisions?: Evidence from the East and West, Part A*, Emerald Group Publishing, 2019; and Alex Mintz and Dmitry Dima Adamsky, eds. *How Do Leaders Make Decisions?: Evidence from the East and West, Part B*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019, 4. Accessed February 24, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Bias, Subjectivity, and Repeatability - Another concern related to qualitative case studies is researcher bias, subjectivity, and repeatability of results. The researcher's biases and subjective viewpoints invariably influence any attempt to explain complex international decisions. Indeed, two layers of subjectivity are in play when considering both the decision-maker and the researcher. This study attempts to limit these influences by assigning numerical ratings and scores to each alternative. Those ratings are then explained to the reader in great detail to fully disclose the researcher's rationale for those scores, allowing other scholars to determine if any biases or misinterpretations of the data are evident.

Regarding repeatability, it remains very likely that another researcher may assign different ratings for some of the dimensions and implications. While little differences will almost certainly occur, small-to-moderate shifts will unlikely alter the study's overall findings and conclusions. Moreover, the sensitivity analysis discussed above is an intuitive way for readers to determine the reliability of each theory's predictions. However, a significant realignment of values would potentially change the outcome. In those cases, it will be incumbent on the scholar to defend the changes based on empirical observations of the leader's preferences, perceptions, and constraints in such a way as to upend the initial results.

Exclusion of Bounded-Rationality/Cybernetic Theory – One limitation of the dissertation is that it does not compare all individual-based decision theories. The cybernetic theory, discussed in Chapter 2, originated as a challenge to the rational choice theory, suggesting that decision-makers are only “boundedly” rational due to information processing limitations and the use of heuristics. While the cybernetic framework is undoubtedly a feasible candidate to explain the decision-making strategies of the three presidents in this dissertation, the theory is significantly more complex than the four theories evaluated in this study. For example, Ostrom

and Job's model requires the inclusion of ten decision premises, which are then analyzed by probit analysis.⁴⁵

Moreover, they invoke Herbert Simon's concept of "satisficing,"⁴⁶ which suggests decision makers, due to their "limited computational powers," choose the first option that is "good enough."⁴⁷ Therefore, to effectively test the applicability of cybernetic theory to the Russo-Ukrainian pre-war crisis, we would need to understand better which options were formally presented to each President and in which order. For that type of information, we would require more behind-the-scenes information, typically gleaned from memoirs of senior officials, including each President and their closest advisors. Perhaps at a later time, scholars will be able to leverage those documents and effectively test the validity of cybernetic theory against the decisions of each President for the Russo-Ukrainian crisis, but until then, the theory remains outside the scope of this study. Furthermore, cybernetic, RC, and EUT are compensatory theories; therefore, this study tests both paradigms by evaluating RC and EUT alongside PH and PT, non-compensatory theories.⁴⁸ Finally, cybernetic theory, PT, and PH theory adopt heuristics in their decision rules, and thus, at a basic level, some aspects of the cybernetic theory are indirectly being tested in this study with the inclusion of PT and PH theory.

Challenges with Testing Prospect Theory – Arguably, Putin and Zelensky found themselves in a domain of losses and Biden in a domain of gains during the crisis when considering their alternatives, and therefore, prospect theory seems like an appropriate model to

⁴⁵ Ostrom, Charles W., and Brian L. Job. "The president and the political use of force." *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 2 (1986), 555.

⁴⁶ Simon, Herbert A. "Models of man; social and rational." (1957).

⁴⁷ Ostrom and Job, "The President," 550.

⁴⁸ Although aspects of PT could be considered compensatory it is traditionally considered non-compensatory.

test. However, several problems persist when attempting to operationalize the impact of prospect theory on the decisions made by national leaders. First, the experiments that underpin prospect theory were highly controlled, unlike the realm of international relations.

For example, the types of choices state leaders wrestle with “rarely involve one riskless and one risky option, but rather two risky options,” and leaders must consider the actions of other states in addition to their actions. Moreover, given the complexities of the prospects involved with foreign policy decision-making, the theory may lack the necessary precision to determine specific values and functions for each leader.⁴⁹ Indeed, some outside the field of IR have tried to reconcile EUT with PT mathematically, but those scholars have “cautioned against imprudent use” of their adjustments and to avoid adopting it at the individual level with high-utility outcomes.”⁵⁰

Despite these challenges, the study’s attempts to test PT are modest in that specific value functions are operationalized through leader placement in either a domain of gains or losses without precise mathematical formulations, as was done in the original PT experiments. Consequently, only two fundamental tenets of PT are being tested: framing and loss aversion. Combined, these two concepts predict that decision-makers in the domain of gains are risk averse and when in the domain of losses risk-seeking. Moreover, as discussed above, a widely accepted definition of risk is operationalized and innovatively integrated into the decision matrix process. While the methodology put forth in this chapter to test PT is rudimentary, it is considered adequate to test its predictions and compare them against the other three theories.

⁴⁹ Jack S. Levy, "Prospect theory and international relations: Theoretical applications and analytical problems," *Political Psychology* (1992), 293.

⁵⁰ Han Bleichrodt, Jose Luis Pinto, and Peter P. Wakker, "Making descriptive use of prospect theory to improve the prescriptive use of expected utility," *Management science* 47, no. 11 (2001): 1498-1514.

Challenges with Testing EUT - Using EUT to explain *past* events becomes problematic as it can easily lead to tautology. Indeed, one of the chief criticisms of EUT, which underpins some rational choice models, is that “the decision process is assumed to approximate the formal idea, and observed data are interpreted in such a way as to make them consistent with the critical assumptions of the paradigm.”⁵¹ Therefore, using EUT to *predict* outcomes is far more convincing than explaining past outcomes. Nevertheless, it remains possible to assign subjective probabilities to leaders using evidence regarding their perceptions, which come in the form of public statements and past actions of leaders. Moreover, expert analysis is leveraged to provide additional viewpoints on those actions and statements. Empirical evidence such as military capabilities, economic capacity, population sizes, and public opinion are valuable indicators of likely probabilities that each leader considers.

Further, this author’s modification of the ADA model, which creates two separate tables that score each alternative’s worst-case and best-case and then average the two scores into a composite matrix, provides a non-probabilistic means to test RC and PH theories independently of any probabilities assigned to the EUT calculations. Therefore, two independent tests are co-occurring of two “rational” models. EUT, which includes probabilities and RC without. Such an approach intends to highlight anomalous findings and strengthen the validity of the study’s conclusions. Nevertheless, this author fully admits it remains impossible to get “into the mind” of each decision-maker perfectly.

Scope - An additional limitation of the study is the chosen timeframe and level of analysis. While this study addresses Putin’s likely motivation for initiating the crisis in Chapter

⁵¹ John D. Steinbruner, *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision: New Dimensions of Political Analysis*. Princeton University Press, 1974. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1nxctxf.7>, 26.

2, the dissertation's primary focus is to explain why he chose certain alternatives over others before the crisis started and why the crisis ended in conflict. While some may critique the narrow timeframe under analysis, recall that essential sources outside of that window are considered, such as critical events like the annexation of Crimea, the withdrawal from Afghanistan, approval rating trends, and Presidential speeches.

Level-of-analysis – Another possible critique of the methodology presented above is that it is too reliant upon the individual level of analysis.⁵² However, an essential component of this study is the inclusion of not just one but three President's preferences and perceptions and their constraints at multiple levels of analysis. Moreover, structural and domestic pressures are considered and integrated qualitatively into the study's analysis through the lens of the decision-maker and quantitatively as assigned values in the multi-dimensional matrices. Finally, this study aims to explain this specific crisis outcome and not suggest sufficient or necessary conditions of war generally. Therefore, a complete theory of war is not required or offered. As such, the individual level of analysis is well suited for the scope of this study, especially considering its analysis includes multiple leaders.

Issues of Trustworthiness – A unique aspect of this pre-war crisis was the deliberate release of intelligence. These intelligence disclosures are included in the study as one of the environmental factors influencing the decision calculus of each President. However, unlike leadership summits and diplomatic and military signaling, intelligence presents a challenging dimension to evaluate concerning validity. While the West and Russia presented claims of intelligence revealing their rivals' subversive intentions, they did not provide access to the "raw"

⁵² Levy and Thompson contend that "individual-, societal-, and state-level causal factor cannot by themselves provide a logically complete explanation for the outbreak of war." Levy and Thompson, *Causes of War*, 19.

intelligence that underpins those assertions. Therefore, verifying the veracity of those claims without access to sources or waiting decades for reports to be declassified is impossible. Nevertheless, the level of accountability for producing false intelligence and sharing it with the public is vastly different in Washington and other democracies than in Moscow. Therefore, we can cautiously conclude that released intelligence from the West is less likely to be manipulated or entirely fabricated, yet it can still be inaccurate, as was the often-cited case concerning Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program.

An further caveat with the pre-emptive release of intelligence is that the disclosure of intelligence may prevent the target from acting on what the intelligence is predicting to happen. For example, when the U.S. disclosed that Moscow planned to conduct so-called "false flag" operations to provide a pretext for invading Ukraine. The fact that those operations did not occur as initially presented may be the result of unreliable intelligence, or it may have been accurate, but after the disclosure, the Kremlin abandoned the idea due to the publicity. Without a defector coming forward who was in the decision-making circle at the time to confirm or deny such claims, it remains impossible to know for sure.

Nevertheless, this study aims to characterize available information to each decision-maker during the crisis. Additionally, each of the Presidents was also dealing with varying levels of uncertainty regarding publicly disclosed intelligence and their own intelligence agencies' assessments, which were not released to the public. Therefore, the released intelligence provides this study with additional public information to include in each leader's decision matrix.

Summary

The above research design and methodology chapter gives the reader an overview of the dissertation's strategy to answer the research question and test its hypotheses. In addition, the

chapter outlines the scope, level of analysis, and theoretical framework to effectively test rational choice, expected utility, poliheuristic, and prospect theories. The dissertation collects and analyzes multiple information sets, including primary sources and expert analysis available during the crisis.

The study adopts a proven approach used by notable scholars in the international relations field through synthesizing presidential perceptions, preferences, and constraints into a modified applied decision analysis (ADA) methodology. These modifications allow for an effective comparison of four decision theory frameworks across three Presidents to provide a useful explanation of the crisis-related outcomes. The next chapter provides a detailed overview of the crisis and identifies the five critical decisions.

Chapter 4 – Crisis Overview and Critical Decisions

Introduction

Perhaps much of the initiation of the 2021 – 2022 Russo-Ukrainian crisis is best explained by what Vladimir Putin allegedly said in 2011 to former US President Clinton when the two men discussed the 1994 Budapest Memorandum at Davos Switzerland. According to Clinton, Putin said to him, “I don’t agree with it. And I do not support it. And I am not bound by it.”¹ Of course, Putin’s predecessor, President Yeltsin, signed the memorandum. Clinton goes on to say, “I knew from that day forward it was just a matter of time” before Putin invaded Ukraine.²

The 2011 encounter was not the first signal Putin offered to a US President of how he uniquely perceived Ukraine. During the 2008 Bucharest NATO summit, when discussing the potential for Ukraine to join the alliance, Putin remarked to President George W. Bush that “Ukraine is not a country.”³ Later in 2014, several months after Putin had annexed Crimea, he was asked by the President of the European Commission if Moscow had moved troops into Eastern Ukraine, and Putin’s response, which the Kremlin did not deny, was, “If I want, I will take Kiev in two weeks.”⁴

¹ Joshua Chaffin, “Bill Clinton saw Putin’s Ukraine campaign as ‘just a matter of time’ in 2011,” *Financial Times*, May 4, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/404af8cf-d073-4edc-ab25-384442864342>.

² The Budapest Memorandum was intended to provide Kyiv with security assurances after it agreed to turn over its Soviet nuclear missiles to the Russian Federation. Moscow, Washington, and London signed the memorandum. It stated that each party would “seek immediate United Nations Security Council action to provide assistance” to Ukraine should it “become a victim of an act of aggression.” “Memorandum of Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine’s Accession to the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons,” United Nations, December 5, 1994, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%203007/Part/volume-3007-I-52241.pdf>.

³ Daniel Baer, “Ukraine’s not a country, Putin told Bush. What’d he tell Trump about Montenegro?” *Washington Post*, July 19, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2018/07/19/ukraines-not-a-country-putin-told-bush-whatd-he-tell-trump-about-montenegro/>.

⁴ Andrew Roth, “Putin Tells European Official That He Could ‘Take Kiev in Two Weeks,’” *The New York Times*, September 2, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/03/world/europe/ukraine-crisis.html>.

Finally, in July 2021, Putin penned an essay laying the philosophical foundation for his invasion seven months later. In the piece “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” he argues that the unity between the two states and peoples dates back over a thousand years. He specifically points to the consolidation of Russian territory in the 18th century as being driven not just by “political and diplomatic decisions” but as a result of their “common faith, shared cultural traditions, and...language similarity.”⁵ The essay clarifies that Putin sees the Bolsheviks and their establishment of multiple statehoods due to the Soviet 1924 Constitution as “a dangerous time bomb” that went off when the USSR ceased to exist, spawning new independent states. In Putin’s view, these states should have never been granted statehood status and been detached from greater imperial Russia.⁶ Consequently, his mindset is that “Russia was robbed,” and the Bolsheviks are essentially to blame for the Ukrainian situation along with Khrushchev, who gave Ukraine Crimea in 1954.⁷

Notwithstanding Putin’s historical account, since 1991, Ukraine has been universally recognized by all UN members, including Russia,⁸ as an independent and fully sovereign state.

⁵ Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” The Kremlin, July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>; and Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” Kremlin, February 21, 2022, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

⁶ Serhii Plokhy contends that the invasion was motivated by “Putin’s belief in the nonexistence of the Ukrainian nation and the desire of Ukrainians to live under Russian rule.” Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, 154.

⁷ Putin, “On the Historical Unity.” See also Putin’s speech to the Duma in 2014 asking to annex Crimea. Vladimir Putin, “Vladimir Putin addressed State Duma deputies, Federation Council members, heads of Russian regions and civil society representatives in the Kremlin,” The Kremlin, March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/>

⁸ On December 8, 1991 Boris Yeltsin, signed the Belavezha Accords, which recognized the independence of Ukraine. See “The Belavezha Accords signed,” Boris Yeltsin Presidential Library, 2023, <https://www.prlib.ru/en/history/619792>. Additionally, Yeltsin signed the “Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation,” which went into effect in 1997, and at the signing ceremony, stated, “We respect and honor the territorial integrity of Ukraine.” Michael Specter, “Setting Past Aside, Russia and Ukraine Sign Friendship Treaty,” *New York Times*, June 1, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/06/01/world/setting-past-aside-russia-and-ukraine-sign-friendship-treaty.html>.

Putin's attempts to circumvent that fact by invoking prior historical events and commonality in religion and linguistics have no legal justification in today's international system in which sovereign states can chart their path if they abide by international laws and conventions. It was Putin's longtime refusal to accept that legal and diplomatic reality and his fear of a thriving democracy in Ukraine that led him to pursue a coercive gambit against NATO, which instantiated the pre-war crisis. Nevertheless, while Putin acted as the crisis catalyst by levying demands on the West in conjunction with deploying an invasion force on Ukraine's border, the crisis outcome resulted from a combination of decisions made by Putin, Biden and Zelensky.

Critical Decisions

The three Presidents made numerous decisions throughout the crisis, but only five are considered critical decisions (CDs). For this study, a CD is defined as holding the possibility of changing the crisis trajectory and its outcome. Starting with CD #1, Putin initiated the crisis to coerce NATO. CD #2 occurred early in the crisis when Biden decided to pre-emptively eliminate the option of any involvement of US forces. For CD #3, Biden rejected all of Putin's NATO-related demands. In CD #4, Zelensky chose to stay on a path of NATO membership. Finally, CD #5 occurred when Putin decided to invade Ukraine. The remainder of the chapter provides a chronological overview of the crisis to provide context for noteworthy events, choices, and critical decisions.

Crisis Overview

March – November 2021

In March and April 2021, Moscow massed a large force along the Ukrainian Border, known as the Spring 2021 War Scare, and several catalysts have been suggested for Putin's provocations. First, in December 2020, the Ukrainian Defense Minister openly pushed for NATO

to bestow Ukraine with the long-discussed Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the upcoming alliance summit. Second, in February 2021, Zelensky shut down multiple Russian-funded television channels in Ukraine.⁹ Third, in January, large and widespread protests erupted against the imprisonment of opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Still, no invasion or specific demands emerged from Moscow, and troop levels eventually decreased. Putin and Biden met in person later that summer, seemingly resetting the relationship.¹⁰ However, in mid-October, discussions began to circulate about a renewed military buildup on the Russian side of the Ukrainian Border. Then, on November 10th, while meeting with Ukrainian officials at the State Department, Secretary Blinken warned Moscow that “Any escalatory or aggressive actions would be of great concern to the United States.”¹¹ A week prior, the CIA director and the US Ambassador to Russia met with Nikolai Patrushev, a key Putin advisor in Moscow, at the request of President Biden “to discuss a range of issues in the bilateral relationship.”¹² Unknown to the public then, the CIA director warned the Russians that the US had become aware of newly developed invasion plans for Ukraine.¹³ However, it is essential to note that the mere existence of war plans, which most major powers maintain and update regularly, does not require those plans to be executed. Indeed,

⁹ Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, 141.

¹⁰ Several “defensive” reasons did emerge from the Kremlin explaining the buildup, including a comment from Minister Shoigu, who suggested it was in response to a NATO exercise. See Mykola Bielieskov, “The Russian and Ukrainian Spring 2021 War Scare,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (2021): 7, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep35091>.

¹¹ Michael Crowley, “Blinken Warns Russia Against Making a ‘Serious Mistake’ in Ukraine,” *New York Times*, November 10, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/10/us/politics/russia-blinken-ukraine.html>.

¹² Anton Troianovski and Julian E. Barnes, “U.S.-Russia Engagement Deepens as C.I.A. Head Travels to Moscow,” *New York Times*, November 2, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/02/world/europe/united-states-russia-william-burns.html>.

¹³ See Dara Massicot, “What Russia Got Wrong: Can Moscow Learn from Its Failures in Ukraine?” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/what-russia-got-wrong-moscow-failures-in-ukraine-dara-massicot>.

after meeting with Patrushev, the CIA director recalled his “level of concern has gone up, not down,” but acknowledged the Russian President had yet to make an irrevocable decision to invade.¹⁴

A week after Blinken’s warnings, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg made his demands of Moscow, saying, “It is urgent that Russia shows transparency about its military buildup, de-escalate and reduce tensions.”¹⁵ As tensions continued rising, Blinken was asked about “red lines” regarding Ukraine and offered none, stating, “The US has real concerns about Russia’s unusual military activity on the border with Ukraine.”¹⁶ It remains unlikely that at this point in the crisis, the President had decided on specific actions he was willing to take if Moscow escalated further. Indeed, coordination had only begun among Washington and its European allies to craft diplomatic and economic responses to potential Russian provocations. Moreover, planning was underway for the two Presidents to meet in early December.¹⁷

December 2021

On December 1st, we encountered our first critical decision (CD) when Putin, speaking at an event at the Kremlin, sent his diplomatic signal when he announced that his country required “legal guarantees” that NATO would not expand eastward.¹⁸ The linkage of security guarantees

¹⁴ Shane Harris, Karen DeYoung, Isabelle Khurshudyan, Ashely Parker and Liz Sly, “Road to war: U.S. struggled to convince allies, and Zelensky, of risk of invasion,” *Washington Post*, August 16, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/interactive/2022/ukraine-road-to-war>.

¹⁵ Julian E. Barnes and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Warns Allies of Possible Russian Incursion as Troops Amass Near Ukraine,” *New York Times*, November 19, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/19/us/politics/russia-ukraine-biden-administration.html>.

¹⁶ Michael Crowley and Julian E. Barnes, “How Far Would Biden Go to Defend Ukraine Against Russia?” *New York Times*, November 25, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/25/us/politics/biden-putin-russia-ukraine.html>.

¹⁷ Crowley and Barnes, “How Far Would Biden.”

¹⁸ Anton Troianovski, “Putin and West Spar Over NATO’s Military Ties to Ukraine,” *New York Times*, December 1, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/01/world/europe/putin-nato-russia-ukraine.html>.

and the troop buildup on the border was implicit, and in doing so, he had decided to attempt a coercive gambit against NATO. Alternatively, Putin could have decided to continue supporting separatists in the Donbas, essentially pursuing the status quo, or increase its military presence in the Donbas to break the impasse. Those other alternatives will be considered in the next chapter. Nevertheless, he ultimately decided to initiate a militarized crisis to gain concessions from the West.

The next day, Blinken began using new language to signal Western resolve to deter Putin from invading. When speaking to reporters, Blinken stated he had explained to his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, that Washington and its allies would “impose severe costs and consequences on Russia if it takes further aggressive action against Ukraine,” including “high-impact economic measures that we’ve refrained from taking in the past.” Lavrov clarified his position to Blinken by re-stating Putin’s demands for “long-term security guarantees.”¹⁹

On December 7th, Biden and Putin met for two hours via videoconference to discuss the crisis. During the meeting, Putin provided more details regarding his demands for security guarantees. Beyond a permanent ban on NATO expansion eastward, he also sought a legally binding prohibition against deploying offensive weapons bordering Russia.²⁰ From the American perspective, Biden threatened economic sanctions and “other measures” if Putin escalated further.²¹ National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan later explained that those other measures

¹⁹ Michael Crowley, “Blinken Trades Warnings With Russia’s Lavrov Over Ukraine, NATO,” *New York Times*, December 2, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/02/us/politics/blinken-lavrov-russia-ukraine.html>.

²⁰ Kremlin, “Meeting with US President Joseph Biden,” December 7, 2021, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67315>.

²¹ White House, “Readout of President Biden’s Video Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia,” December 7, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/12/07/readout-of-president-bidens-video-call-with-president-vladimir-putin-of-russia/>.

included sending additional US military forces to NATO allies in Eastern Europe. He also clarified that the National Security Council's (NSC) belief was that Putin had yet to decide whether to attack with his amassed forces.²²

The next day, we reach the second crisis-related CD when Biden tells reporters that he has ruled out any use of military forces on the ground in Ukraine to either act as a deterrent or fight alongside Ukrainian forces.²³ Instead, Biden could have chosen to remain ambiguous about the role US forces in the region would play or taken an even more risky step and threatened some form of military retaliation. Perhaps not by coincidence, two days later, the head of Ukraine's military intelligence service predicted that "There are not sufficient military resources for repelling a full-scale attack by Russia if it begins without the support of Western forces."²⁴ Sending a less-than-subtle warning that the West needs to increase its support to Ukraine if it wants it to survive a Russian invasion.

The following week, the G7 foreign ministers issued a joint statement that condemned the Russian buildup, reiterated their support of Ukraine's sovereignty, and called on Moscow to de-escalate.²⁵ Sending a clear signal to Putin that the G7 states, which includes not only NATO members but also Japan, were united against his attempt at coercion. Several days later, Putin

²² Jake Sullivan, "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan," White House, December 7, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/12/07/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-and-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-december-7-2021/>.

²³ Joseph R Biden Jr., "Remarks by President Biden Before Marine One Departure," White House, December 8, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/12/08/remarks-by-president-biden-before-marine-one-departure-10/>.

²⁴ Michael Schwartz, "Ukraine Commanders Say a Russian Invasion Would Overwhelm Them," *New York Times*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/world/europe/ukraine-military-russia-invasion.html>.

²⁵ United States Department of State, "G7 Foreign Ministers' Statement on Russia and Ukraine," December 12, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/g7-foreign-ministers-statement-on-russia-and-ukraine/>.

and China's President Xi Jinping held their video summit in which they proposed enhanced cooperation to "more effectively safeguard the security of both parties."²⁶ This meeting and its conclusions signaled to the West that Russia was not alone if it decided to move forward with an attack against Ukraine.

By Mid-December, NATO's Stoltenberg reiterated the alliance's commitment to President Zelensky that Ukraine is still welcome to join the alliance in the future despite Putin's current demands.²⁷ Such a pronouncement made any compromise on the NATO expansion issue more difficult, especially after Putin submitted his formal demands later in the month to Brussels and Washington. Nonetheless, an equally important signal sent to Moscow at this early stage in the crisis was the omission of any increased security assistance for Kyiv.

The next day, December 17th, the Kremlin released its formal demands as a draft agreement. It contained nine articles, with the most contentious being the cessation of further NATO enlargement, the removal of any weapons and infrastructure from NATO members who joined the alliance after May 1997, and the prohibition of any NATO military activity in Ukrainian territory.²⁸ President Putin held his annual news conference the following week,

²⁶ Anton Troianovski and Steven Lee Myers, "Putin and Xi Hold Video Summit," *New York Times*, December 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/15/world/asia/china-russia-summit-xi-putin.html>.

²⁷ Michael Schwartz, "NATO Signals Support for Ukraine Amid Russia Threat," *New York Times*, December 16, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/16/world/europe/ukraine-nato-russia.html>.

²⁸ The draft agreement Moscow presented to the West contained nine substantive articles. Article 1 required that each party "shall not strengthen their security individually, within international organizations, military alliances or coalitions at the expense of the security of other Parties." Article 2 stated that each party needed to inform the other about military exercises and establish a "hotline." Article 3 affirms that neither party considers the other "adversaries." Article 4 restricts "military forces and weaponry" deployment to NATO countries that joined after May 1997. Article 5 prohibits short and intermediate-range missiles from being placed close enough to reach any parties. Article 6 prevents further enlargement of NATO and specifically mentions Ukraine. Article 7 states that no NATO member can "conduct military activity on the territory of Ukraine...other states in Eastern Europe...South Caucasus and in Central Asia." Article 8 reaffirms the role of the UN in maintaining peace. Finally, Article 9 allows each signatory to withdraw from the agreement after 30 days notice. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Agreement on measures to ensure the security of The Russian Federation and member States of the

during which he refused to pledge not to invade Ukraine. Instead, he argued that he needed assurances from the West, not the other way around. Interestingly, he digressed for a few moments into the history behind the creation of Ukraine as a state and once again blamed Lenin for this outcome, but then quickly returned to the issue of security guarantees, saying, “But the matter at hand concerns security, not history, but security guarantees. This is why it is not the negotiations themselves but the results that matter to us.”²⁹

Notably, he felt compelled to press the historical context after making his demands to NATO so singularly focused on security guarantees. This digression speaks to Putin’s inability to separate the so-called security issues from what he perceives as a historical error and injustice by the Bolsheviks. Finally, his comments highlight the narrow margins the West was working with to avoid an invasion, given Putin’s firm stance. By drawing a line in the sand publicly, Putin raised the reputational costs for himself if the West did not acquiesce. Accordingly, this should have sent a strong signal to Washington and Brussels that Putin was highly resolved to achieve his goals vis-à-vis Ukraine.

At the end of the year, congress passed, and Biden signed the National Defense Authorization Act, which obligated \$322M in foreign military financing (FMF) to Kyiv, almost double the previous fiscal year. Moreover, President Biden authorized an additional \$200M in Drawdowns, directly transferring military supplies from existing US stockpiles. Since taking office, Biden had only previously authorized \$60M in drawdowns at the end of August.³⁰

North Atlantic Treaty Organization,” December 17, 2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en.

²⁹ Vladimir Putin, “Vladimir Putin’s annual news conference,” Kremlin, December 23, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67438>.

³⁰ Andrew S. Bowen and Cory Welt. “U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine,” Congressional Research Service, October 21, 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov>.

In the background, the question lingered about the future of the Nord Stream 2 underwater pipeline, built to bring large volumes of natural gas directly to Germany. Unlike its predecessor, Russia's Gazprom energy company wholly owned the pipeline sequel, and critics like Texas Senator Ted Cruz pushed for a vote to sanction the companies working to bring the pipeline online. Moreover, Olaf Scholz, Germany's new Chancellor, told reporters that a regulatory agency in Germany would decide the fate of the private-sector pipeline without political considerations, seemingly indicating it would still go forward regardless of the crisis with Moscow.³¹

Meanwhile, several international experts writing in December maintained a relatively optimistic tone, writing that it is doubtful that Putin is interested "in an actual invasion...it would be surprising." Others published an article sub-titled "Russia Seeks to Stop NATO's Expansion, not Annex More Territory."³² Indeed, at the end of December, there was room for optimism as the Biden administration announced a diplomatic delegation would begin formal negotiations on January 10th. However, on December 30th, Putin and Biden had another 50-minute phone call, requested by Putin, in which he indicated there would be a "complete rupture" in Washington and Moscow's relationship if the West imposed sanctions on Putin in the event he escalated militarily against Kyiv.³³ The White House did not provide many details of the call but did

³¹ Melissa Eddy, "Germany Wants Its Russian Pipeline. German Allies Aren't Sure It's a Good Idea," *New York Times*, December 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/28/world/europe/nord-stream-pipeline-germany-russia.html>.

³² Dmitri Trenin, "What Putin Really Wants in Ukraine: Russia Seeks to Stop NATO's Expansion, Not to Annex More Territory," *Foreign Affairs*, December 28, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2021-12-28/what-putin-really-wants-ukraine>.

³³ David E. Sanger and Andrew E. Kramer, "Putin Warns Biden of 'Complete Rupture' of U.S.-Russia Relationship Over Ukraine," *New York Times*, December 30, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/30/us/politics/biden-putin-ukraine-call.html>.

disclose that Biden “made clear that the United States and its allies and partners will respond decisively if Russia further invades Ukraine.”³⁴

January 2022

As the new year began, Putin faced an unexpected development in Kazakhstan as protests erupted over rising gas costs. As a result, Putin sent 2,000 personnel as “peacekeepers” to aid the Moscow-backed Kazakh government, and five days into the crisis, he promised the peacekeepers would remain “for a limited time period.”³⁵

Two days before the negotiations in Geneva, a New York Times article revealed off-the-record sources disclosing details of what a punitive sanctions regime would entail, which would include the technology and financial sectors, and that the Pentagon was preparing to arm a Ukrainian insurgency if the country’s military was overrun. Additionally, the article reported that the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Mark Milley, had told his Russian counterpart at the end of December on a phone call that he expected Russia could probably defeat the Ukrainian military quickly, but would result in a costly insurgency.³⁶ The disclosure was undoubtedly intended to signal to Moscow that they should take the upcoming diplomatic negotiations seriously and not simply assume that they could invade Ukraine and that the Western response would look similar to when Russia seized Crimea.

³⁴ Jen Psaki, “Statement by Press Secretary Jen Psaki on President Biden’s Phone Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia,” White House, December 30, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/12/30/statement-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-on-president-bidens-phone-call-with-president-vladimir-putin-of-russia>.

³⁵ Valerie Hopkins, “Russian Troops Will Stay to Finish Job in Kazakhstan, Putin Says,” *New York Times*, January 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/10/world/europe/putin-russia-kazakhstan.html>.

³⁶ David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Details Possible Sanctions on Russia Over a Ukraine Invasion,” *New York Times*, January 8, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/08/us/politics/us-sanctions-russia-ukraine.html>.

While most observers focused on the talks between Washington, Brussels, and Moscow, Zelensky's government in Kyiv was simultaneously engaging in its own crisis negotiations with Russia in Vienna as part of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) talks. Indeed, Zelensky's government crafted a ten-step proposal to resolve the Donbas crisis on December 21st.³⁷ Nevertheless, Putin's demands centered not on the Donbas conflict but on Ukraine's NATO membership, but at this point, Kyiv was unwilling to limit its ambitions for joining the alliance, understandably, given that the NATO membership policy goal was embedded in Ukraine's constitution.

As talks between the US and Russia began to unfold, assurances emerged from senior Russian diplomats, such as Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, that the Kremlin has "no intention to invade Ukraine."³⁸ Still, during the same time frame, anonymous US officials revealed that Russia was positioning military helicopters along the border, which would be a key asset for any major offensive.³⁹

On January 13th, the Republican bid to sanction Nord Stream 2 in the Senate failed. President Zelensky had been supporting the measures, whereas the Biden administration pressured Democratic Senators, of which six voted with Republicans, to vote down the measure since the administration saw it as a potentially divisive step that would only complicate their

³⁷ Vladimir Solovyov, "And I'm walking, walking through the war," *Kommersant*, December 24, 2021, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5143592>.

³⁸ Andrew E. Kramer, "A Russian Pledge of No Invasion? Ukrainians Are Skeptical," *New York Times*, January 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/11/world/europe/ukraine-russia.html>.

³⁹ Julian E. Barnes, Michael Crowley, and Eric Schmitt, "Russia Positioning Helicopters, in Possible Sign of Ukraine Plans," *New York Times*, January 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/10/us/politics/russia-ukraine-helicopters.html>.

efforts of unifying NATO members' response during the crisis.⁴⁰ The Nord Stream 2 vote illustrates the tension, but not break, between the Zelensky government and the Biden administration's diplomatic approaches, which unfolded throughout the crisis.

As the talks stalled and both sides' tone seemed pessimistic, a significant cyber-attack hit Ukraine, which many at the time attributed to Russia. Furthermore, on the same day, the Biden administration accused Russia of sending saboteurs to Ukraine "to have the option of fabricating a pretext for invasion."⁴¹ The timing of these two events suggests it was Moscow's attempt at expressing both its displeasure on how the initial rounds of diplomacy unfolded and, perhaps more significantly, its resolve to achieve meaningful change.

Complicating things further for President Zelensky was the return of former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to Ukraine, whom Zelensky had previously defeated in the last presidential election. Poroshenko was a fierce critic of Zelensky and had accused the current President of being too accommodating when negotiating with the Russians over the conflict in the Donbas. On the other hand, Zelensky's government had levied several criminal charges against Poroshenko, for which the latter had returned for his court appearance.⁴² Having Zelensky's most vocal and popular critic back in the country advocating zero compromises with Russia would have complicated Zelensky's room for maneuver, who had already seen dramatic negative shifts in popularity since being elected.

⁴⁰ Cate Edmondson and Kenneth P. Vogel, "New Sanctions for Russian Gas Pipeline Fall Short in Senate," *New York Times*, January 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/us/politics/senate-russia-gas-pipeline-ukraine.html>.

⁴¹ Andrew W. Bowen, "Russia Military Buildup Along the Ukrainian Border," Congressional Research Service, February 7, 2022.

⁴² Andrew E. Kramer, "Poroshenko, Ex-President, Returns to Ukraine, Roiling Politics," *New York Times*, January 17, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/17/world/europe/petro-poroshenko-russia-ukraine.html>.

Another key signal from the Kremlin occurred in mid-January when Russia began to evacuate families of diplomatic staff from its embassy in Kyiv and other consulates.⁴³

Additionally, Russian forces began arriving in Belarus for joint military drills, which many feared exposed Ukraine's Northern border to invasion.⁴⁴ On the same day, the UK Defense Secretary announced that his country had decided to "supply Ukraine with light, anti-armor, defensive weapon systems."⁴⁵

During this time, Putin hosted the new Iranian President at the Kremlin, reminding the West that Iran would be a reliable partner in preventing Moscow's total isolation. Iranian President Raisi, in his remarks to Putin, made clear that he saw an opportunity for Tehran and Moscow to partner more closely to balance against pressure from the West when he said, "I would like to say that in the current, exceptional conditions when unilateral actions by the West, including the US are being confronted, we can create synergy in our cooperation."⁴⁶

As the Putin-Raisi meeting unfolded in Moscow, Biden held an extended press conference during which, when asked about Putin's intentions concerning Ukraine, Biden responded, in part, by saying, "My guess is he will move in. He has to do something." He also opined that if Russia's invasion into Ukraine were "a minor incursion," then Washington and its

⁴³ Michael Schwartz and David E. Sanger, "Russia Thins Out Its Embassy in Ukraine, a Possible Clue to Putin's Next Move," *New York Times*, January 17, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/17/us/politics/russia-ukraine-kyiv-embassy.html>.

⁴⁴ Tom Balmforth, "Russian forces arrive in Belarus for joint military drills," Reuters, January 17, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-belarus-plan-joint-military-drills-february-lukashenko-2022-01-17>.

⁴⁵ Ben Wallace, "Ministry of Defence Statement by the Defence Secretary in the House of Commons," Ministry of Defence, January 17, 2022, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/statement-by-the-defence-secretary-in-the-house-of-commons-17-january-2022?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications-topic&utm_source=bf2e6c40-445b-4e59-808b-bd3a60871808&utm_content=immediately.

⁴⁶ Ebrahim Raisi, "The Kremlin, Meeting with President of Iran Sayyid Ebrahim Raisi," Kremlin, January 19, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67608>.

allies would likely “fight about what to do and not do...”⁴⁷ This comment likely gave Putin rare insight into where the US President believed divisions could be exploited among the Western allies.

On January 21st, Ukrainian intelligence claimed at least 1,000 Russian mercenaries were being sent into separatist-held areas in the Donbas, while on the same day, Russia’s foreign minister Lavrov denied any plans to invade Ukraine, stating, “You claim that we are preparing to attack Ukraine, but we have explained on many occasions that this is not the case.”⁴⁸ Nevertheless, on the 22nd, the UK suggested that Putin was planning to install a pro-Russian leader in Kyiv and had selected a former Ukrainian member of parliament, Yevhen Murayev, for the job.⁴⁹ The UK claimed that it released the intelligence to disrupt Putin’s plot. The Russian foreign ministry denied any plans, calling the report disinformation on the part of the British.⁵⁰

The end of January saw a significant escalation in tensions as Russia began moving blood supplies to the border area in anticipation of casualties,⁵¹ and both the UK and Washington directed their diplomat’s families living in Ukraine to depart.⁵² Then, on January 24th, the US

⁴⁷ Joseph R. Biden Jr., “Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference,” White House, January 19, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/01/19/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-6/>.

⁴⁸ Michael Schwartz, “Ukraine Accuses Russia of Sending Mercenaries to Rebel Territories,” *New York Times*, January 21, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/world/europe/ukraine-russia-rebel-territories.html>.

⁴⁹ Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, “Kremlin plan to install pro-Russian leadership in Ukraine exposed,” January 22, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/kremlin-plan-to-install-pro-russian-leadership-in-ukraine-exposed>.

⁵⁰ Brad Dress, “British government: Kremlin looking to install pro-Russian leader in Ukraine,” *The Hill*, January 22, 2022, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/590929-british-government-kremlin-looking-to-install-pro-russian-leader-in>.

⁵¹ Bowen, “Russian Military Buildup,” 1.

⁵² Katie Benner, Edward Wong, and Lara Jakes, “U.S. Orders Family Members of Embassy Staff to Leave Ukraine,” *New York Times*, January 23, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/us/politics/ukraine-us-embassy-russia.html>.

Secretary of Defense put 8,500 American troops on alert for possible deployment to NATO countries in Europe.⁵³

Despite all this, President Zelensky and his government took a more cautious tone with the Ukrainian people, suggesting on his Facebook account that the drawdown of US and UK embassy staff “did not mean escalation is inevitable.” On the 24th, the Ukrainian defense minister Oleksii Reznikov, when interviewed on Ukrainian television, said: “Today, at this very moment, not a single strike group of the Russian armed forces has been established, which attests to the fact that tomorrow they are not going to invade...that is why I ask you to not spread panic.”⁵⁴

Behind the scenes, however, Moscow was enhancing the intensity and scope of its disinformation narratives by portraying Russia as a victim, distorting the facts surrounding the independence of Ukraine, claiming “The Collapse of Western Civilization is imminent,” and suggesting that the US was behind the color revolutions which since the turn of the century had taken place across multiple former Soviet states.⁵⁵

Finally, on January 26th, Washington and Brussels formally responded to Putin’s December demands, and in doing so, we reach the third crisis-related CD with Biden rejecting all of Putin’s NATO-related demands. Secretary Blinken stated during a press conference announcing the response Washington was offering to continue discussions related to arms control, the possibility of “reciprocal transparency measures regarding force posture in Ukraine,”

⁵³ United States Department of Defense, “Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby Holds a Press Briefing,” January 24, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2910061/pentagon-press-secretary-john-kirby-holds-a-press-briefing/>.

⁵⁴ Michael Schwartz, “How Ukraine’s Leaders Are Responding to Russian Threat,” *New York Times*, January 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/25/world/europe/ukraine-russia-invasion.html>.

⁵⁵ United States Department of State, “Russia’s Top Five Persistent Disinformation Narratives,” January 20, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/russias-top-five-persistent-disinformation-narratives>.

and ways to “increase confidence regarding military exercises and maneuvers in Europe.”⁵⁶ In the short term, Putin remained silent on the West’s response.

The next day, Under Secretary Nuland suggested an apparent breakthrough with Berlin unequivocally stating that “if Russia invades Ukraine one way or another, Nord Stream 2 will not move forward.”⁵⁷ Moreover, at this point in the crisis, Moscow had amassed over 100,000 troops, and the Pentagon leadership proposed that Russia had the necessary mix of troops, equipment, and weapons to invade Ukraine fully.⁵⁸ However, those comments were not well received by President Zelensky, and he responded by saying, “They keep supporting this theme, this topic...they make it as acute and burning as possible. In my opinion, this is a mistake.”⁵⁹

Throughout mid and into late January, scholars and experts debated the need for continual NATO expansion, with some arguing that the alliance should end the “open-door-policy, explicitly forswearing adding members...incorporating Ukraine would be strategic madness.”⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Antony J. Blinken, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Press Availability,” United States Department of State, January 26, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-a-press-availability-13/>.

⁵⁷ United States Department of State, “Undersecretary Nuland Comments on Nord Stream 2,” U.S. Department of State Facebook page (video), January 27, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/statedept/videos/under-secretary-nuland-comments-on-nord-stream-2/1089360115236518/>.

⁵⁸ United States Department of Defense, “Secretary of Defense Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley Press Briefing,” January 28, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2916567/secretary-of-defense-austin-and-chairman-of-the-joint-chiefs-of-staff-gen-mille/>.

⁵⁹ Michael Schwartz and Andrew E. Kramer, “White House Warnings Over Russia Strain Ukraine-U.S. Partnership,” *New York Times*, January 28, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/28/world/europe/biden-ukraine-russia-diplomacy.html>.

⁶⁰ Michael Kimmage and Michael Kofman, “Russia Won’t Let Ukraine Go Without a Fight: Moscow Threatens War to Reverse Kyiv’s Pro-Western Drift,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 22, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2021-11-22/russia-wont-let-ukraine-go-without-fight>.

Still, others argued that “closing the door to NATO, especially now, would demoralize Ukraine, make it more vulnerable to Putin’s designs, and split the alliance.”⁶¹

The President of France, Emmanuel Macron, began direct talks with Putin on January 31st. On the same day, the White House Press Secretary announced that the administration had “developed specific sanction packages for both Russian elites and their family members” if Russia invaded Ukraine. She went on to say, “The individuals we’ve identified are in or near the inner circle of the Kremlin and play a role in government decision-making, or at a minimum complicit in the Kremlin’s destabilizing behavior.”⁶² This announcement undoubtedly intended to affect the decision calculus of Putin’s closest advisors, reminding them that they would personally incur economic costs if they counseled Putin to invade, and he ultimately heeded their advice.

Also, on the 31st at the UN Security Council, The US and Russia lobbied verbal assaults at one another over the crisis, with the US ambassador to the UN declaring, “This is an escalation and a pattern of aggression that we’ve seen from [Russia] again and again.” Interestingly, the Ambassador from China stated, “The United States’ claim that this will lead to war are unfounded, given the Russian Federation’s declaration that it has no plans to launch military action.” The Russian ambassador claimed that Washington’s suggestion of a possible Russian invasion were based on “Bogus narratives.”⁶³

⁶¹ Eric S. Edelman and David J. Kramer, “Keep NATO’s Door Open to Ukraine: Washington Shouldn’t Grant Putin the Sphere of Influence He Wants,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 31, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-01-31/keep-natos-door-open-ukraine>.

⁶² Jen Psaki, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki, January 31, 2022,” White House, January 31, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2022/01/31/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-january-31-2022/>.

⁶³ United Nations, “Situation along Russian Federation-Ukraine Border Can Only Be Resolved through Diplomacy, Political Affairs Chief Tells Security Council,” UN Press, January 31, 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14783.doc.htm>.

February 2022

As February began and the pre-war crisis entered its final Month, Washington ordered families of its diplomats in Belarus to leave based on the increase in Russian military activity in that country, and Putin finally responded publicly to the Western response to his demands. He noted they were “carefully analyzing” the replies from the West, but that “it is already clear that...the principal Russian concerns were ignored. We didn’t see an adequate response to our three key demands.”⁶⁴ Unsurprisingly, he specified the three *key* demands as preventing NATO expansion, the placement of missiles near Russia, and returning NATO infrastructure to 1997 levels. The remarks were plainly intended to signal to the West that he was displeased with its counteroffer to discuss transparency measures and that he was uninterested in negotiating his way out of the crisis through face-saving measures, which did not address his principal concerns.

Putin’s message also signaled to Zelensky that his country was now more than ever at risk of invasion. On the same day, Zelensky began to offer a different tone on the crisis, bringing a previously unseen level of urgency when he said, “This is not going to be a war of Ukraine and Russia. This is going to be a European war, a full-fledged war.”⁶⁵ Accordingly, it remains possible that the final two CDs of the crisis were made at the beginning of February.⁶⁶ With Putin’s statements, he further boxed himself into a corner, incurring severe reputational costs if

⁶⁴ Vladimir Putin, “Translated Press conference video” *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/01/world/europe/putin-russia-ukraine.html>.

⁶⁵ Marc Santora and Sashank Bengali, “Five Takeaways on Ukraine Crisis, After Putin Breaks Silence,” *New York Times*, February 2, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/02/world/europe/putin-russia-ukraine-us.html?searchResultPosition=42>.

⁶⁶ Critical Decision (CD) #4 was Zelensky’s decision to continue on a path of NATO membership and not entertain a middle-ground option or move towards non-alignment. CD #5 was Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine instead of negotiating a new framework or limiting a military escalation to the Donbas.

he were to back down or negotiate on the issues outlined in the West's counteroffer that he now publicly stated was unacceptable.

Moreover, Putin likely recognized at this point that the West was also in a similar position, having now publicly drawn a line in the sand as being unwilling to negotiate on Putin's NATO-related demands. Indeed, the West would have also incurred severe reputational costs if any of its leaders broke with the consensus position and offered to close the door to NATO. Hence, it remains highly likely that at this point, Putin had convinced himself that invasion was the only acceptable alternative to achieve his goal of changing Kyiv's direction toward joining the alliance.

Similarly, Zelensky's changed tone and rhetoric surrounding the crisis are notable as he brought a greater sense of urgency to the leaders of Europe. Moreover, he shows no sign of adopting a middle path regarding NATO membership nor moving entirely away from joining the alliance. Indeed, two key speeches in the following two weeks demonstrated his resolve to stay the course concerning NATO and unite the country to fight back if Russia invades.

The following day, the Pentagon announced the repositioning of US forces in Europe and a new deployment of forces from the US to Eastern Europe. First, 1,000 soldiers already in Germany were being repositioned to Romania, bringing the total number of US servicemembers in that country to 1,900. Additionally, the Secretary of Defense directed 2,000 troops from North Carolina to deploy to Poland.⁶⁷ While re-assuring NATO allies, this decision would have had little effect on Putin's calculus as he was not threatening or posturing to invade either of those

⁶⁷ United States Department of Defense, "Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds a Press Briefing," February 2, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2921277/pentagon-press-secretary-john-f-kirby-holds-a-press-briefing/>.

states. Furthermore, it would not have had any tangible effect on Zelensky's strategy as it provided no additional security to his country.

Over the next few days, both sides of the crisis took steps to reinforce their commitment to their partners, with the Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba claiming there were “no divisions between me and Secretary Blinken [or] between President Zelensky and President Biden.”⁶⁸ On the other side, Putin met with Xi and produced a joint statement declaring their friendship had “no limits” and that Beijing supported an end to NATO expansion.⁶⁹ The day prior to the so-called “no limits” agreement, the Biden administration accused the Kremlin of crafting a false-flag video, which the State Department spokesman described as “a video with graphic scenes of false explosions – depicting corpses, crisis actors pretending to be mourners, and images of destroyed locations or military equipment – entirely fabricated by Russian intelligence.”⁷⁰

The video, however, was not released, citing the need to protect classified sources and methods. For those who doubt the existence of such a video, it remains unlikely that the US government would entirely fabricate it as they would be accountable to congressional oversight concerns. However, it is possible officials incorrectly assessed the intent or reliability of intelligence they received, although that remains less probable given the intelligence format. Regardless, the disclosure would have given Putin pause had he been planning such a false

⁶⁸ Dmytro Kuleba, “Ukraine Does Not Oppose U.S. Plan to Defuse Crisis With Russia,” (Translated Video), *New York Times*, February 2, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/europe/100000008188156/ukraine-russia-foreign-minister.html?searchResultPosition=45>.

⁶⁹ Kremlin, “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development,” February 4, 2022, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

⁷⁰ United States Department of State, “Department Press Briefing – February 3, 2022,” February 3, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/briefings/departments-press-briefing-february-3-2022/>.

pretext for invading and raised concerns regarding the protection of classified operations within his intelligence services.

Further, given that Putin ultimately did eventually use a fictional pretext to deploy more troops to the Donbas under the guise of protecting civilians and acting as peacekeepers, it should lend credibility to the validity of the video as authentic. Moreover, it remains possible that it was among a menu of options for Putin to consider but one that he may not have ultimately decided to use even if Washington had not disclosed its existence.

Throughout the first week in February, Ukraine claimed Russia had moved an additional 10,000 troops to Crimea,⁷¹ and Kyiv invited international media to observe military demonstrations of their forces using a variety of military weapons, including shoulder-fired anti-tank weapons.⁷² On the other side of the Atlantic, President Biden met with Chancellor Scholz of Germany, confirming earlier statements that the Nord Stream 2 pipeline would not go forward if Russia invaded Ukraine.⁷³ Moreover, US officials declared that Putin had amassed over 110,000 troops, which equated to roughly 70 percent of the forces necessary for a full invasion, but that Putin had still not decided whether or not to invade.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Michael Schwartz, “Russian Troops in Final Stages of Readiness Add to Worries for Ukraine,” *New York Times*, February 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/04/world/europe/russian-troops-ukraine-crimean-peninsula.html?searchResultPosition=74>.

⁷² Maria Varenikova, “Ukraine Shows Off New U.S. Weaponry, in a Signal to Russia,” *New York Times*, February 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/03/world/europe/ukraine-american-missile-demonstration.html?searchResultPosition=73>.

⁷³ Katie Rogers, “Biden Meets German Leader on Russia Sanctions and Pipeline,” *New York Times*, February 7, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/07/us/politics/biden-olaf-scholz-russia.html?searchResultPosition=88>.

⁷⁴ Helene Cooper and David E. Sanger, “U.S. Warns of Grim Toll if Putin Pursues Full Invasion of Ukraine,” *New York Times*, February 5, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/05/us/politics/russia-ukraine-invasion.html?searchResultPosition=81>.

Macron then traveled to the Kremlin to meet with Putin, where they spoke for over six hours, but in the end, there was no movement towards a viable agreement or indications of de-escalation.⁷⁵ Macron then traveled to Kyiv to meet with Zelensky, where the French President indicated it could take some time to resolve the crisis.⁷⁶ Zelensky also began upping his rhetoric of disappointment and resentment towards the West, specifically regarding the Budapest Memorandum. In his speech at the Munich security conference, he said, “Ukraine has received security guarantees for abandoning the world’s third nuclear capability. We don’t have that weapon. We also have no security. We also do not have part of the territory of our state [Crimea].”⁷⁷ He went on to lambast the utter failure of the Budapest memorandum and that he had tried to invoke the document’s articles and convene the signatories several times to no avail. At this point, Zelensky was hoping for some security assurances, and he likely would have taken ones that did not necessarily involve NATO membership, but in the end, no formally binding offers of mutual defense were presented.⁷⁸

While Zelensky continued his pushback on the West, his foreign minister Kuleba suggested, “There is still room for diplomacy...I hope we will succeed diplomatically. If not, and

⁷⁵ Kremlin, “News conference following Russian-French talks,” February 8, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67735>.

⁷⁶ Eliza Mackintosh and Nathan Hodge, “Ukraine Russia crisis: Emmanuel Macron visited his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky as Russia pours cold water on de-escalation,” CNN, February 8, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/08/europe/ukraine-russia-news-tuesday-intl/index.html>.

⁷⁷ Volodymyr Zelensky, “Speech by the President of Ukraine at the 58th Munich Security Conference,” Official website of the President of Ukraine,” February 19, 2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/vistup-prezidenta-ukrayini-na-58-j-myunhenskij-konferenciyi-72997>.

⁷⁸ On 17 February, the UK, Poland, and Ukraine issued a joint statement to pursue a “Trilateral Memorandum of Cooperations” which would include such measures as “support to the International Crimea Platform, increasing our collaboration on cyber security, energy security, and boosting strategic communications to counter disinformation.” See Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, “United Kingdom, Poland and Ukraine foreign ministers' joint statement,” February 17, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-by-the-united-kingdom-poland-and-ukraine-17-february-2022>.

Russia decides to attack, we will fight.”⁷⁹ While Putin routinely urged Kyiv to implement the Minsk agreements throughout the crisis, it was perceived by many Ukrainians as too large of a concession to Russian military aggression. Moreover, depending on how one interprets the sequencing of the agreement, it would potentially lead to Russian influence over Ukraine’s foreign policy if the Donbas were given special autonomy, allowing it to veto specific plans.⁸⁰

To the prospect of a de facto Russian veto, Kuleba responded, “This is not going to happen...never.”⁸¹ Indeed, Zelensky’s government was facing intense pressure from within Ukraine not to compromise on the Donbas from groups like the “Movement Against Capitulation” and “Democratic Ax,” which pledged to oust the Zelensky government via mass protests if it capitulated to Moscow. Accordingly, both Zelensky and Kuleba suggested that the biggest threat to Ukrainian stability was internal pressures caused by Russia’s threat of invasion rather than an invasion itself.⁸²

The military escalation continued as the UK placed 1,000 troops on a higher readiness level to respond to a possible humanitarian crisis.⁸³ Russia also began maneuvers in Belarus,⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Andrew E. Kramer, “What Are the Minsk Accords, and Could They Defuse the Ukraine Crisis?” *New York Times*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/08/world/russia-ukraine-minsk-accords.html?searchResultPosition=105>.

⁸⁰ For a detailed examination of the Minsk Accords and the implementation friction points between Moscow and Kyiv see Plokyhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, 126-131.

⁸¹ Kramer, “The Minsk Accords.”

⁸² Andrew E. Kramer, “Armed Nationalists in Ukraine Pose a Threat Not Just to Russia,” *New York Times*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/world/europe/ukraine-nationalism-russia-invasion.html?searchResultPosition=31>.

⁸³ Sashank Bengali and Ivan Nechepurenko, “Top British officials lead diplomatic efforts on Thursday,” *New York Times*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/world/europe/top-british-officials-lead-diplomatic-efforts-on-thursday.html?searchResultPosition=122>.

⁸⁴ Melina Delkic, “Russia’s Large-Scale Military Drills,” *New York Times*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/briefing/russia-belarus-trump-calls-olympics.html?searchResultPosition=29>.

and commercial satellite imagery revealed new Russian positions in Belarus, Crimea, and Western Russia.⁸⁵ These new deployments may have been the impetus for the US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan to announce at a press conference that with regards to an invasion, “It could begin any day now...if you look at the disposition of forces in both Belarus and in Russia...the Russians are in a position to be able to mount a major military action in Ukraine any day now.” At the same time, Sullivan was cautious in saying, “We obviously cannot predict the future. We don’t know exactly what is going to happen.”⁸⁶ The next day, the Pentagon ordered approximately 150 national guard troops to leave Ukraine, who had been conducting training missions with Kyiv’s military.⁸⁷

In response to an apparent escalation on Moscow’s part, Biden approved the deployment of 3,000 additional military personnel to Poland and initiated a phone conference with critical NATO and EU leaders to suggest that Putin may have moved up his timetable for an invasion.⁸⁸ The next day, Biden ordered the departure of most of the remaining diplomats from the US embassy in Kyiv and held another phone call with Putin in which he “reiterated that a further Russian invasion of Ukraine would produce widespread suffering and diminish Russia’s

⁸⁵ Christoph Koettl, “Russia Massing More Troops Near Ukraine, Satellite Images Show,” *New York Times*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/world/europe/russia-ukraine-forces.html?searchResultPosition=32>.

⁸⁶ Jake Sullivan, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan,” White House, February 11, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2022/02/11/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-and-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-february-11-2022/#:~:text=But%20the%20risk%20is%20now,event%20of%20a%20Russian%20invasion>.

⁸⁷ Idrees Ali, “U.S. removing about 150 military trainers from Ukraine,” Reuters, February 12, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/exclusive-us-remove-military-trainers-ukraine-officials-2022-02-12/>.

⁸⁸ Eric Schmitt, “U.S. intelligence says Putin has accelerated his timetable and could invade within days,” *New York Times*, February 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/11/world/europe/president-biden-is-holding-a-call-with-nato-and-eu-leaders-to-discuss-russia-and-ukraine.html?searchResultPosition=43>.

standing.”⁸⁹ Nonetheless, after the call, the administration clarified that they were still unclear if Putin would continue diplomacy or invade.⁹⁰ On the 13th, US staff assigned to the OSCE’s Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, observing the conflict in the Donbas region since 2014, were directed to leave out of concern about a looming invasion.⁹¹ Furthermore, on the 13th, the US embassy was relocated to Lviv in Western Ukraine, and the next day the CIA station was repositioned.⁹²

On the 14th, Zelensky released a video address intended to increase the unity and resolve of his citizens in the wake of an unspecified number of elites fleeing the country and the media companies owned by those same elites, spreading panic. He also addressed civil servants who had fled the state, urging them to “return to your homeland within 24 hours and stand side by side with the Ukrainian army, diplomacy and people!” He continued to deliver a defiant tone and showed no signs of compromising on the status of the Donbas or moving away from pursuing NATO membership, declaring, “We want peace and we want to resolve all issues exclusively through negotiations. Both Donbas and Crimea will return to Ukraine. Exclusively through diplomacy. We do not encroach on what’s not ours, but we will not give up our land.” As he concludes, he explains that “we are all told that February 16th will be the day of the attack. We

⁸⁹ White House, “Readout of President Biden’s Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia,” February 12, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/02/12/readout-of-president-bidens-call-with-president-vladimir-putin-of-russia/>.

⁹⁰ White House, “Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official on the President’s Call with Russian President Vladimir Putin,” February 12, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/02/12/background-press-call-by-a-senior-administration-official-on-the-presidents-call-with-russian-president-vladimir-putin/>.

⁹¹ Andrew Zverev, “OSCE monitoring mission staff pull out from eastern Ukraine,” Reuters, February 13, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-staff-osce-begins-pullout-donetsk-eastern-ukraine-2022-02-13/>.

⁹² Lara Jakes, Richard Pérez-Peña and Julian Barnes, “The U.S. Is Closing Its Kyiv Embassy and Moving to Western Ukraine,” New York Times, February 14, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/14/world/europe/us-closing-kyiv-embassy.html?searchResultPosition=67>.

will make it the Day of Unity.”⁹³ On the same day, Zelensky received disappointing news when the German Chancellor stated he would “encourage businesses to invest in Ukraine” but continued to rule out sending weaponry to Kyiv.⁹⁴

Putin, also on the 14th, held a televised discussion with Lavrov in which his foreign minister stated that “It seems to me that our options are far from exhausted, but they should not continue indefinitely, but at this stage I would suggest that we continue the talks and build on them.” Interestingly, Putin’s response was one word, “good,” without revealing if he felt as cautiously optimistic as his Foreign Minister.⁹⁵ The next day, a spokesperson for the Russian Defense Ministry announced that while its military is “continuing a series of large-scale operational training activities,” some of the training is concluding, and as a result, “the troops...will merge and march back to their home stations,” stating that some “have already started loading on trains and motor vehicles.”⁹⁶

For some observers, the combination of Lavrov’s assessment that the diplomatic talks remain viable and the announcement of Russian forces departing the border region indicated a possible cooling of the crisis. Indeed, in televised remarks with his German counterpart the

⁹³ Volodymyr Zelensky, “Address of the President of Ukraine on the unity of Ukrainian society,” Official website of the President of Ukraine, February 14, 2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zvernennya-prezidenta-ukrayini-shodo-yednosti-ukrayinskogo-s-72893>.

⁹⁴ Christopher F. Schuetze, “German Leader Vows Support for Ukraine, on the Eve of Putin Meeting,” *The New York Times*, February 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/14/world/europe/olaf-scholz-germany-ukraine.html?searchResultPosition=64>.

⁹⁵ Anton Troianovski and Andrew E. Kramer, “Tone of Ukraine Crisis Shifts as Russia Signals Openness to Talk More,” *New York Times* (nytimes.com) “Video,” February 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/14/world/europe/ukraine-russia-putin-zelensky-scholz-nato.html>.

⁹⁶ Reuters, “Translated Video of Igor Konashenkov,” *New York Times*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/europe/100000008210337/russia-ukraine-troops-putin.html?searchResultPosition=16>.

following day, Putin confirmed that “the decision of partial troops withdrawal has been made” and continued with, “Who can say how the actual situation will develop? Nobody, so far.”⁹⁷

The most significant acknowledged cyberattack was launched against the Ukrainian defense ministry and army websites and on the country’s two largest banks on the 14th and 15th. The top Ukrainian cyber official said both attacks “bore traces of foreign intelligence services.”⁹⁸ Moreover, despite Putin’s confirmation that some troops were returning to their home garrisons, Biden announced that Washington saw no sign of a pullback, and the threat of invasion remained high.⁹⁹ In fact, on the 16th, London, Kyiv, and Washington accused Moscow of deception regarding the troop pullback, saying they saw an increase in troop levels in the border region.¹⁰⁰ Then again, on the 17th, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin re-confirmed an increase, not a decrease, in Russian troop and equipment levels along the border.¹⁰¹

On the Russian side, on the 17th, Russia finally responded formally to the US counteroffer to Putin’s original demands. The most provocative aspect of the statement was the declaration that “In the absence of the readiness of the American side to agree on firm, legally binding

⁹⁷ Reuters, “Translated Video of Vladimir Putin,” *New York Times*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/europe/100000008210337/russia-ukraine-troops-putin.html?searchResultPosition=16>.

⁹⁸ Valerie Hopkins, “Ukraine Says Cyberattack Was Largest in Its History,” *New York Times*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/15/world/europe/ukraine-cyberattack.html?searchResultPosition=7>.

⁹⁹ Joseph R. Biden Jr., “Remarks by President Biden Providing an Update on Russia and Ukraine,” White House,” February 15, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/15/remarks-by-president-biden-providing-an-update-on-russia-and-ukraine/>.

¹⁰⁰ Michael Howie, “Russia ‘still moving forces towards Ukraine border’, says UK intelligence chief,” *Evening Standard*, February 16, 2022, <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/ukraine-russia-jim-hocken-hull-military-buildup-nato-kremlin-brussels-b982955.html>.

¹⁰¹ United States Department of Defense, “Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III Holds a Press Conference at NATO Headquarters, Brussels, Belgium,” February 17, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2938678/secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-holds-a-press-conference-at-nato-headqu/>.

guarantees of ensuring our security...Russia will be forced to respond, including through the implementation of military-technical measures.”¹⁰²

The next day, Biden held a news conference where he unequivocally announced that he believed that Putin had decided to invade and that this belief was based on US intelligence. He narrowed the timeframe to “the coming week – in the coming days,” he made it clear that Putin’s plan was not a limited incursion but instead that “they will target Ukraine’s capital.”¹⁰³

The night before, however, the US Senate was unable to pass punishing sanctions against Russia over a disagreement among Republicans and Democrats on the timing of the sanctions. Republicans sought to impose a pre-emptive sanctions package, but Democrats unified behind the Biden administration’s plan to stay united with allies on a *reactive* sanctions regime implemented only after Russia took new military action. Ultimately, they could only agree on a non-binding rebuke of Putin’s actions.¹⁰⁴ Zelensky strongly agreed with the Republican position urging the West to issue immediate sanctions and not wait until an invasion began, saying, “We don’t need your sanctions after...parts of our country will be occupied.”¹⁰⁵

In Ukraine, shelling in the Donbas intensified, and separatist leaders began evacuating women and children, claiming Ukraine was preparing to attack. Washington claimed such a

¹⁰² Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS), “Russia’s Reaction to U.S. Response on Security Guarantees,” February 17, 2022, <https://tass.ru/politika/13744013>.

¹⁰³ Joseph R. Biden Jr., “Remarks by President Biden Providing an Update on Russia and Ukraine,” White House, February 18, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/18/remarks-by-president-biden-providing-an-update-on-russia-and-ukraine-2/>.

¹⁰⁴ Catie Edmondson, “Unable to Agree on Russia Sanctions Bill, Senate Settles for a Statement,” *New York Times*, February 18, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/18/us/politics/congress-russia-sanctions.html?searchResultPosition=50>.

¹⁰⁵ Roger Cohen and David E. Sanger, “President Zelensky criticizes the allied response to Russia’s buildup,” *New York Times*, February 19, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/19/world/europe/zelensky-criticizes-the-allied-response-to-russias-buildup.html?searchResultPosition=73>.

move was an excuse for Separatist leaders to invite Russian troops into the region to restore order and act as so-called peacekeepers.¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile, at the Munich Conference, Beijing's Foreign Minister attempted to take a neutral position by calling for continued negotiations to ensure Russia's security and respect Ukrainian territorial integrity.¹⁰⁷ With Zelensky in attendance at the Conference, he was allegedly encouraged not to return to Kyiv and instead establish a "government in exile," but he refused.¹⁰⁸

On the 20th, Putin and Macron had another call together, producing no progress, and Blinken suggested Biden was still willing to meet again with the Russian President. On the 21st, Putin convened a televised Security Council meeting to discuss whether recognizing the Donetsk and Lugansk areas in the Donbas was now appropriate. The awkward exchange between Putin and his foreign intelligence services Director Sergei Naryshkin, occurred at this event. At the end of Naryshkin's comments, he suggested the West "be given a last chance in order for them to force Kiev to make peace and comply with the Minsk Agreements." Putin did not respond well to this statement and began aggressively questioning his intelligence chief's wording until Naryshkin came around to his boss's preferred answer. Interestingly, as Naryshkin became noticeably rattled by Putin's questioning and tone, he mistakenly responded, "I support the proposal to have the Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics become part of the Russian Federation." Revealingly, that was not the topic of the meeting, which was merely to discuss

¹⁰⁶ Steven Erlanger, "Shelling escalates in eastern Ukraine, as U.S. officials warn of pretexts for a Russian invasion," *New York Times*, February 19, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/19/world/europe/shelling-escalates-in-eastern-ukraine-as-us-officials-warn-of-pretexts-for-a-russian-invasion.html?searchResultPosition=77>.

¹⁰⁷ Chris Buckley, "China's foreign minister calls for new negotiations and respect for 'territorial integrity,'" *New York Times*, February 19, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/19/world/europe/chinas-foreign-minister-calls-for-new-negotiations-and-respect-for-territorial-integrity.html?searchResultPosition=74>.

¹⁰⁸ Ploky, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, 148.

declaring those regions as independent republics, and Putin corrected his intelligence chief accordingly. Notably, several months later, while the war was still raging in September, Putin ultimately annexed both regions.

That evening, Putin held a national address where he spoke at length about the history of Ukraine, reiterating the notion of its artificial creation by the Bolsheviks and his version of Ukrainian events since 2014 and during the most recent crisis. During that address, he officially declared the Donetsk and Lugansk republics independent and sovereign republics and asked the Russian Federal Assembly to ratify a “Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance” with both republics.¹⁰⁹ Putin then proceeded with moving Russian forces into these areas.

Disturbingly, it was revealed on the 21st that Washington had obtained “credible information” that Moscow was “creating lists of identified Ukrainians to be killed or sent to camps following a military occupation” and that “Russian forces will likely use lethal measures to disperse peaceful protests.” This revelation came to light after *The New York Times* obtained a copy of a letter sent by UN Ambassador Crocker to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, on the same day, the US State Department moved all of its diplomatic staff out of Ukraine, which had moved out of Kyiv into Western Ukraine earlier in the crisis.

The UN Security Council convened the next day, and the Western ambassadors condemned Russia for unilaterally recognizing the separatist regions. As a result, Biden and his Western allies announced sanctions, which he said were focused on “two large Russian financial

¹⁰⁹ Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” Kremlin, February 21, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

¹¹⁰ Edward Wong, Julian E. Barnes and Anton Troianovski, “U.S. Says Russia Has a List of Ukrainians to Kill or Detain,” *New York Times*, February 21, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/20/world/europe/us-russia-ukraine-kill-list.html?searchResultPosition=94>.

institutions...on Russian sovereign debt...[and] Russia's elites and their family members."¹¹¹ Moreover, in another sign of imminent war, Ukraine's President activated some of his nation's military reserves in preparation for a wider conflict,¹¹² and the Russian Foreign Ministry announced it was pulling all of its diplomatic staff out of Ukraine.¹¹³ Furthermore, Biden authorized additional military movements to the Baltics and Poland in a show of military support for its allies. The forces included eight F-35 fighter jets, over 30 attack helicopters, and 800 troops already stationed in Europe.¹¹⁴

Finally, on February 24th, Putin addressed the people of Russia in a televised address where he outlined his case for invading Ukraine, and CD #5 was formalized. He claimed the regions, which he had just days earlier unilaterally recognized as independent republics, "have asked Russia for help," and as a result, "I made a decision to carry out a special military operation." He clarified that the mission's purpose would be to "protect people who...have been facing humiliation and genocide" and would seek to "demilitarise and denazify Ukraine."¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Joseph R. Biden Jr., "Remarks by President Biden Announcing Response to Russian Actions in Ukraine," White House, February 22, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/22/remarks-by-president-biden-announcing-response-to-russian-actions-in-ukraine/>.

¹¹² Associated Press, "Ukrainian president says he's activating some reservists, but not ordering full mobilization as Russian threat grows," AP News, February 22, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-ap-news-alert-europe-cc52f95f50a0dd257626e43c84e97d0c>.

¹¹³ The Times of Israel, "Russia pulls diplomatic staff from Ukraine amid escalating tensions," February 22, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/russia-pulls-diplomatic-staff-from-ukraine-amid-escalating-tensions/>.

¹¹⁴ Meghann Myers, "US attack helos, F-35s and infantry heading to Baltics amid Ukraine invasion (militarytimes.com)," February 22, 2022, <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/ukraine/2022/02/22/us-attack-helos-f-35s-and-infantry-heading-to-baltics-amid-ukraine-invasion/>.

¹¹⁵ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," February 24, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

Only minutes after Putin concluded his speech, large explosions occurred near the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, and the full-scale invasion was underway.¹¹⁶ After the first day of the invasion, President Zelensky addressed the nation. However, his tone on NATO membership and neutrality had shifted dramatically:

“Today we heard from Moscow that they still want to talk. They want to talk about Ukraine’s neutral status. I tell all the partners of our state: now is an important moment - the fate of our country is being decided. I ask them: are you with us? They answer that they are with us. But they are not ready to take us to the alliance. Today, I asked the twenty-seven leaders of Europe whether Ukraine will be in NATO. I asked directly. Everyone is afraid. They do not answer. And we are not afraid of anything. We are not afraid to defend our state. We are not afraid of Russia. We are not afraid to talk to Russia. We are not afraid to say everything about security guarantees for our state. We are not afraid to talk about neutral status. We are not in NATO now. But the main thing - what security guarantees will we have? And what specific countries will give them?”¹¹⁷

Zelensky’s comments reflect his frustration with his and fellow citizens’ situation. They had been making incremental progress toward meeting NATO membership requirements for years, but the changes were not fast enough. More notably, he declares that Russia had reached out to his government to discuss Kyiv’s inclination for declaring neutrality, and Zelensky’s response above was, “We are not afraid to talk about neutral status.” This represents a clear departure from his government’s position during the crisis and reinforces the observation that his pre-war decision, and this study’s CD #4, was to stay on the path toward NATO. Only after the invasion had begun did he begin to entertain the possibility of pursuing neutrality if that would achieve a cease-fire.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Evan Hill, Dmitriy Khavin and Malachy Browne, “Video of Large Explosions Near Kharkiv, Ukraine,” *New York Times*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/europe/100000008221157/video-explosions-ukraine.html?searchResultPosition=168>.

¹¹⁷ Volodymyr Zelensky, “Address by the President to Ukrainians at the end of the first day of Russia’s attacks,” Official website of the President of Ukraine, February 25, 2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zvernennya-prezidenta-do-ukrayinciv-naprikinci-pershogo-dnya-73149>.

¹¹⁸ Two sources indicated the agreement was reached just days after the invasion began, and the third source suggested it occurred before the invasion. The Kremlin denies any deal was ever presented, and Ukrainian leadership has never confirmed a specific draft deal was agreed upon from their side. Nevertheless, based on Zelensky’s public comments regarding openness to neutrality as the war began, it remains possible that a deal was

Summary

As outlined above, the key events of the Russo-Ukrainian pre-war crisis reveal a linear and tragic path toward war. As Russia pressed its demands, Washington, Brussels, and Kyiv remained firmly opposed to any tangible shifts in their NATO policies or ambitions for membership. The West and Ukraine remained primarily unified in their opposition and messaging despite some tensions between Kyiv and Washington regarding the sense of urgency behind their warnings and their effects on Ukrainian society. It is unknown if Putin would have still invaded had the West fully acquiesced to Putin's NATO-related demands, Washington threatened military retaliation, or Kyiv unilaterally abandoned its aspiration of NATO membership. Nevertheless, the impatience of Putin to maintain leverage over Ukraine and the intransigence observed on both sides eliminated any viable off-ramps or reasonable hopes for de-escalation.

In the next Chapter, we will analyze the five critical decisions outlined above to determine which decision framework most accurately predicts the choices observed by each of the three presidents.

authorized by the Ukrainian President and presented to Putin. See "Exclusive: As war began, Putin rejected a Ukraine peace deal recommended by aide," Reuters, September 14, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/exclusive-war-began-putin-rejected-ukraine-peace-deal-recommended-by-his-aide-2022-09-14/>.

Chapter 5 – Theory Testing and Analysis

Introduction

This chapter tests the four theories hypothesized to have played a role in eliminating the conciliatory options during the crisis. The following discussion will employ a mixed approach of qualitative and quantitative measures to determine which theory(s) are most closely aligned with the decisions made during the crisis. As discussed in Chapter 3, the decision strategies will be evaluated using a modified version of the Applied Decision Analysis (ADA)¹ methodology and its decision matrix to enable hypothesis testing.

Recall in Chapter 4 that the three Presidents made numerous decisions, but only five were considered critical decisions (CDs) in that they had the potential to shift the overall outcome of the crisis. In chronological order, the CDs were: CD #1: Putin decided to initiate the crisis with an attempt to coerce NATO. CD #2: At the start of the crisis, Biden decided to pre-emptively eliminate the option of any involvement of US forces. CD #3: Biden rejected all of Putin's NATO-related demands. CD #4: Zelensky decided to stay on a path of NATO membership. CD #5: Putin decided to invade Ukraine.

Each of these decision theories and the five critical decisions could be effectively evaluated through qualitative methods alone. However, the quantitative analysis adds a complementary perspective and aids in identifying discrepancies within the qualitatively derived

¹ This study adopts and highly modifies the applied decision analysis (ADA) decision matrix created by Alex Mintz. The ADA matrix is modified by producing two matrices for every alternative to allow for the incorporation of Expected Utility and Prospect Theory calculations. Moreover, the rating scale is modified from a -10 to +10 to a 1-9 scale in order to reduce variations in values by different analysts and to aid efforts intended to replicate this study's results. For an example of the original ADA and its procedures, see Alex Mintz, "Applied decision analysis: Utilizing poliheuristic theory to explain and predict foreign policy and national security decisions." *International Studies Perspectives* 6, no. 1 (2005): 94-98.

conclusions. Consequently, the bulk of the following discussion will be presented qualitatively, while the quantitative calculations and values are presented in the footnotes and appendix.

Importantly, particular phrases will be italicized throughout the analysis to ensure consistency across language and numerical values to cue the reader that a quantitative value has been assigned according to the pre-determined values associated with the term.² Each time an alternative's dimension receives a numerical rating, it is presented in the footnotes according to a specific notation.³ Additionally, when assigning probability ratings, which are required for Expected Utility Theory (EUT) calculations, the specific language used in the body of the analysis will correspond to a percentage range and then be precisely identified in the footnotes.⁴

After each qualitative examination of a CD and its alternatives, a preference table is presented at the end of the section, which details the preference ranking order predicted for each theory. The findings are discussed to identify discrepancies among the theories compared to real-world observations. A complete evaluation of the results and their implications will occur in the next and final chapter.

Lastly, one of the chief criticisms of quantitatively evaluating complex problems by assigning values to various dimensions is the subjectivity involved in the selection process. This

² The specific terms used for assigning dimensional implication ratings and their associated numerical values are as follows: *highly positive* (9); *positive* (8); *somewhat positive* (7); *marginally positive* (6); *no expected effect* (5); *marginally negative* (4); *somewhat negative* (3); *negative* (2); *highly negative* (1).

³ The implication rating notation schema is as follows: First is the critical decision number CD #1. Second is the acronym associated with the alternative under discussion. Next is the dimension under consideration, which will be represented as P, M, E, and D, which correspond to political, military, economic, and diplomatic. After the dimension letter will be the assigned numeric value followed by either a (P) or (N) representing the positive or negative outcome. For example, CD #1: SQ/P = 7 (P); 3 (N) represents critical decision number one, the status quo alternative, its political dimension, which has a positive outcome value of (7) and negative outcome value of (3).

⁴ This study adopts the probability ratings language used by the U.S. Intelligence community: *Remote* (1-5%); *highly improbable* (5-20%); *improbable* (20-45%); *roughly even odds* (45-55%); *probable* (55-80%); *highly probable* (80-95%); *nearly certain* (95-99%), see "Intelligence Community Directive (ICD) 203, Analytic Standards," Office of the Director of National Intelligence, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICD/ICD_203_TA_Analytic_Standards_21_Dec_2022.pdf.

study conducts a sensitivity test against each theory's predictions within each critical decision to address those concerns. The sensitivity test results give the reader insights into how variances in subjective values would tangibly change the predicted preference rankings. For example, when a reader sees *very-low-sensitivity* (VLS), it indicates that at least a 30% change in total value range for each dimensional rating in the alternative's positive outcome is required *before* the second-highest preferred alternative overtakes the first ranked. This would effectively result in raising the overall implication category by two levels. For example, if a dimension's alternative was assigned a *somewhat positive* rating, a 30% increase would move past the *positive* rating and into the *highly positive* category.

Conversely, *very-high-sensitivity* (VHS) signifies that a 10% increase to all four of the second-ranked alternative's positive dimensions would change the preference ranking order. The numerical value is just shy of an entire category shift. Between the two categories above are *high sensitivity* (HS), *moderately sensitive* (MS), and *low sensitivity*.⁵ Such a confidence system adds

⁵ The sensitivity ranking procedures and weights are as follows for Rational Choice (RC): *very-high-sensitivity* adds (.9) to each dimension in the second-ranked alternative, which results in a 3.6 net increase. Even if the value is already at the highest rating (9), an additional (.9) is added to the field. The value (.9) represents 10% of the total range for each dimension, i.e., each dimension has a possible range of 1-9 (.9=10%). If the cumulative effect of the added values moves the alternative into the first-ranked position, then the theory's original preference ranking prediction is considered *very high-sensitivity* (VHS). The same procedure is followed for the remaining sensitivity levels in the following increments: *High-Sensitivity* (HS) 1.35=15%, *moderate-sensitivity* (MS) 1.8=20%, *low-sensitivity* (LS) 2.25=25%, *very-low-sensitivity* (VLS) 2.7=30%. Poliheuristic Theory (PH) follows the same procedure; however, if all alternatives except for the predicted one were eliminated in the first stage due to PH's decision rule to pre-emptively remove any alternative with negative political implications, then the highest scoring alternative among those which had a negative political rating, will follow the procedure above until the political dimension becomes positive *and* the total score for that alternative surpasses the first ranked alternative originally predicted. At that point, a sensitivity category may be assigned. The sensitivity test for Prospect Theory is the same as the one described above for RC, except that depending on the domain of the decision-maker, the values inputted will be decreased instead of increased to reduce or increase the variance in outcome appropriately. Still, the values, increments, and sensitivity categories are the same. For Expected Utility (EUT), the same process as RC is followed. However, since EUT has the added variable of probabilities, the second-ranked dimensional values are increased simultaneously with the alternative's overall probability levels in 10% increments. Thus, if there is no change in preference ordering after raising each of the dimensional ratings by (.9), the probability for outcome success and failure must also be raised and lowered by 10%, respectively. The analyst can proceed to the next sensitivity level only after adjusting both measures, and no preference shift occurs. Probability increments increase by 10% for each corresponding sensitivity category, i.e., VHS = 10%, HS = 20%, MS = 30%, LS = 40%, and VLS = 50%. The maximum probability of success for any alternative is capped at 99%.

transparency and credibility to the findings and mitigates concerns about the degree to which the subjective assignment of values skews the overall results. Indeed, one would expect small and sometimes even moderate differences in values chosen by various scholars. However, when considering LS and VLS rankings, those levels of individual variations are unlikely to have a tangible effect.

Determining Static Dimensions, Weights, and Domains

Central to each matrix are *dimensions*, dimension *weights*, *alternatives*, *implications*, and *ratings* for each alternative. In addition, a risk index and the decision-makers domain are also provided to evaluate prospect theory (PT) and expected utility scores for EUT.⁶ As discussed in Chapter 3, dimensions and their associated weights reflect the ideal *preferences* of each leader, while the implications and ratings assigned to each alternative incorporate the leader's *perceptions* of his domestic and international *constraints* and *incentives*. Finally, the composite scored matrix reveals the rank order preferences for the four theories, which represent the leader's aggregate perceptions, preferences, and constraints.

The domain, dimensions, and dimensional weights will remain unchanged for each President for every CD. Conversely, alternatives, ratings, expected utilities, and associated risk indexes will change for each CD as they are unique to the decision. What follows is an explanation of each President's static dimensions, weights, and domains based on an analysis of their perceptions and preferences.

The ADA methodology is a multi-dimensional framework; therefore, each President will have one specific dimensional criterion identified in the following general domains: diplomatic,

⁶ Leaders will be placed into either a domain of gains or losses. See chapter 2 for a discussion of Prospect Theory.

military, economic, and political. Undoubtedly, more than one criteria in each of the four dimensions are relevant to each President. However, the goal of the matrix is to represent the most significant goal within each dimension to achieve a necessary balance between simplicity and accuracy.

President Putin

The political dimension intends to account for the implications of the leader's political survival for each alternative under consideration. This study adopts the assumptions and conclusions of *Selectorate Theory* that all political leaders are instrumentally rational and, therefore, principally motivated to remain in power.⁷ Accordingly, the political dimension will be weighted the highest for both Putin and the other three presidents.⁸

Generally, for autocrats, a leader can involuntarily lose their position of power in three ways. The first two come from within the state through popular uprisings or the elites removing or killing the incumbent. The third is external to the state and occurs less often than the other two but involves being removed by a foreign power after losing a war or a foreign-backed coup. Therefore, like most autocrats, Putin seeks to diminish domestic opposition to his regime, which includes suppressing public unrest and ensuring the elites who keep him in power are satisfied.

Economically, Putin shares the same goal as the other two presidents, and for that matter, all national leaders, which is to maintain stable macroeconomic conditions at a minimum. For both autocracies and, to a greater extent, democracies, economic stability and a lack thereof largely correlate to a leader's popularity and overall support. In the 21st century, multiple leaders

⁷ Recall that *Instrumental rationality* assumes each person is making decisions based on what they think is in their best interest. Conversely, *value rationality* is focused on choosing what is right according to one's values, even if doing so negatively affects one's self-interest. See Chapter 2 for a discussion of instrumental rationality and Selectorate Theory.

⁸ Political (P) Weight (W) $P/W = (1)$.

of democracies have lost power due to deteriorating economic conditions.⁹ Similarly, the Arab Spring, which began in 2011, was motivated mainly by stagnant or deteriorating economic conditions in mostly autocratic states, leading to widespread protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Bahrain. Because a significant decline in economic conditions is strongly correlated to shifts in power, the economic dimension will be weighted the second highest for Putin.¹⁰

Militarily, the Russian President's overarching goal was to prevent NATO's presence and expansion in its near-abroad, particularly in Ukraine and Georgia. He made this position clear in his speech to the Duma in 2014, in speeches in 2021 and 2022 before the conflict,¹¹ and then again in his demands to NATO in December 2021 when he sought a ban on NATO forces and weapons in member states who joined the alliance after May 1997 and a ban on Ukraine entering the alliance.¹² As discussed in Chapter 2, Putin's alarm concerning NATO's growing influence was not out of a genuine concern for Russian national security but for its potential to undermine his grip on power.¹³ The reason is that alliance members are harder to influence and intimidate

⁹ Examples include President Rúa of Argentina in 2001, President Rousseff of Brazil in 2016, Greek Prime Minister Tsipras in 2015, Iceland's Prime Minister Haarde in 2008, and Prime Minister Berlusconi of Italy in 2011.

¹⁰ $E/W = (.9)$.

¹¹ Vladimir Putin, "Vladimir Putin addressed State Duma deputies, Federation Council members, heads of Russian regions and civil society representatives in the Kremlin," The Kremlin, March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/>; Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," Kremlin, July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>; and Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," Kremlin, February 21, 2022, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

¹² The Kremlin, "Agreement on measures to ensure the security of The Russian Federation and member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," December 17, 2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en.

¹³ See also Edelman and Kramer when they wrote during the crisis, "Putin invokes NATO enlargement as a convenient excuse when his real fear is the emergence of successful, democratic, Western-oriented countries along Russia's borders—especially Ukraine." Eric S. Edelman and David J. Kramer, "Keep NATO's Door Open to Ukraine: Washington Shouldn't Grant Putin the Sphere of Influence He Wants," Foreign Affairs, January 31, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-01-31/keep-natos-door-open-ukraine>.

and are more likely to consolidate their democracies and potentially flourish economically. Such developments potentially undermine popular Russian support for Putin if they see their neighbors' freedoms and prosperity while protected under NATO's umbrella against Russian threats. Nevertheless, the risk posed by NATO expansion poses a longer-term erosive threat to Putin's regime, whereas economic instability can manifest relatively quickly and is harder to manage. Consequently, the military dimension is weighted below economic concerns but still given relatively high importance.¹⁴

Finally, Putin's track record has demonstrated that he weighs the diplomatic implications of his actions the least of the four dimensions, mainly when it affects his ties with Western nations. Throughout Putin's twenty years in power, he has steadily moved Russia away from democracy and firmly into a personalist autocracy. He has attempted to assassinate opposition figures on foreign and Russian soil,¹⁵ imprisoned his domestic critics,¹⁶ interfered in foreign elections,¹⁷ and forcibly seized and illegally annexed Crimea.¹⁸ Aside from the West, however,

¹⁴ $M/W = (.8)$.

¹⁵ For an analysis on the poisoning of Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny see Tim Lister, Clarissa Ward and Sebastian Shukla, "Alexey Navalny: CNN-Bellingcat investigation identifies Russian specialists who trailed Putin's nemesis" CNN, December 15, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/14/europe/russia-navalny-agents-bellingcat-ward/index.html>; and for a summary of Russians suspected of being poisoned by the Kremlin see "Russians hit by suspected toxic poisonings," Al Jazeera, August 21, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/21/russians-hit-by-suspected-toxic-poisonings>.

¹⁶ For a list of prominent Russian critics who have been imprisoned see, Mark Trevelyan, "Vladimir Kara-Murza joins growing list of Vladimir Putin critics facing long jail terms," Reuters, April 17, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kara-murza-becomes-latest-putin-opponent-get-long-jail-term-2023-04-17/>.

¹⁷ For investigative findings concerning Putin authorizing Russian interference in U.S. elections see "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election," Senate Committee on Intelligence United States Senate, November 10, 2020, <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/publications/report-select-committee-intelligence-united-states-senate-russian-active-measures>; and "Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections," Office of the Director of National Intelligence, March 10, 2021, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf>.

¹⁸ "General Assembly Adopts Resolution Calling upon States Not to Recognize Changes in Status of Crimea Region," United Nations, March 27, 2014, <https://press.un.org/en/2014/ga11493.doc.htm>.

Putin does value diplomatic relations with its strategic partners and like-minded autocracies, including Kazakhstan, Syria, Belarus, and China. India, while democratic, is also a significant trading partner, especially in military sales, although volume to New Dehli has been decreasing in recent years, while exports to China are increasing substantially.¹⁹

In addition to arms sales, the importance of China cannot be understated, as was demonstrated when Putin traveled to Beijing just before it hosted the Winter Olympics to sign the so-called “no limits” treaty. It is unknown if Putin discussed his plans to invade Ukraine with Xi. However, what remains clear is that he wished to secure closer security and economic ties with Beijing amid the crisis, ensuring Beijing would serve as an essential trading partner if Putin decided to invade and the threatened sanctions from the West were enacted. Therefore, the diplomatic criterion for Putin will focus on implications related to strengthening Russia’s partnership with China but will be weighted below the other dimensions in relative importance.²⁰

With Putin’s specific dimensional criteria and weighting now established, the last static factor to select is the perceived domain of reference, in which Putin placed himself so we can effectively test the predictions of prospect theory (PT). For all three leaders, the neutral reference point will be the status quo. If the status quo is acceptable, then the President will be placed into a domain of gains, but if unacceptable, in a domain of losses.²¹ In addition to the reasons

¹⁹ According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), “Just under two-thirds of Russian arms exports went to three states in 2018–22: India (31 percent), China (23 percent) and Egypt (9.3 percent). India was also the largest recipient of Russian arms in 2013–17, but exports to India decreased by 37 percent between the two periods. In contrast, exports to China (+39 percent) and Egypt (+44 percent) increased within the same time frame. See “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2022,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2023, 5, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/2303_at_fact_sheet_2022_v2.pdf.

²⁰ $D/W = (.5)$, which is 30% less than the military dimension.

²¹ See Chapter 2, discussion on Prospect Theory on the use of the status quo as a reference point in international relations and the implications of domain placement.

previously discussed in Chapter 2, there are several reasons Putin viewed the status quo, concerning NATO and Kyiv, as an unacceptable and almost certain loss. In 2019, the Ukrainian constitution was amended by its parliament by an overwhelming majority to reflect the nation's strategic aspirations to join the EU and NATO and designated the President as the guarantor of its implementation.²² Moreover, while President Zelensky remained somewhat moderated regarding NATO integration during his 2019 Presidential campaign, his comments shifted dramatically in early 2021 to a firmly pro-NATO position, which some attribute to the spring 2021 war scare when Russia massed troops along the Ukrainian border.²³ Additionally, Putin saw his leverage to influence Ukrainian politics being diminished after Zelensky ordered the closure of several Russian-funded television channels.

Furthermore, despite annexing Crimea, Ukraine continued toward greater integration with the West by adopting NATO military standards, increasing their combat-ready troops from 6,000 in 2014 to 145,000 in January 2022, and receiving substantial assistance from Brussels and Washington.²⁴ Indeed, between 2014 and the start of the war, the US alone provided \$2.3 billion in security assistance.²⁵ Moreover, Washington and Kyiv signed the U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership on November 10, 2021.²⁶ Additionally, NATO's 2008 Bucharest

²² The amendment was passed 334 – 17 see “Ukrainian Parliament Passes Constitutional Amendment To Reflect EU, NATO Aspirations,” Radio Free Europe. February 7, 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-parliament-passes-constitutional-amendment-to-reflect-eu-nato-aspirations/29756695.html>; and Chapter V, Article 102 of the Ukrainian Constitution, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/44a280124.pdf>.

²³ Mykola Bielieskov, “The Russian and Ukrainian Spring 2021 War Scare,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (2021): 7, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep35091>.

²⁴ Andrew S. Bowen, “Ukrainian Armed Forces,” *Congressional Research Service*. January 26, 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11862>.

²⁵ Christina L. Arabia, Andrew S. Bowen, and Cory Welt, “U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine,” February 27, 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12040>.

²⁶ “U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership.” United States Department of State, Media Note. November 21, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-ukraine-charter-on-strategic-partnership>.

Declaration, which stated that Ukraine would become a member of NATO, was reiterated in the June 2021 NATO Summit.²⁷ Further, Putin was likely aware that he was losing the hearts and minds of the Ukrainian people, as polling demonstrated that a growing majority (52.7%) of its citizens sought membership in the alliance. However, an even more substantial majority of Ukrainians (59%) did not believe that “Russia would end its aggressive policy towards Ukraine if Kyiv abandoned its aspirations to join EU and NATO.” Finally, and perhaps most telling, when asked if the EU continues to refuse a membership prospect to Ukraine, the majority (63.1%) preferred to either not join any economic forum, deepen relations with the US, or still demand membership in the EU. In contrast, a tiny minority (7.8%) thought it was best to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)²⁸ or increase cooperation with China (4.5%).²⁹

Consequently, Putin was faced with two prospects prior to the start of the crisis. First, he could accept an almost certain loss that Ukraine would continue to move away from Moscow, receive support from NATO, and perhaps even join the alliance in the next decade. On the other hand, he could choose a riskier prospect to escalate the issue into a militarized crisis and, in

²⁷ See “Bucharest Summit Declaration issued by NATO Heads of State and Government (2008),” NATO, April 3, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm; and “Brussels Summit Communiqué issued by NATO Heads of State and Government (2021),” NATO, June 14, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm.

²⁸ Putin established the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in 2015 with early members Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan. However, Putin has long considered Ukraine’s membership in the EEU as an important step in expanding its regional potency. Indeed, when President Yanukovich backed away from signing an agreement with the EU and pivoted towards the EEU, Ukrainian public protests erupted and forced him to flee the country in February 2014, and his government was replaced. See Richard Sakwa, *Russian Politics and Society*, 5th ed. Routledge, 2020, 525.

²⁹ In 2021, 52.7% of Ukrainians believed that Ukraine should become a NATO member, compared to 48.4% in 2020. See “Diplomacy-2022: Foreign Policy Expectations of Ukrainian Society,” New Europe Center, December 21, 2021, <https://www.promoteukraine.org/diplomacy-2022-foreign-policy-expectations-of-ukrainian-society>, 7, 11, 23; and others made the linkage that after Crimea and Russia’s actions in the Donbas “support for joining NATO among Ukrainians has jumped to roughly 60 percent.” Eric S. Edelman and David J. Kramer, “Keep NATO’s Door Open to Ukraine: Washington Shouldn’t Grant Putin the Sphere of Influence He Wants,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 31, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-01-31/keep-natos-door-open-ukraine>.

doing so, potentially eliminate the inevitable loss by creating an acceptable status quo.³⁰ As a result, this study suggests Putin framed the Ukrainian situation in this way and thus placed himself in a domain of losses.

From an approval rating standpoint, there is also cause to suggest Putin viewed himself in a domain of losses. Throughout Putin's time in power, his approval ratings have gone through several distinct stages from which he has undoubtedly learned important lessons.³¹ His invasion of Georgia garnered him an eight-point approval rating boost and, at the time, an all-time high rating of 88%. However, the 2008 world financial crisis and a sharp decline in oil prices eroded those numbers significantly, falling to a new all-time low of 61 percent by November 2013. A few months later, Putin seized Crimea and then annexed it in March 2014. By June 2014, his approval rating rose to 86 percent, and his approvals remained in the 80th percentile³² until May 2018.³³

After four years of impressive ratings, Putin made the highly unpopular decision to raise the age for Russians to receive a retirement pension. As a result, his approval ratings precipitously fell to pre-Crimea levels, where they fluctuated in the 60th percentile, and remained there until the COVID-19 pandemic, when his ratings achieved a new all-time low of 59 percent

³⁰ Similarly, when confronted with an unacceptable status quo in 2014, after Ukrainian President Yanukovych was removed from power, Putin was "faced with the loss of his protégé in Kyiv, Ukraine's almost certain signing of an association agreement with the EU," and as a result "decided to take the peninsula by force." Plochy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, 106.

³¹ All of Putin's following polling numbers are derived from the Levada-Center, widely considered the only independent entity allowed to conduct polling in Russia. See "Indicators," Levada-Center, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings>.

³² February 2018 was the only month his numbers dipped below 80 percent between March 2014 and April 2018, dropping to 76 percent and then returning to 80 percent in March.

³³ After his military intervention in Syria, he also received a four-point boost in October 2015. Notably, oil prices crashed at the start of 2015.

in April of 2020. By the Summer of 2020, his numbers were back in the 60s, remaining there for almost two years until he initiated the Ukraine crisis.

Although approval ratings in the 60s are typically viewed positively by political leaders, Putin, who grew accustomed to four years of being in the 80s, would likely view being in the 60s as a loss and contribute to his overall view as being in a domain of losses. Indeed, as Prospect Theory suggests, people acclimate more slowly to losses than gains. Finally, after the January 2021 arrest of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, protests erupted in Russia across 185 cities and involved hundreds of thousands of people into February.³⁴ Although Navalny was imprisoned, the protests' scope, duration, and intensity were the largest since 2011, and would have been of concern to Putin and perceived as a negative significant shift in overall public support for his regime.

President Zelensky

As discussed above, this study will adopt the highest weighting for each President concerning the political dimension.³⁵ Unlike Putin, however, Zelensky led a democratic nation, although its institutions were not nearly as consolidated as in the United States. For instance, since 2000, popular uprisings led to ousting of two Ukrainian presidents, first in 2004 during the Orange Revolution and then again due to the EuroMaidan protests in 2014. Moreover, armed nationalist paramilitary groups in Ukraine during the 2021 – 2022 crisis were highly opposed to any compromises with Russia and posed a standing threat to the government in Kyiv if it made

³⁴ Leonid Ragozin, "How Putin made himself Maidan-proof by waging war on Ukraine," Al Jazeera, January 30, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/1/30/how-putin-made-himself-maidan-proof-by-waging-war-on-ukraine>.

³⁵ $P/W = (1)$.

too many concessions to Moscow.³⁶ Therefore, Zelensky, unlike most advanced democracies, had to consider widespread protests and armed uprisings as a threat to his political survival and being voted out during re-election.

Militarily Zelensky's situation was quite challenging. Although occurring under a different presidential administration, Russia forcibly seized and annexed the strategically important Crimean Peninsula in 2014, and a conflict in the Donbas region, fueled by Moscow, has been raging since 2014. The latter was estimated to have caused 51,000 – 54,000 casualties, with over 14,000 killed before the February 2022 Russian invasion.³⁷ Nevertheless, Zelensky's speeches make clear that he viewed Crimea and the Donbas as Ukrainian territory and was working to return them to Kyiv, but through *peaceful* means.³⁸ Interestingly, some have argued that "prolonging war in Donbas means Ukraine can avoid political and economic costs associated with peace."³⁹ Thus, the primary military criterion for Zelensky was not to forcibly

³⁶ Andrew E. Kramer, "Armed Nationalists in Ukraine Pose a Threat Not Just to Russia," *The New York Times*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/world/europe/ukraine-nationalism-russia-invasion.html>.

³⁷ "Conflict-related civilian casualties in Ukraine," United Nations, 27 January 2022, <https://ukraine.un.org/en/168060-conflict-related-civilian-casualties-ukraine>.

³⁸ In a February 2021 speech, Zelensky stated when speaking about Russian aggression in the Donbas that "We will defend our land with or without the support of partners" and that "Crimea and the occupied regions of Donbas will certainly return to Ukraine, but only peacefully." See Volodymyr Zelensky, "Speech by the President of Ukraine at the 58th Munich Security Conference," President of Ukraine Official Website, February 19, 2021, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/vistup-prezidenta-ukrayini-na-58-j-myunhenskij-konferenciyi-72997>. In a December 2021 speech Zelensky stated unequivocally "Donbas is Ukraine," and "this is our state, let's fight for it, for our territories, by all means, all together." See Volodymyr Zelensky, "Speech by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the Verkhovna Rada with the Annual Address on the Internal and External Situation of Ukraine," President of Ukraine Official Website, December 1, 2021, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/vistup-prezidenta-volodimira-zelenskogo-u-verhovnij-radi-zi-71805>.

³⁹ Katharine Quinn-Judge, "Why the Stalemate in Eastern Ukraine Will Likely Hold: Despite the Russian Buildup, the Status Quo Still Serves Both Sides," *Foreign Affairs*, December 15, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2021-12-15/why-stalemate-eastern-ukraine-will-likely-hold>.

recapture Crimea and the Donbas, but to prevent any further erosion of territorial sovereignty, resulting in weighing the military dimension as the second most relevant.⁴⁰

Further, as discussed above, the economic criterion will be the same for each President and centers on maintaining economic stability. However, unlike Putin, Zelensky's economic dimension ranks below that of military objectives, given the loss of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in the Donbas region.⁴¹

Lastly, the diplomatic situation is essential for Zelensky as his hopes for short-term and long-term economic growth and security resided with Western support through closer integration with the EU and NATO. Therefore, alternatives that affect his standing within those economic and military power blocs are highly salient when making decisions. For example, at the February 2021 Munich Security Conference, he was unambiguous that he viewed the 1994 Budapest Memorandum as ineffective and, therefore, implored the attendees to outline a clear timeline for Kyiv's entrance into NATO and detailed specific measures needed to help aid his country against Russian aggression.⁴² Accordingly, the weighting of this dimension is higher relative to Putin's diplomatic dimension, yet still the lowest of Zelensky's three dimensions.⁴³

While Zelensky's diplomatic and military-related dimensions and weightings differed from Putin's, he is similarly considered as being in a domain of losses. Once again, the neutral reference point for evaluating possible prospects (alternatives) is centered on the status quo, which Zelensky felt was unacceptable. While Russia had not lost any of its territory to military

⁴⁰ $M/W = (.9)$.

⁴¹ $E/W = (.8)$.

⁴² Zelensky, "58th Munich Security Conference."

⁴³ $D/W = (.7)$.

force, Ukraine had lost Crimea, and the Donbas region remained contested. Furthermore, although Ukraine's military had increased in size and capability significantly since 2014, it had not changed the situation on the ground in any meaningful way, and Kyiv was still severely outmatched relative to Russia by all objective, tangible measures.⁴⁴ Indeed, at the start of the crisis in early December, even Ukraine's generals feared the worst if Moscow conducted a full-scale invasion, saying, "There are not sufficient military resources for repelling a full-scale attack by Russia if it begins without the support of Western forces."⁴⁵ Moreover, Zelensky's approval ratings were already at all-time lows at 31%.⁴⁶ Consequently, it remains challenging to argue that Zelensky was in any domain other than a loss domain when the crisis was ongoing.

⁴⁴ For example, consider the two countries' simulated War Correlates National Capabilities Index (WCNCI) scores. The national scores are based on the following formula: $WCNCI = (\text{Population} + \text{Urban population} + \text{Iron and steel production} + \text{Energy consumption} + \text{Military personnel} + \text{Military expenditure}) / (\text{World total population} + \text{World urban population} + \text{World iron and steel})$, see National Material Capabilities (v6.0), Correlates of War, <https://correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/national-material-capabilities/>. At the time of this writing, the most current WCNCI data was from 2016, so a simulated score was generated using the same WCNCI formula but with sources that had 2020 and 2021 data. For steel and iron production figures from the World Steel Organization were used, see "World Steel in Figures 2021," <https://worldsteel.org/world-steel-in-figures-2021/#pig-iron-2019-and-2020>; world population data was derived from the United Nations "World Urbanization Prospects," <https://population.un.org/wup/DataQuery/>; and all other data sets were gathered from the CIA World Factbook 2022 version, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/about/archives/2022/>. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita used the WCNCI index scores when calculating state leaders' subjective probabilities for winning a conflict, see Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *The War Trap*. Yale University Press, 1983. Similarly, this study used the simulated scores derived from the sources above to calculate the chances of Russian victory over Ukraine, which resulted in an 88.4% probability of victory. The formula used was: $\text{Chances of Victory} = \text{Russia's WCNCI} / (\text{Russia's WCNCI} + \text{Ukraine's WCNCI})$.

⁴⁵ Gen. Kyrylo O. Budanov, the head of Ukraine's military intelligence service, made this comment. See Michael Schwartz, "Ukraine Commanders Say a Russian Invasion Would Overwhelm Them," *New York Times*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/world/europe/ukraine-military-russia-invasion.html>.

⁴⁶ After being elected, Zelensky had approval ratings in the 70th percentile, but before the Russian invasion in 2022, his numbers were in the low 30th percentile. See Afq Fitri "How President Zelensky's approval ratings have surged," *New Statesman*. March 1, 2022. <https://www.newstatesman.com/chart-of-the-day/2022/03/how-president-zelenskys-approval-ratings-have-surged>.

President Biden

Biden's political dimension will be weighted highest for the abovementioned reasons.⁴⁷ Just as Zelensky, the military dimension will be rated second highest given that Biden had recently suffered an embarrassing withdrawal from Afghanistan only four months earlier. Biden's approval rating suffered after the public and chaotic exit from Kabul. At the beginning of July 2021, he had a 52% approval rating. By September 8, only eight days after the last American plane departed Kabul, his approval rating had dropped seven points to 45%.⁴⁸ Consequently, it is reasonable to assert that it was paramount to avoid costly military engagements after having just ended a two-decade-long war in Afghanistan, which weakened him politically. As such, his criterion for the military dimension during the crisis was to avoid a direct military conflict with Moscow.⁴⁹

From an economic perspective, maintaining a stable economy is highly significant and is weighted just behind the military dimension.⁵⁰ The United States was recovering economically after the pandemic, with unemployment slowly returning to acceptable levels. When Biden was inaugurated in January, the unemployment rate was 6.3%, and by November, 4.2%.⁵¹ Therefore, avoiding any actions that would disrupt the positive trend would have been a central consideration.

⁴⁷ $P/W = (1)$.

⁴⁸ The polling numbers averages of polls during the timeframe selected from the American Research Group, Rasmussen Reports, HarrisX/Harris Poll, YouGov, and Hart Research Associates/Public Opinion Strategies. "How Popular is Joe Biden," FiveThirtyEight, <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/biden-approval-rating/>.

⁴⁹ $M/W = (.9)$.

⁵⁰ $E/W = (.8)$.

⁵¹ "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, <https://www.bls.gov/cps/>.

In the diplomatic dimension, a key goal of Biden's was strengthening the NATO alliance and Washington's role as its leader. During his Presidential campaign, Biden attempted to contrast himself with President Trump, writing, "NATO is at the very heart of the United States' national security, and it is the bulwark of the liberal democratic ideal."⁵² This theme was repeated during his first six months in office and then again at the alliance's summit in Brussels when he stated that "NATO is critically important to us," and he emphasized the essential role Washington serves as the alliance's leader, declaring, "America is back."⁵³ Therefore, Biden's diplomatic criterion related to this crisis was strengthening NATO's resolve and unity after a perceived abandonment of that goal under his predecessor.⁵⁴

Lastly, it is necessary to place Biden in the appropriate domain within the context of Prospect Theory (PT). In contrast to Zelensky and Putin, where the former had materially lost territory, and the latter viewed the democratic and security gains in his near-abroad as a threat to his regime, Biden viewed the status quo as acceptable despite his sinking approval ratings. Indeed, Biden likely viewed his approval ratings as less significant at the time since he was not facing re-election in the immediate future and the mid-terms were almost a year away. Moreover, the U.S. is the world leader across the economic, military, and diplomatic domains, with the world's largest economy, strongest military, and the most expansive network of alliances and partnerships relative to any other state. More specific to Ukraine, neither the Obama administration, in which Biden served as Vice President, nor the Trump administration, nor the

⁵² Biden, Joseph R Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again." *Foreign Affairs*, January 23, 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

⁵³ Sabine Siebold, "NATO adopts tough line on China at Biden's debut summit with alliance," *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nato-welcomes-biden-pivotal-post-trump-summit-2021-06-14/>.

⁵⁴ $D/W = (.6)$. While not as high as Zelensky's rating of the same dimension ($D/W = .7$), it ranks higher than Putin's ($D/W = .5$).

Biden administration considered Ukraine as a vital national interest. Thus, although the situation in Ukraine has been problematic since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, those developments are insufficient to place Biden into a domain of losses, given Washington's overall geopolitical position since the end of the Cold War.

Furthermore, even if Russia invaded Ukraine, Washington would still enjoy continued military dominance in Europe vis-à-vis leadership in NATO and a new unifying fear of Moscow and dependence on Washington among European states, all without posing any risk to US or NATO forces or territory.⁵⁵ Consequently, this study places Biden into a domain of gains for the duration of the crisis.

Theoretical Predictions for Each Critical Decision

Having established the static dimensions, weights, and domains for each President, it is now appropriate to evaluate the alternatives associated with each critical decision (CD) and assign appropriate *implication ratings* for each alternative's dimensional criteria. President Putin and Biden each made two CDs, and President Zelensky one, totaling five CDs to be analyzed. Accordingly, the following presents an analysis of those decisions using the methodology described above and in Chapter 3 to test the predictions of the four decision theories against the observed choices of each President.

In deviating from the standard ADA procedures, two decision matrices are constructed for each alternative, with one assuming a negative outcome and the other with a positive outcome. The *negative and positive matrices* are averaged and entered into a *composite matrix*.

⁵⁵ Berejikian described a hypothetical conflict in 2002, which parallels that of the U.S. (Y) and Russia (X) quite well when he wrote, "the object of dispute between states – say, a piece of territory – has less strategic importance for Y than for X. Indeed, possession of the disputed territory is a necessary condition of an acceptable status quo for X, but his is not so for Y." Consequently, Berejikian placed Y into a gains frame and was therefore risk averse. See Jeffrey D. Berejikian, "A cognitive theory of deterrence," *Journal of Peace Research* 39, no. 2 (2002): 177.

The Rational Choice (RC) framework preference predictions are ranked from the highest to the lowest total scores for each alternative on the composite matrix. Poliheuristic (PH) theoretical framework will follow the same decision rule *after* eliminating all alternatives with negative ratings in the political dimension. If all alternatives pose a negative rating for the political dimension, the alternative with the lowest negative rating and the highest overall score is selected as the first preference.

For the Expected Utility Theory (EUT) framework, the negative and positive matrix scores are used as the utilities for each outcome for the alternative under consideration. Then, the leader's expected and subjective probabilities are assigned to each outcome using an EUT equation, and the expression is solved.⁵⁶ The above process is repeated for each alternative to produce the preference rankings for EUT, from highest to lowest utilities.

Finally, the Prospect Theory (PT) framework utilizes the same values assigned to each alternative, but preference orders are based on a combination of the leader's domain of reference (gains or losses) and the risk index scores. Subtracting the alternative's total negative and positive matrix scores determines the degree of outcome variance and the risk index relative to the other alternatives. Accordingly, the riskiest alternatives have the most significant potential outcome variance. Those in the domain of gains prefer the lowest-risk alternatives and the reverse when in a domain of losses.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ The simplest expression of the expected utility formula is $EU = \sum P(x) U(x)$, where EU = expected utility; \sum = summation of all outcomes; $P(x)$ = probability of outcome x; $U(x)$ = utility of outcome x.

⁵⁷ This study acknowledges that the four decision theories being tested are not monolithic. Thus, the models used in this chapter are representative frameworks based on the key tenets of the underlying decision theory.

Critical Decision (CD) #1: Putin – Crisis Initiation to Coerce NATO (CN)

Recall that this study begins its analysis on November 10th, before the official start of the crisis on December 7th, when Putin outlined several demands during his two-hour videoconference with Biden. Therefore, the first critical decision (CD) was Putin's choice to escalate his Ukrainian and NATO issues into a militarized crisis. The Russian President faced a fundamental challenge of what to do about Ukraine's growing relationship and integration with NATO and had three different but viable options. First, maintain the status quo (SQ), which is to say, continue supporting separatist fighters in the Donbas and maintain diplomatic and economic pressure on Kyiv to move away from the EU and NATO. Second, escalate military involvement in the Donbas (ED) in terms of increased supplies, lethal aid, and increasing the number of Russian military forces on the ground. Third, attempt a gambit at diplomatic coercion against NATO (CN).

This study assumes a positive outcome for SQ, and ED is defined as Ukraine moving away from NATO integration and adopting a non-aligned military position. In contrast, a negative outcome would entail continued cooperation and training with NATO and aspiring for alliance membership. On the other hand, CN assumes a positive outcome would include NATO closing its doors to future expansion to Ukraine and a negative result as keeping their open-door policy intact.

We begin with considering the status quo (SQ) alternative and its political implications for Putin on both the positive and negative outcomes. It is reasonable to assert that if Putin witnessed Ukraine ceasing further collaboration with Brussels, he would perceive the resulting implications as *somewhat positive* for the political criterion of diminishing opposition to his regime. On the other hand, although abandoning its membership aspirations with NATO would

likely enhance the perception of Putin and Russia achieving gains in its near-abroad, it would likely only bring with it limited positive effects, especially since the alternative does not include a move away from democracy in Kyiv or necessarily closer ties with Moscow.

Conversely, with a negative outcome, we can expect more significant long-term pressure on Putin's regime if Ukraine drifts closer to NATO and eventually joins the alliance. Assuming Ukraine continues on a path of democracy and achieves its security goals with NATO membership, it would serve as an alternative way of operating for the Russian people with whom they share a closer cultural and religious identity than any other state in Russia's near-abroad. Therefore, Putin would likely expect a *somewhat negative* outcome concerning the goal of diminishing opposition.⁵⁸

In the economic dimension, we would expect Putin to believe there would be a marginal gain in legitimate trade and cross-border corruption opportunities if Kyiv moved away from NATO and potentially a more pliant government in Kyiv came to power. Accordingly, the implications would probably be only *marginally positive*. Alternatively, a negative outcome would essentially result in a further drain on resources committed to the Donbas but no conceivable opportunities for more significant trade. In fact, with greater Ukrainian integration with NATO, Putin would likely expect pro-Russian parties and politicians to lose influence in Kyiv and, in turn, Putin's ability to influence the direction of Ukrainian-Russian trade relations. The outcome would, therefore, undoubtedly be negative but on the lower end of the *somewhat negative*, given that most exports to Ukraine were energy, and there would not necessarily be a reduction in need simply because Kyiv achieved greater integration with NATO.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ CD #1: SQ/P = 7 (P); 3 (N).

⁵⁹ CD #1: SQ/E = 6 (P); 3 (N).

When considering the military criterion of preventing NATO's presence and expansion in Russia's near-abroad, the SQ option holds *positive* implications if Ukraine adopts non-alignment with the current pressure levels from Moscow. Still, the end-state for this alternative does not assume a re-alignment with the Kremlin and, more importantly, would not rule out eventual membership for Georgia. Consequently, while the implications would undoubtedly be positive, they would not be considered highly positive as they would not entirely prevent NATO's expansion near its borders. On the other hand, if the SQ alternative had an unsuccessful outcome with Ukraine continuing on its path toward joining the alliance, then the impact would undoubtedly be considered by Putin as *negative*, considering the amount of political, diplomatic, economic, and military investment⁶⁰ Putin has made since 2014 in attempting to reverse Kyiv's trajectory.⁶¹

Finally, from a diplomatic viewpoint, we would expect Putin to view the SQ's positive outcome of *marginally* advancing his goal to strengthen his partnership with Beijing. It would demonstrate that Putin's steady pressure strategy against Kyiv was at least partially successful. Moreover, it would potentially add utility to deepening a relationship with Putin in the eyes of Xi since he, too, is opposed to growing NATO influence in world affairs. Conversely, in the event of an adverse outcome, it is unlikely to materially change Xi's position of needing to partner with Putin to balance against the more dominant Western powers.⁶² Thus, there would likely be

⁶⁰ Regarding political investment, "Minsk II gave Russia broad autonomy over Donbas," giving Moscow "wide control over Donbas...made Donbas residents eligible for Russian citizenship." Economically, "Moscow planning \$12B investments into Donbas." Quinn-Judge, "Stalemate in Eastern Ukraine."

⁶¹ CD #1: SQ/M = 8 (P); 2 (N).

⁶² Koffman and Kendall-Taylor wrote in the lead-up to the crisis, "China and Russia have formed strategic partnership to compete together against US." Michael Kofman and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, "The myth of Russian decline: Why Moscow will be a persistent power," *Foreign Affairs*, 100 (2021): 142.

no expected effect.⁶³ The discussion above provides the core ratings to evaluate the predictions of all four theories for the SQ alternative. Finally, to calculate PT's risk-index value for the SQ alternative, one must subtract the total values of the positive and negative matrices.⁶⁴

Having arrived at the PT risk-index, only determining Putin's subjective probability of success for the SQ alternative remains to facilitate an EUT calculation.⁶⁵ Using the expressions of probability discussed at the start of this chapter, we assess that Putin expected it was *very unlikely* that Ukraine would move away from closer integration with NATO by continuing to implement the same pressure levels.⁶⁶ Indeed, as described above, the Ukrainian public sentiment continued to favor joining NATO and especially the EU, and the government in Kyiv had taken a hard stance against Moscow concerning the conflict in the Donbas.⁶⁷ As a result, after seven years of fomenting and supporting a separatist conflict and annexing Crimea, the SQ measures had only pushed Ukrainians further from Russia and closer to the West. Thus Putin would not have expected a business-as-usual approach to have shifted Kyiv's trajectory, and thus, a 20% probability is appropriate.⁶⁸

⁶³ CD #1: SQ/D = 6 (P); 5 (N).

⁶⁴ This provides a risk index of 12. Recall that the risk-index is determined by the variance of possible outcomes, with a larger number being higher risk.

⁶⁵ To determine the SQ alternative's EUT for Putin, we input the negative and positive matrix scores as the utilities for each EU outcome and then assign Putin's assessed subjective probability.

⁶⁶ CD #1: SQ/EU = 20% (P); 80% (N). With a 20% success probability, it follows that provides an EU of 12.20 for the SQ alternative.

⁶⁷ Kimmage and Koffman suggest that "Zelensky took a hard run away from Moscow in 2020." Michael Kimmage and Michael Kofman, "Russia Won't Let Ukraine Go Without a Fight: Moscow Threatens War to Reverse Kyiv's Pro-Western Drift," *Foreign Affairs*, November 22, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2021-11-22/russia-wont-let-ukraine-go-without-fight>.

⁶⁸ A 20% possibility of success rests on Zelensky's faltering approval ratings and a possible successor emerging with more sympathetic views toward Moscow.

With the analysis of the SQ alternative complete, only two alternatives remain for CD #1, escalating in the Donbas (ED) and Coerce NATO (CN). Beginning with ED, Putin probably would have viewed a positive outcome as having a *somewhat positive* implication for his political survival and diminishing opposition to his regime. It would be considered entirely positive if the escalation did not require additional Russian resources and likely Russian lives lost, which he would have considered possibly eroding his support. Moreover, while a successful escalation that moved Kyiv towards non-alignment would send a clear message to Putin's political opponents, those gains would be tempered by the likely protracted nature of an escalation and associated costs in treasure and blood.

In contrast, a negative outcome of Ukraine continuing on a path towards NATO integration and membership despite escalating the conflict in the Donbas would be expected by Putin to have *negative* implications.⁶⁹ Expending additional resources while not achieving his desired end-state would make Putin look ineffective and vulnerable to the public and elites, especially considering the two states' sizes and strengths give Russia a significant perceived advantage.⁷⁰

Economically, Putin would have expected a positive result to have come at the cost of additional resources, but after Kyiv shifted towards a more neutral position, Moscow could reduce its resource commitment and escalation. Nevertheless, such an outcome would not likely lead to additional economic revenue through increased trade, considering the escalation would have undoubtedly placed additional strains on the two states' relationship. Moreover, additional Western sanctions would likely materialize with any overt escalation in the Donbas regardless of

⁶⁹ CD #1: ED/P = 7 (P); 2 (N).

⁷⁰ "Russian military at highest level of readiness, mobility, and tech capes in decades." Koffman and Kendall-Taylor, "Myth of Russian Decline."

Ukraine's response. This results in a solidly *negative* economic implication, given the additional costs required to achieve the positive outcome, no additional revenue, and more economic sanctions. While such a threat of economic sanctions would be considered highly negative for most countries, Putin had accumulated over \$620B in foreign reserves to help insulate his economy.⁷¹ On the other hand, after committing additional resources, enduring more sanctions, and still not achieving his desired outcome, the escalation costs would almost certainly be perceived by Putin as a *highly negative* economic result.⁷²

Militarily, success in moving Kyiv towards non-alignment would be viewed as a *positive* development by Putin in his criterion of preventing NATO's expansion in his near-abroad. Again, a successful outcome would not prevent Georgia from joining the alliance, and additional military resources would have to be exhausted to achieve the outcome relative to SQ. Nonetheless, Russia's strategic position in the Donbas would likely be enhanced if its escalation sufficiently moved Kyiv away from NATO. Alternatively, Putin would see a failure to shift Kyiv's relationship with Brussels as *highly negative*.⁷³ The slightly higher negative view – relative to this alternative's positive rating – stems from the resources diverted to escalate the conflict in the Donbas, which did not achieve the desired goal; instead, the situation only worsened.

Finally, in the diplomatic dimension, Putin would expect to view a successful surge and turnabout from Kyiv as enhancing his prestige and effectiveness as an autocrat with his

⁷¹ Adam M. Smith, "SWIFT and Certain Punishment for Russia?: There Are Better Ways to Deter Moscow Than Threatening Its Banking Access," *Foreign Affairs*, January 4, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-01-04/swift-and-certain-punishment-russia>.

⁷² CD #1: ED/E = 2 (P); 1 (N).

⁷³ CD #1: ED/M = 8 (P); 1 (N).

counterpart in Beijing. The bold action would have paid off; therefore, he could expect a *somewhat positive* result related to strengthening his strategic partnership with Beijing. Conversely, a failure after a surge in resources would be viewed as a negative implication by Putin and Xi but likely only *marginally*.⁷⁴

Lastly, from an EUT perspective, it is likely Putin believed an escalation in the Donbas would *improbably*⁷⁵ result in a tangible shift in Kyiv away from NATO. The justification for a higher chance of success than the SQ option stems from Zelensky's declining approval ratings.⁷⁶ Before the crisis, Zelensky's approval ratings were in the low 30th percentile, and it is reasonable to believe that Zelensky would not have gained re-election if the conflict in the Donbas had continued and even worsened. Moreover, a failed Zelensky government would offer an opportunity for Putin to help pro-Moscow Ukrainian parties gain a more significant share of parliament and better position some of his closer allies in the Ukrainian political system.

The final alternative to analyze for CD #1 is the coerce NATO (CN) option. With hindsight, we know this is the alternative Putin ultimately chose, but we must be careful not to let that influence the ratings and values assigned to the alternative's dimensions. This alternative is meant to achieve the same goal as the others but goes about it differently. Whereas the SQ and ED alternatives directly pressured Kyiv to adopt a non-aligned status, the CN alternative sought to circumvent Ukraine entirely and demand that NATO bindingly agree to ban Ukraine from joining, among other demands.⁷⁷ Accordingly, a positive outcome for this alternative is for

⁷⁴ CD #1: ED/D = 7 (P); 4 (N).

⁷⁵ CD #1: ED/EUT = 40% (P); 60% (N).

⁷⁶ Fitri, "President Zelensky's approval ratings."

⁷⁷ The draft agreement Moscow presented to the West contained nine substantive articles. Article 1 required that each party "shall not strengthen their security individually, within international organizations, military alliances

NATO to agree to a permanent ban on Ukraine and, ideally, but not necessarily, further expansion, and an unfavorable outcome with NATO keeping its doors open.

From a political standpoint, successfully coercing NATO into banning Ukraine would have sent a strong message to those inside Russia, bolstering the Kremlin-crafted narrative that Putin was a bulwark against the corrupt, aggressive, and decadent West. Moreover, it would have sent a signal to those in Russia who oppose Putin that the West is unwilling to push back on Putin when he flexes his military might and threatens to wreak havoc on the stability of Europe. Therefore, a *positive* rating is assigned for a successful outcome.

However, an unsuccessful coercion attempt could lead to a domestic perception of the West having called Putin's bluff. Consequently, Putin would likely perceive such an outcome as constraining his freedom to exit the crisis without incurring reputational costs unless he chose to take military action. Short of military escalation, he could abandon his demand for a complete ban on Ukrainian membership and settle for a less-than-ideal compromise. This also would have been seen as a sign of weakness by those in Russia who oppose Putin.

Importantly, had Putin already decided to invade Ukraine, regardless of the West's responses to his demands, his perception of a failed coercive attempt would likely not be considered highly negative since it would have only been a ploy to give his forces time to fully mass and give the appearance of attempting a diplomatic option. However, the U.S. intelligence

or coalitions at the expense of the security of other Parties.” Article 2 stated that each party needed to inform the other about military exercises and establish a “hotline.” Article 3 affirms that neither party considers the other “adversaries.” Article 4 restricts “military forces and weaponry” deployment to NATO countries that joined after May 1997. Article 5 prohibits short and intermediate-range missiles from being placed close enough to reach any parties. Article 6 prevents further enlargement of NATO and specifically mentions Ukraine. Article 7 states that no NATO member can “conduct military activity on the territory of Ukraine...other states in Eastern Europe...South Caucasus and in Central Asia.” Article 8 reaffirms the role of the UN in maintaining peace. Finally, Article 9 allows each signatory to withdraw from the agreement after 30 days notice. See “Agreement on measures to ensure the security of The Russian Federation and member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, December 17, 2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en.

community concluded that Putin had not decided to invade until February.⁷⁸ Moreover, Putin was willing to engage in diplomacy with Western leaders repeatedly.⁷⁹ Hence, this study suggests he had not pre-decided to invade Ukraine.⁸⁰ Thus, we can assign a negative rating to the political dimension when considering the impacts of a failed coercion attempt and not being fully committed to an invasion.⁸¹

Economically, Putin likely expected to achieve some economic gains if NATO were to ban Ukraine since Kyiv would have undoubtedly felt abandoned by the alliance and, out of necessity, looked to mend relations with Moscow, in turn, leading to greater economic leverage over Ukraine for Putin and his elites to exploit. Nonetheless, those gains would likely be limited at best and only *somewhat positive*. Alternatively, a failure in coercion would have only posed an economic risk to Putin had the West decided to enact pre-emptive sanctions, as some suggested.⁸² However, Putin learned after the annexation of Crimea that getting the West to

⁷⁸ James Risen, “Putin Decided Last-Minute to Invade, Intelligence Officials Say,” *The Intercept*, <https://theintercept.com/2022/03/11/russia-putin-ukraine-invasion-us-intelligence/>; and it was not until February 18th that President Biden declared that Putin had decided to attack after receiving intelligence stating “we have reason to believe the Russian forces are planning and intend to attack Ukraine in the coming week...we believe that they will target Ukraine’s capital, Kyiv.” See Amanda Macias, “Biden believes Putin has decided to attack Ukraine in coming days,” February 18, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/02/18/biden-believes-putin-has-decided-to-attack-ukraine-in-coming-days.html>. Both predictions proved accurate and timely.

⁷⁹ As McFaul wrote on February 11th, “Putin is still speaking and meeting with Western leaders, including Biden, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson.” Michael McFaul, “How to Make a Deal With Putin,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 11, 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2022-02-11/how-make-deal-putin>.

⁸⁰ Experts at the time of the crisis agreed, writing “Putin’s demands not an ultimatum, but an opening bid,” and would be “satisfied if US agreed to a long-term moratorium on NATO expansion.” See Dmitri Trenin, “What Putin Really Wants in Ukraine: Russia Seeks to Stop NATO’s Expansion, Not to Annex More Territory,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 28, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2021-12-28/what-putin-really-wants-ukraine>; and “The negotiations could also succeed even if they fail to yield a major agreement. Putin may hold off on invading Ukraine while diplomats confer if only to see what he can get out of a deal.” See McFaul’s “A Deal with Putin.”

⁸¹ CD #1: CN/P = 8 (P); 2 (N).

⁸² Bolton, John. “How Putin Is Beating the West at Deterrence.” *TIME Magazine* 199, no. 11/12 (March 28, 2022), 30. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ez-salve.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=155795941&site=ehost-live>.

unify around sanctions is incredibly difficult, and often, they are circumventable.⁸³ Given that experience, it is doubtful that Putin believed the West would have been able to rally around meaningful *pre-emptive* sanctions on the implicit threat of military escalation in Ukraine, especially given Europe's dependency on Russian energy.⁸⁴ As a result, the economic impact of a failed coercion attempt would have likely been perceived by Putin as only *marginally negative*.⁸⁵

Militarily, a successful outcome would be considered *highly positive* for Putin in diminishing NATO's presence near his borders since Ukraine's membership would not depend on Kyiv's whims. In contrast, rejecting his demands would serve as a *negative* but not highly negative since there would still be potential opportunities to negotiate a reduced or predictable NATO presence near Russia, and he would always have the option to invade or escalate to a wider conflict in Ukraine eventually. Thus, the door to preventing NATO's expansion would not be closed if the CN alternative failed. Moreover, he did not have to expend any resources in the attempt, although it was associated with a relatively high reputational cost if he later decided not to invade and had to compromise or walk away with no meaningful gains.⁸⁶

Diplomatically, Putin would likely have expected a *somewhat positive* boost to his relevance to Xi if he could force NATO to acquiesce without resorting to increased force. In

⁸³ Indeed as Townsend wrote early in the crisis that after Crimea, "halfhearted measures [sanctions] had little coercive effect on Putin and West limited military support to Ukraine to nonlethal support only." Jim Townsend, "What It Will Take to Deter Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, January 7, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2022-01-07/what-it-will-take-deter-russia>.

⁸⁴ As Ukraine expert Vindman wrote on January 21st, "Washington's European allies are wary of the potential for sanctions to harm their own economies." Alexander Vindman and Dominic Cruz Bustillos. "The Day After Russia Attacks: What War in Ukraine Would look like – and How America Should Respond." *Foreign Affairs*, January 21, 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-01-21/day-after-russia-attacks>.

⁸⁵ CD #1: CN/E = 7 (P); 4 (N).

⁸⁶ CD #1: CN/M = 9 (P); 2 (N).

contrast, a failure to coerce NATO would probably *somewhat negatively* impact their strategic relationship, especially if Putin were to settle for a sub-optimal compromise or, even worse, back down entirely. In the latter case, Xi may try to distance himself from Putin, at least openly, as Moscow would have strained relations with the West through Putin's coercive gambit and not achieved any meaningful change.⁸⁷

Finally, to determine a relatively accurate subjective probability that Putin would have assigned to achieving his demands through coercion, it is helpful to look at the reflections of a Russian diplomat who defected after the start of the war, Boris Bondarev. According to Bondarev, when he received a copy of the demands Moscow was to present to Brussels and Washington, he was perplexed, noting that they would "clearly be unacceptable to the West." He also spoke with his colleagues and supervisor, who was confused, stating, "No one could understand how we would go to the United States with a document that demanded...NATO permanently close its door to new members."⁸⁸

Therefore, given that not only Bondarev but many of his colleagues were highly skeptical that the West would agree to Putin's demands, it remains very doubtful that Putin would also have believed it held much hope for success. Still, the alliance had recent signs of stress, as evidenced by the AUKUS submarine deal.⁸⁹ As a result, Putin is likely to see successful coercion prospects as possible but *very unlikely*.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, it presented a low cost in terms of

⁸⁷ CD #1: CN/D = 7 (P); 3 (N).

⁸⁸ Boris Bondarev, "The Sources of Russian Conduct: A Diplomat Defects From the Kremlin," Foreign Affairs, November/December 2022 Vol 101, number 6: 50, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/sources-russia-misconduct-boris-bondarev>.

⁸⁹ As Michael Kimmage and Michael Kofman wrote during the crisis, Russia was aware of "Fissures in NATO based on AUKUS submarine deal," Kimmage and Kofman, "Russia Won't Let Ukraine."

⁹⁰ CD #1: CN/EU = 15% (P); 85% (N).

resources, although high costs politically, and a high-payoff opportunity to gain concessions and gave the appearance of trying to negotiate before a potential decision to escalate further.

Based on the qualitative discussion above, we would expect alternative ED would by far provide the least appealing choice for Putin from an RC, PH, and EUT perspective, which was also the case quantitatively. Moreover, the PH framework discarded the ED alternative in the first analysis stage because it had negative political implications. Interestingly, the very low probabilities of success associated with the SQ alternative led to EUT incorrectly ranking the SQ option first, although the prediction was considered very high sensitivity (VHS). Additionally, from a PT standpoint, the CN alternative had the greatest degree of variance in outcomes and, hence, was considered the riskiest. Thus, PT would predict Putin would select CN, being that he was in a domain of losses. However, unlike the other three theories, the next riskiest alternative for PT was ED, ranked as the second preferred option. Finally, PT's results were less sensitive than the other three, with a rating of only *highly sensitive*. The predicted preference ranking order and their associated confidence levels are depicted in Figure 5.1.⁹¹

Decision Theory	RC	PH	EUT	PT
Preference Ranking	CN>SQ>ED	CN>SQ	SQ>CN>ED	CN>ED>SQ
Sensitivity Level	VHS	VHS	VHS	HS

Fig. 5.1. Critical Decision (CD) #1: Putin's preference ranking order and sensitivity level.

Critical Decision #2: Biden – No U.S. Troops (NT)

We shift to President Biden for CD #2, the first critical decision after the crisis was initiated. On December 7th, 2021, President Putin and Biden met via videoconference for two hours to discuss Russia's build-up of military forces along the Ukrainian border. Notably, Putin

⁹¹ The composite decision matrix for CD #1 can be found in the Appendix (A.1).

had similarly massed troops along the border in April earlier that year.⁹² In November, Secretary of State Blinken warned the Russians about their build-up, but it had no effect, and in the coming weeks, a meeting was scheduled for the two presidents to have a conversation.⁹³ Still, in November, the Russians had yet to link the build-up of troops to any specific demands. That changed during the December 7th video call as Putin made his demands known. The Russian President wanted “solid legally binding guarantees ruling out NATO’s eastward expansion and the deployment of weapons that threaten Russia in the immediate vicinity of its borders.”⁹⁴

In response, Biden made it clear that tough economic sanctions would follow any Russian invasion of Ukraine, stating the next day, when speaking to reports, that the sanctions would be “like none he has ever seen or ever have been seen.” He also said the U.S. would likely reinforce its presence in NATO countries to reassure those allies. Finally, he stated that the U.S. would enhance Kyiv’s defensive capabilities.⁹⁵ According to the readouts and Biden’s account the day after, he did not indicate whether the U.S. military would become involved in defending Ukraine during the call. However, when asked the next day by a reporter, “Can we rule out boots on the ground, sir – putting U.S. troops on the ground?” Biden responded, “that is not on the table,” adding, “We have a moral obligation and a legal obligation to our NATO allies...that obligation does not extend to...Ukraine.”⁹⁶

⁹² Bielieskov, “Spring 2021 War Scare,” 1.

⁹³ Michael Crowley, “Blinken Warns Russia Against Making a ‘Serious Mistake’ in Ukraine,” *New York Times*, November 10, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/10/us/politics/russia-blinken-ukraine.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

⁹⁴ “Telephone conversations with US President Joseph Biden and President of Russia,” Kremlin, December 31 2021. <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67487>.

⁹⁵ Joseph R. Biden, “Remarks by President Biden Before Marine One Departure,” The White House, December 8, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/12/08/remarks-by-president-biden-before-marine-one-departure-10/>.

⁹⁶ Biden, “Remarks by President Biden.”

Consequently, within 24 hours of speaking to Putin, Biden decided to pre-emptively and publicly take any U.S. troop involvement off the table (NT). Alternatively, he could have remained ambiguous on troops (AT) to complicate Putin's calculus. Finally, as a third option, he could have suggested some type of military retaliation, including threatening troops (TT). For all three alternatives, the positive and negative outcomes are the same: Putin is either deterred from invading (positive) or Putin is not deterred (negative). The three alternatives will now be analyzed in turn.

Considering the political dimension, the implications for a positive outcome for the no troops (NT) decision were *highly positive*. If Biden could get Putin to back down with reactive sanctions alone and avoid a debate with the congressional opposition and the American public about risking the lives of Americans to defend Ukraine, it undoubtedly presented a very high payoff for virtually no risk. Conversely, a negative outcome where Putin still invaded would carry some political risk to Biden, but mainly from the opposition party if they felt his overall crisis strategy was too soft. Nevertheless, the vast majority of Americans wished to stay out of any conflict in Ukraine. For example, in a late January poll of Americans, only 11% believed the U.S. "should send soldiers to Ukraine to fight Russian soldiers," and 20% felt the U.S. should send soldiers but only to provide "help, but not fight Russian soldiers."⁹⁷ Therefore, while an adverse outcome resulting from the NT option would not be ideal, it was still associated with a *positive* implication, as many would likely credit him with keeping America out of a costly war. Moreover, Biden had suffered a drop in his approvals after the chaotic exit from Afghanistan

⁹⁷ Linley Sanders, "How should the United States respond if Russia invades Ukraine?" YouGov, January 27, 2022, <https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2022/01/27/united-states-respond-russia-invades-ukraine-poll>.

only three months earlier, so he was likely uninterested in risking another military event, especially one that could result in high casualties or, even worse, escalate to nuclear weapons.⁹⁸

Militarily, of all three alternatives, the NT option provided the greatest positive implications associated with avoiding a direct military conflict with Moscow. Indeed, whether Moscow invaded or not, Putin was not threatening the U.S. or any of its NATO allies and, therefore, clearly stating that the U.S. would not be getting involved with directly defending Kyiv kept tensions between the West and the Kremlin from reaching higher levels, which could have led to miscalculations. Thus, the implications for both a positive and negative outcome for NT are considered *highly positive*.⁹⁹ Paradoxically, by removing any possibility of US and, by default, Western direct military intervention, the chances of Putin risking a war in Ukraine increased.

Economically, the effects of a negative and positive outcome differ significantly. Given Russia's significant share of global energy production and even more significant share within Europe, the impact of an invasion on energy prices would be expected to be significant. Even more so given the threat of severe economic sanctions.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, a positive outcome for the NT alternative may ease energy prices in the short term as it would ease sentiment about a possible wider regional conflict between Moscow and NATO. Nevertheless, simply the presence of an ongoing militarized crisis with one of the largest energy producers in the world would likely lead to increased prices. Therefore, the implications associated with a positive outcome

⁹⁸ CD #2: NT/P = 9 (P); 8 (N).

⁹⁹ CD# 2: NT/M = 9 (P); 9 (N).

¹⁰⁰ "Washington's European allies are wary of the potential for sanctions to harm their own economies," see Vindman, "The Day After Russia."; and "Russia has ability to throttle gas flows to Europe," Smith, "SWIFT and Certain Punishment."

would be *somewhat positive*. In contrast, a negative outcome would almost certainly lead to higher energy prices and, in turn, negatively impact the American consumer and perhaps the broader economy still recovering from the adverse impacts of the pandemic. Therefore, a failure in deterrence would be perceived by Biden as having a *negative implication*.¹⁰¹

Finally, with Biden being unequivocally clear that the U.S. military would not be directly intervening or threatening retaliation, it likely reinforced his diplomatic goal of strengthening NATO resolve and unity. Threatening a military response or remaining ambiguous would likely have created tension within the alliance. Some states fear being unintentionally brought into a conflict with Russia if it were to attack U.S. troops and the collective defense Article 5 of NATO's charter was invoked.¹⁰² Therefore, regardless of a positive or negative outcome, the NT option provided *positive* diplomatic effects. This would not have been the case if Putin directly or indirectly threatened a NATO member.¹⁰³

Lastly, the expected utility for the NT option needs to be determined. It is doubtful that Biden saw removing the troop option as deterring Putin from invading, but his strategy also included threatening sanctions. Therefore, while it is likely he would have assigned a low chance of successfully deterring Putin after taking troops off the table, it is necessary to consider the threat of economic sanctions as part of his calculus since it would be overly artificial to isolate the probability of success from the entire strategy. Moreover, Putin had massed troops on its border with Ukraine earlier in the year and did not invade. Thus, on balance, we assign a *very*

¹⁰¹ CD#2: NT/E = 7 (P); 2 (N).

¹⁰² As Russia expert Stent suggested in late January "Putin believes Russia's interests are best served by a fractured transatlantic alliance." Angela Stent, "The Putin Doctrine." *Foreign Affairs*, January 27, 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-01-27/putin-doctrine>.

¹⁰³ CD#2: NT/D = 8 (P); 8 (N).

unlikely probability of deterring Putin with sanctions alone,¹⁰⁴ especially after removing the option of troops.¹⁰⁵ This low rating is reinforced by the fact that the U.S. had already discovered Putin's war plans¹⁰⁶ and the disparity in capabilities between Kyiv and Moscow, giving Putin the edge.¹⁰⁷

Alternative – Ambiguous on Troops (AT): Another viable option for Biden was to consider remaining unclear on the level of U.S. military involvement concerning the defense of Ukraine, essentially creating uncertainty intended to complicate Putin's decision calculus on escalation. At some point, he would have had to make a public declaration on troop involvement; however, some argued at the time that taking the military option off the table so early into the crisis was a mistake. Indeed, Ian Brzezinski, a former deputy assistant secretary for defense for Europe and NATO policy under the George W. Bush administration, stated that by eliminating the military option, "Biden diluted our most important source of leverage in this crisis" and went

¹⁰⁴ In fact, a 2018 RAND report conducted on behalf of the United States Army examined extended deterrence outcomes in interstate aggression and large-scale conventional conflicts. They found that "sanctions – absent military pressure – were generally not sufficient to deter territorial aggression." See Mazarr, Michael J., Arthur Chan, Alyssa Demus, Bryan Frederick, Alireza Nader, Stephanie Pezard, Julia A. Thompson, and Elina Treyger. *What Deters and Why: Exploring Requirements for Effective Deterrence of Interstate Aggression*. Rand Corporation, 2018, 98-99; and as Townsend wrote early in the crisis, "Economic sanctions alone, no matter how personally painful they may be to Putin and his cronies, will not be enough to prevent the Kremlin from using tactics that have proved effective in the past." Townsend, "What it Will Take."

¹⁰⁵ CD#2: NT/EU = 20% (P); 80% (N).

¹⁰⁶ The Whitehouse made their awareness of Kremlin war plans involving up to 175,000 troops to invade Ukraine on December 3, 2021, see Aamer Madhani et al., "US intelligence finds Russia planning Ukraine offensive," December 3, 2021, Associated Press, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-europe-russia-ukraine-vladimir-putin-ff5ac633e928a01b7d6d3bdbe2330fe2>. However, recall Washington was aware of these war plans as early as the end of October since on November 2, 2021, a meeting occurred between the CIA Director, the U.S. Ambassador to Russia, and the Moscow's Secretary of the Russian Security Council, and the CIA Director revealed the U.S. had discovered its plans to invade Ukraine. See Massicot, Dara. "What Russia Got Wrong: Can Moscow Learn From Its Failures in Ukraine?" *Foreign Affairs*. March/April 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/what-russia-got-wrong-moscow-failures-in-ukraine-dara-massicot>.

¹⁰⁷ Recall that the simulated WCNCI indexes of Russia and Ukraine suggested an 88.4% probability of victory of Russian victory. Nevertheless, some correctly at the time acknowledged "Conquering Ukraine would be no cakewalk." McFaul, "How to Make a Deal."

to advocate the President should consider deploying forces to Western Ukraine to act as a deterrent.¹⁰⁸ Additionally, a month after the war broke out, one of Trump's former National Security Advisors claimed that the decision to be unequivocal on the troop question was "an unforced, unilateral concession, with no Russian reciprocity sought or given. Biden could simply have said nothing, hiding his intentions, and let the ambiguity weight on Putin's mind."¹⁰⁹ Considering that as context, it is necessary to evaluate the AT alternative against Biden's multiple dimensions and goals.

Starting with the political dimension, remaining ambiguous on the use of troops would have brought some negative implications throughout the crisis as prominent members of the opposition party quickly came out against any use of military force against Russia.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is necessary to understand the implications of the AT alternative if Putin were to back down or invade. Hence, had Biden remained unclear on troop commitments and Putin had de-escalated, regardless of the reason, Biden would have been able to claim credit that his deterrence strategy prevailed and gain political capital, producing a *somewhat positive* benefit.

Conversely, had Biden chosen that course and Putin still invaded, there would have been less room for opponents to criticize him since such a decision would have been more aggressive than taking troops entirely off the table, yet still, in the end, posed no risk to U.S. forces or escalation. However, there also remained the chance that opponents would claim that Putin had

¹⁰⁸ Michael Crowley, "All Options are Not on the Table as Biden Moves Troops Closer to Ukraine," *New York Times*, February 7, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/05/us/politics/biden-ukraine-russia-war.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

¹⁰⁹ John Bolton, "How Putin Is Beating the West at Deterrence," *TIME Magazine* 199, no. 11/12 (March 28, 2022), 30. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ez-salve.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=155795941&site=ehost-live>.

¹¹⁰ As Texas Republican Senator Ted Cruz stated in early February, "Under no circumstances should we send our sons and daughters to die to defend Ukraine from Russia." See Crowley, "All Options."

called Biden's ambiguous bluff and point to a lack of resolve on his part. Nevertheless, such a position would be hard to defend as most opposition members were not calling for a military defense of Ukraine. Therefore, we can conclude there would be only a *marginally negative* effect for selecting this option in the event of a Russian invasion.¹¹¹

From a military dimension, recall that Biden's objective was to avoid a direct confrontation with Russia. If he had remained publicly ambiguous but privately and among his advisors already decided they would not come to the defense of Ukraine, then pursuing this option did not constrain Biden, nor was it necessarily riskier since they would arguably not have allowed themselves to be goaded into committing forces. However, if the administration genuinely considered deploying forces as a deterrent or possibly retaliating if an invasion occurred, then those previous assumptions would no longer be valid, and the implications of choosing AT would shift. Notwithstanding, for this study, we will assume the AT option was perceived as a deterrence strategy *and* a genuine consideration. The range of options under consideration would have included a verbal threat of military retaliation, leaving troops already in Ukraine conducting training in place to serve as a deterrent or trip-wire force, deploying an additional small-to-modest number of troops (1-10k) to the country, considering strikes on Russian targets after an invasion, and finally deploying a large amount of U.S. troops (10k+). A necessary point of clarification is that any such military option would have been a separate decision to be made further along in the crisis. For this decision, we need only consider the perceived implications for Biden had he chosen to remain ambiguous and decide later if a military response would be enacted. Consequently, if Putin had decided to back down after choosing the AT, it would undoubtedly have *highly positive* implications. In contrast, had that

¹¹¹ CD#2: AT/P = 7 (P); 4 (N).

strategy been adopted and Putin had decided to invade, there would always be the risk that crisis momentum and the fear of looking ineffective in the face of an adversary could have led to an escalation on the part of the administration at some level and therefore carried with it at least a *somewhat negative* implication had Putin decided to invade.¹¹²

Economically, the situation was quite different. Even had Biden decided privately that he would never keep troops, send more troops, or strike back directly at Moscow if it invaded, the uncertainty in economic markets about the possibility of a direct confrontation with Russia and the U.S. would have undoubtedly hurt prices. Thus, even with a positive outcome and Putin backing down, Biden would expect *somewhat negative* economic impacts during the crisis. If Putin decided to invade, Biden would have expected long-lasting disruptions to energy markets¹¹³ and *negative* economic implications.¹¹⁴

Lastly, in diplomacy, Biden sought foremost to strengthen NATO resolve and unity in the face of Putin's coercive gambit. Pursuing a strategy of ambiguity would likely have strained relations with NATO members who were exceptionally wary of any direct conflict with Russia. Indeed, the main effort of unifying around punitive sanctions may have been undermined by the added pressure of a possible looming confrontation with Russia. However, had the outcome been positive and Putin backed down, it would have demonstrated U.S. resolve and strength and, likely in the end, led to greater confidence in Washington's, and probably by association, the alliance's, ability to facedown Europe's last revisionist power. Therefore, a favorable outcome after choosing this alternative would likely have been perceived by Biden as *somewhat positive*,

¹¹² CD#2: AT/M = 9 (P); 3 (N).

¹¹³ "Russia has ability to throttle gas flows to Europe." Smith, "SWIFT and Certain Punishment."

¹¹⁴ CD#2: AT/E = 3 (P); 2 (N).

whereas had Putin still invaded, it would have been seen as a *negative* outcome as it would have likely caused tensions within the alliance and stymied progress on sanctions, and in the end, failed as an effective deterrent.¹¹⁵

Finally, we would expect Biden to perceive a greater chance of deterring Putin had he remained ambiguous in combination with a threat of severe Western sanctions. The increase would likely have been a modest increase over NT, thus placing his confidence level into the *roughly even odds* category.¹¹⁶

Alternative – Threaten Troops (TT): The final alternative, which will be analyzed under CD #2, is the threat of military retaliation, but more explicitly, committing U.S. forces to the defense of Ukraine. Notably, some called for Washington to prepare for war during the crisis. As Dr. Evelyn Farkas, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia in the Obama administration, wrote in early January 2022 that the Biden administration should be “marshaling an international coalition of the willing, readying military forces to deter Putin, and, if necessary, prepare for war.” She writes, “The horrible possibility exists that Americans, with our European allies, must use our military to roll back Russians – even at risk of direct combat.”¹¹⁷

Indeed, for those that consider a Biden threat of military retaliation against Russia as unthinkable, recall in Chapter 2 that Biden as President, on at least four occasions, has publicly threatened U.S. military retaliation against China if it were to attack Taiwan.¹¹⁸ While no

¹¹⁵ CD#2: AT/D = 7 (P); 2 (N).

¹¹⁶ CD#2: AT/EUT = 45% (P); 55% (N).

¹¹⁷ Evelyn N. Farkas, “The US Must Prepare for War Against Russia Over Ukraine,” Defense One, January 11, 2022. <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2022/01/us-must-prepare-war-against-russia-over-ukraine/360639>.

¹¹⁸ Susan V. Lawrence and Caitlin Campbell “Taiwan: Political and Security Issues,” Congressional Research Service, March 31, 2023. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10275>.

analogy is perfect, China, like Russia, is a nuclear-armed state with a powerful military. Similarly, neither Taipei nor Kyiv has a formal defensive alliance with Washington. Furthermore, Biden's statements depart from the long-standing U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity towards Taiwan. Moreover, while some may point to the Taiwan Relations Act¹¹⁹ passed by Congress in 1979, assuring Taiwan that it would provide it with "sufficient" self-defense capabilities, others could point to the 1994 Budapest memorandum when Kyiv voluntarily agreed to transfer its nuclear arsenal to Russia. The memorandum signed by Moscow, Washington, and London stated that each party would "seek immediate United Nations Security Council action to provide assistance" to Ukraine should it "become a victim of an act of aggression."¹²⁰ Of course, such a security assurance was poorly crafted since if the aggressor were Russia, which was the most likely case, they also held a permanent seat on the security council and, therefore, could block any UN measure regarding its actions in Ukraine. Additionally, the memorandum did not specify the degree or type of assistance each party was obligated to provide to Ukraine's defense. Nonetheless, the implications of trading nuclear weapons for security assurances were implicit among the signatories.¹²¹

Therefore, it is necessary first to consider Biden's perceived political implications for evaluating this alternative. If he had threatened retaliation and Putin had backed down, then he would have no doubt received much praise for standing firm against Putin and having avoided

¹¹⁹ See H.R.2479 - 96th Congress (1979-1980): Taiwan Relations Act, Library of Congress, January 1, 1979, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/96th-congress/house-bill/2479>.

¹²⁰ "Memorandum of Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine's Accession to the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons," United Nations, December 5, 1994, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%203007/Part/volume-3007-I-52241.pdf>.

¹²¹ The preceding discussion is intended to preempt suggestions that the TT option is a "throw away" or unrealistic option to be considered for the purposes of this study.

not only a war between Washington and Moscow but also a catastrophic war across Ukraine and the inevitable destabilization, and therefore would have been seen domestically as a *highly positive* political gain. Nevertheless, some would have likely argued that the strategy was reckless and, had Putin not backed down, would have resulted in an enormously costly war or an embarrassing erosion of U.S. resolve had Biden, in the end, decided not to go through with retaliation. Still, the policy's success would have likely drowned out those more cautionary voices.

Alternatively, for the same mitigative reasons above, had Putin gone through with an invasion, the negative political implications would have been enormous, given the likely casualties even if the U.S. ultimately won the conflict. Moreover, had Biden decided to reverse his position to defend Ukraine upon an invasion, the political cost would have been *highly negative* domestically and internationally.¹²²

When considering Biden's military goal to avoid a direct confrontation if Putin had backed down, it would be seen as a *highly positive* outcome, and in the reverse situation, a *highly negative* outcome for this dimension.¹²³

Regarding creating stable economic conditions, we expect Biden to perceive the negative implications of a threat of military retaliation to exceed that of ambiguity. Therefore, even if Putin were to back down, the short-term implications eventually would be *negative* and *highly negative* had Putin invaded and a direct conflict between the two powers resulted.¹²⁴

¹²² CD #2: TT/P = 9 (P); 1 (N).

¹²³ CD #2: TT/M = 9 (P); 1 (N).

¹²⁴ CD #2: TT/E = 2 (P); 1 (N).

Finally, diplomatically, had Biden threatened military retaliation, he would have almost certainly perceived such an act as weakening the unity, if not the resolve of his NATO allies since it was unlikely that most of the 29 other alliance members at the time would have been willing to commit to Washington's defense if it sent troops to Ukraine and they were attacked.

Therefore, instead of emphasizing the EU and NATO rallying around punitive sanctions, the focus would have been on dissuading Washington from direct engagement. Further, even if the TT had dissuaded Putin from invading, it still would have probably caused fissures in the alliance, resulting in a *somewhat negative* outcome. Conversely, had Putin invaded, there may have been some who would have welcomed Washington's assertive defense of Ukraine, most likely those members most under threat from Moscow in Eastern Europe. However, larger powers such as Germany, France, Italy, and the UK would almost certainly have split or abandoned any direct involvement in the conflict, possibly creating a permanent crack in the alliance and its collective defense commitment under Article 5. Biden would have perceived such an outcome as *highly negative*.¹²⁵

Lastly, from an expected utility outlook, we would expect a threat of military retaliation to provide the highest expected chances of success at deterring Putin.¹²⁶ This would be especially true had Biden quickly deployed a large number of military forces to Ukraine to serve as a tripwire force. Moreover, using a simulated War Correlates National Capabilities Index (WCNCI),

¹²⁵ CD #2: TT/D = 3 (P); 1 (N).

¹²⁶ As Vindman described in late January, "Washington has put itself in a position in which, short of threatening military escalation, deterrence will probably fail. The options for deterrence today are significantly worse than they were last year, last month, or even last week. The U.S. commitment to peace and diplomatic resolutions during this time has been commendable, but in focusing on diplomacy without a commensurate emphasis on hard-power tools, the Biden administration missed an opportunity to head off a crisis on Europe's eastern flank." Vindman, "Day After Russia Attacks."

Moscow would only have had a 20% chance of victory against Washington.¹²⁷ Of course, this assumes Putin would not have resorted to using a tactical nuclear weapon had he started to lose the conflict. As a result, we would expect Biden to assign a *highly probable* subjective probability to deter Putin with a threat of retaliation.¹²⁸

After considering the qualitative explanation above, along with the quantitative ratings, each theory correctly predicted the choice made by Biden. Moreover, unlike CD #1, RC, PH, and EUT were all considered VLS and PT at LS. RC, PH, and PT all had the same overall ranking of the second and third alternatives. However, EUT placed TT second over AT. As expected, threatening troops would have a higher outcome variance, and taking troops off the table would have the lowest variance, corresponding to the most and least risky, respectively. Thus, PT correctly predicted Biden, being in a domain of gains, would have chosen NT. The predicted preference ranking order and their associated confidence levels are depicted in Figure 5.2.¹²⁹

Decision Theory	RC	PH	EUT	PT
Preference Ranking	NT>AT>TT	NT>AT>TT	NT>TT>AT	NT>AT>TT
Sensitivity Level	VLS	VLS	VLS	LS

Fig. 5.2. Critical Decision (CD) #2: Biden’s preference ranking order & sensitivity level

Critical Decision #3: Biden – Reject Putin’s Demands (RD)

We have now evaluated Putin’s alternatives regarding crisis initiation and Biden’s decision to pre-emptively take direct military involvement off the table, which represent the first two crisis-related critical decisions. From a chronological perspective, the third CD was Biden’s choice to reject Putin’s NATO-related demands. Concerning NATO, Putin made three

¹²⁷ See footnote 43 regarding the WCNCI formula, which was also applied for U.S. and Russian capabilities, resulting in an 80% chance of American victory over Moscow.

¹²⁸ CD #2: TT/EU = 80% (P); 20% (N).

¹²⁹ The composite decision matrix for CD #2 can be found in the Appendix (A.2)

significant demands. First, the alliance agrees to “refrain from any further enlargement of NATO, including the accession of Ukraine as well as other States.” Second, NATO cannot deploy any “military forces and weaponry” in any states that joined the alliance after May 27th, 1997. Lastly, no NATO member “conduct military activity on the territory of Ukraine...other states in Eastern Europe...South Caucasus and in Central Asia.”¹³⁰ There were other demands included in the draft agreement, but the three above were the most demanding and the most important to the Russian President.¹³¹ Indeed, when Washington and Brussels provided their counter-offer, they remained open to some of the other non-NATO provisions, but Putin ultimately responded to the West’s offer, saying “that fundamental Russian concerns ended up being ignored.”¹³²

Accordingly, CD #3 will focus on the three NATO provisions and Biden’s three likely alternatives. The first alternative would have been to agree to the demands (AD), as some during the crisis were suggesting that NATO’s expansion needed to end and was counterproductive.¹³³ Indeed, as previously discussed, Walt and Mearsheimer had argued for some time that NATO expansion was dangerous. Moreover, Ukraine was not expected to be ready to join NATO until

¹³⁰ See Articles 4, 6, and 7, “Agreement on measures to ensure the security of The Russian Federation and member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, December 17, 2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en.

¹³¹ As some wrote during the crisis, Putin would “be satisfied if US agreed to long-term moratorium on NATO expansion.” Trenin, “What Putin Really Wants.”

¹³² “Putin Says Moscow's Security Demands 'Ignored' As U.S., U.K. Call On Russia To De-Escalate,” Radio Free Europe, February 1, 2022. <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-russia-lavrov-blinken-zelenskiy-talks/31681318.html>.

¹³³ As Kimmage wrote mid-January, “ending NATO expansion would be an act of self-defense for the alliance itself, giving it the gifts that greater limitation and greater clarity confer,” and that it needed to “explicitly forswear adding members,” because “incorporating Ukraine would be strategic madness.” Finally, “The theater-of-the-absurd quality of the West’s attachment to the open-door policy is itself insulting to Ukraine (and to Georgia) and will over time generate ill will toward Washington.” Kimmage, “Russia Won’t Let Ukraine.”

the next decade at the earliest,¹³⁴ and it remained likely that if the situation in the Donbas and perhaps even Crimea had not been resolved, Kyiv had no viable path to join.¹³⁵ Furthermore, NATO monumentally overshadows Russia economically and militarily, with or without new members. Additionally, it could be reasonably argued that it would not have amounted to a tangible shift in relative economic or military power between the two blocs by acquiescing to Putin's demands. Symbolically, however, it would have demonstrated the efficacy of coercive diplomacy that one autocrat could achieve against an economically and militarily superior alliance of 30 states. Finally, considering the likely human suffering anticipated with this war and wars in general, it was a reasonable alternative to at least fully consider, even if it was not the best choice for the alliance.

The second alternative was to agree in principle to a so-called middle ground (MG), which the Brookings Institute termed the “not now but not never” option regarding Ukrainian membership.¹³⁶ Essentially, that was already understood by Washington and the other alliance members, so agreeing to that option would not have materially altered the expectations of any NATO members. However, such a position was essentially the de facto status quo and is unlikely to have been accepted by the Kremlin.

The third alternative, ultimately chosen, was a flat rejection of Putin’s demands (RD) concerning NATO’s open-door policy and preventing the post-1997 members from hosting

¹³⁴ The U.S. State Department in December 2021 “told Ukraine NATO membership unlikely to be approved until next decade.” See Trenin, “What Putin Really Wants.”

¹³⁵ Michael McFaul and Robert Person. “What Putin Fears Most.” *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development* 21 (2022), 29.

¹³⁶ Steven Pifer, “Russia’s draft agreements with NATO and the United States: Intended for rejection?” Brookings Institution, December 21, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/12/21/russias-draft-agreements-with-nato-and-the-united-states-intended-for-rejection>.

weapons or personnel from other members. The following analysis will illustrate that there was very little to incentivize the alliance members to choose either AD or MG over RD.

Alternative – Agree to Demands (AD): For each of the three alternatives, the positive and negative outcomes will be the same as for CD #2, Putin is deterred, or Putin invades. It is noncontroversial to conclude that by selecting the AD option, Biden would have perceived such a decision as carrying *highly negative* political implications regardless of whether Putin is invading or not invading.¹³⁷ Even if it had prevented Putin from escalating the situation further, his critics and perhaps many of his allies would have cast the decision as appeasement under military threat. Moreover, while avoiding war would have somewhat mitigated the adverse effects, it would still have been hard to defend since opponents would likely have pushed the narrative that Putin never intended to invade and was only bluffing to see what he could get away with, achieving all he wanted without having to give up anything in return serving to only to embolden him to press for more concessions.¹³⁸

Regarding Biden’s military objective of avoiding a direct military conflict with Moscow, this option would provide a *highly positive* result had Putin backed down and a *somewhat positive* result had he still invaded since neither option would necessarily lead to a direct confrontation unless there were a miscalculation or error in judgment at the local commander

¹³⁷ CD #3: AD/P = 1 (P); 1 (N)

¹³⁸ As Edelman and Kramer wrote at the end of January, “it is a mistake to assume Putin would be assuaged by assurances that NATO membership for Ukraine (and Georgia) is off the table. On the contrary, concessions would likely lead him to up the ante, as he would view such pledges as a sign of weakness and could raise the stakes to include no European Union membership either. After all, it was closer ties to the EU, not NATO, that led to Putin’s intervention into Ukraine in 2013 and 2014.” Eric S. Edelman and David J. Kramer, “Keep NATO’s Door Open to Ukraine,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 31, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-01-31/keep-natos-door-open-ukraine>.

level, which led to an escalation.¹³⁹ However, any war in the region close to U.S. forces operating in the Black Sea would create the potential for a wider conflict. For example, missiles going off course and causing damage to a NATO country,¹⁴⁰ personnel, or equipment, an aggressive pilot shooting down, or colliding with an alliance surveillance aircraft resulting in loss of life.¹⁴¹

Economically, Biden would expect AD to have a calming effect on energy prices specifically and world markets generally if Putin decided to back down and therefore carry a *positive* implication. Conversely, had Putin decided to invade still after having all his NATO demands met, it would be perceived as an equally *negative* since Putin would have given the world a clear impression of being insatiable in his revisionist aspirations and very likely unwilling to end the war without an outcome in his favor.¹⁴²

Last of all, diplomatically, it is unlikely that acquiescing to Putin's demands would be seen by Biden as strengthening NATO resolve and unity, as at least some, especially those in Eastern Europe who are most wary of Putin's designs, would be highly opposed to closing

¹³⁹ For an analysis on accidental wars, see Scott D. Sagan. *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons*. Vol. 177. Princeton University Press, 1993, 262 - 263. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvzsmf8r>. Sagan identifies a series of nuclear "accidents and near-accidents" throughout the Cold War, which "could have led to further escalation." Moreover, he argues the decision to wage war, even at the conventional level, has not always been deliberate, listing three accidental wars and battles. See also Allison, Graham T, and Philip Zelikow. *Essence of Decision : Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Second ed. New York: Longman, 1999.

¹⁴⁰ Indeed, in November 2022 a missile over Ukraine struck Poland and killed two farmers. Initially, speculation turned to it being a Russian missile, but it turned out to be an errant Ukrainian missile. Nevertheless, had it been Russian, what would have followed remains uncertain. See Mary Glantz, "A Missile Strikes Poland: How Russia's War Could Spread," United States Institute of Peace, November 17, 2022. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/11/missile-strikes-poland-how-russias-war-could-spread>.

¹⁴¹ CD #3: AD/M = 9 (P); 7 (N).

¹⁴² CD #3: AD/E = 8 (P); 2 (N).

Brussel's open door policy.¹⁴³ Moreover, even if Washington took the lead and moved towards accommodation and France and Germany followed suit, it would remain unlikely that the Baltic states and others closer to Russia would be willing to sign onto any ban, especially when over 100,000 Russian forces were postured to invade Ukraine in retaliation. Hence, with a positive outcome, a rift within the alliance could still very well have formed, leading to a *negative* implication and *highly negative* result if this option was chosen and Putin still invaded, probably leading to severe doubts on Washington's ability to lead the alliance during future crises effectively.¹⁴⁴

Finally, when determining Biden's subjective probability of success assigned to deterring Putin, had Biden agreed to his NATO-related demands, it would be considered *highly probable*¹⁴⁵ to have been successful since Putin would have been getting all that he wanted. Of course, it remained possible he could have still moved forward with the invasion even after getting what he wanted, but it would seem unlikely, at least in the short to mid-term. However, such a reversal would likely have led to Xi distancing himself from supporting Putin since there would have been little grounds for Putin to have still proceeded with an invasion. Nevertheless, the political costs to Biden domestically and within the alliance would have been difficult to survive.

¹⁴³ At the 2008 Budapest NATO summit, Germany and France did not want to include language about Ukraine and Georgia eventually joining the alliance to avoid antagonizing Moscow, so it remains possible they would have been more receptive to backing away from that path. However, that position would have been severely challenged by the Baltic states and Poland. See Paul Taylor and Mark John, "Ukraine and Georgia face uphill battle on NATO bid," Reuters, April 1, 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato/ukraine-and-georgia-face-uphill-battle-on-nato-bid-idUSL0179714620080401>.

¹⁴⁴ CD #3: AD/D = 2 (P); 1 (N).

¹⁴⁵ CD #3: AD/EUT = 85% (P); 15% (N).

Alternative – Middle Ground (MG): This option would have been more positively received at home and abroad than the AD alternative. Had Putin decided not to invade, Biden would likely have expected to be hailed as a brilliant strategist, having agreed to what was already the de facto path for Ukraine and yet not tying his hands for the future while avoiding a significant war in Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, there would have inevitably been critics from the opposition party and almost certainly some of NATO's members who would have seen any compromise with a threatening autocrat as setting a dangerous precedent for future crises. Therefore, we can reasonably assign a *positive* implication if Putin did not escalate. On the other hand, had Biden walked the middle path and then Putin still invaded, the political repercussions would have likely been marginal as long as punitive sanctions went into effect as promised, and there is no reason to believe that pursuing this course would not have been the case. After all, the MG option would have demonstrated a genuine effort on the part of the West to address Moscow's concerns, but significantly, a failure in deterrence would not have threatened the U.S. homeland or any of its allies. Thus, the political cost of adopting this strategy would have been *marginally negative*.¹⁴⁶

Militarily, the implications associated with a positive and negative outcome would be the same as the military dimension for the AD alternative, namely a *highly positive* outcome in avoiding conflict with Russia if Putin backed down and a *somewhat positive* result if he still invaded since the chances of accidental encounters could arise but intentional engagements would be avoided.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ CD #3: MG/P = 8 (P); 4 (N).

¹⁴⁷ CD #3: MG/M = 9 (P); 7 (N).

Economically, we could expect Biden to perceive slightly less positive implications with the MG option than the AD alternative but equivalent negative economic impacts as AD if Putin decided to invade, resulting in *somewhat positive* and *negative* implications.¹⁴⁸

Lastly, diplomatically, Biden would expect to encounter resistance from the Eastern European members to any option other than resolute opposition to Putin's demands. As a result, it would be projected that MG would lead to a less damaging outcome than AD diplomatically, but still, a *somewhat negative* and *negative* implication if Putin backed down or invaded, respectively.¹⁴⁹

From the expected utility perspective, we would lower the expectation of deterring Putin with this alternative relative to AD. However, there existed a realistic possibility that showing compromise on the issue would lead to extended negotiations and at least forestall an invasion. Unless a deadlock manifested in Brussels and not all members could agree to the MG solution, and Putin grew impatient, which would be a real possibility. Therefore, it is reasonable to assign *roughly even odds* to the downside to deter Putin successfully or, at the very least, delay an invasion.¹⁵⁰

Alternative – Reject Demands (RD): Rejecting Putin's demands outright, combined with threatening punitive sanctions, presents Biden's positive outcome since it remains consistent with his campaign rhetoric to get tough on China and Russia to strengthen the NATO alliance.¹⁵¹ It also would leave little room for political attacks against the opposition, with some minor

¹⁴⁸ CD #3: MG/E = 7 (P); 2 (N).

¹⁴⁹ CD #3: MG/D = 3 (P); 2 (N).

¹⁵⁰ CD #3: MG/EUT = 45% (P); 55% (N).

¹⁵¹ Joseph R Biden, Jr., "Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference," White House, June 13, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/06/13/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-2>.

exceptions from those who wanted to flex U.S. military power. Indeed, after Trump left office,¹⁵² it would be difficult for members of either party to endorse compromising on NATO's future with a leader that both sides acknowledge was an autocrat responsible for human rights abuses and regularly intimidating its neighbors. Even if Putin invaded, there would be little criticism of this decision.

Instead, any blame would come in the form, as it has, that the Biden administration was too slow on sending supplies and weapons to Ukraine and that he should have pursued pre-emptive sanctions.¹⁵³ Therefore, this alternative brings a *highly positive* result if Putin were to back down and only a *somewhat positive* result if deterrence failed since the public rarely likes instability. Nevertheless, Biden would likely have envisioned being rewarded for being tough on Putin while keeping America out of a costly war with Russia.¹⁵⁴

Militarily, we would expect to see a similar *highly positive* outcome if Putin were to back down and, in turn, eliminate any near-term risk of direct conflict with NATO or Washington, and the implications if Putin chose to invade to be similar to that of the MG and AD alternatives for the same reasons listed above.¹⁵⁵ Conversely, unlike MG and AD, from an economic standpoint, Biden would expect a *somewhat negative* outcome when it became public that he and his NATO

¹⁵² For example, President Trump's remarks regarding the intelligence community's universal assessment that Russia interfered in the U.S. Presidential election. Trump responded at the Helsinki press conference with Putin standing next to him, "My people came to me — Dan Coats came to me and some others — they said they think it's Russia. I have President Putin; he just said it's not Russia. I will say this: I don't see any reason why it would be, but I really do want to see the server. But I have — I have confidence in both parties." See Donald J. Trump, "Remarks by President Trump and President Putin of the Russian Federation in Joint Press Conference," The White House, July 16, 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-president-putin-russian-federation-joint-press-conference/>.

¹⁵³ For instance see Farkas, "The US Must Prepare," and Bolton, "How Putin Is Beating," 30–31.

¹⁵⁴ CD #3: RD/P = 9 (P); 7 (N).

¹⁵⁵ CD #3: RD/M = 9 (P); 7 (N).

allies rejected Putin's most pressing demands. Although it would be reasonable to assume a similar *negative* economic implication as MG and AD had Putin still invaded.¹⁵⁶

Lastly, the diplomatic dimension for the RD alternative would probably be viewed as having *positive* implications. It would be seen as easier to unify and strengthen NATO if Biden refused to compromise on NATO's deterrent capabilities for its members closest to Russia. However, there was much sensitivity from the Germans regarding the Nord Stream pipeline,¹⁵⁷ and thus, he could expect some stiffening from Berlin, which lowered his expectations from highly positive to simply positive. In contrast, and unlike the other two alternatives, pursuing RD would likely not have created any significant rifts within the alliance and, therefore, while not overly positive if Putin still invaded the pre-crisis decisions would serve to bolster the confidence in the resolve and resiliency of the alliance to remain firm in the face of pressure, and in turn result in a *marginally positive* rating.¹⁵⁸

Of the three alternatives, Biden was likely not very optimistic that rejecting Putin's demands on the NATO issues would serve as a deterrent. Additionally, at this point in the crisis, he had already removed any chance of direct U.S. and, by default, NATO involvement in any future conflict. It, therefore, follows that Biden saw this alternative as *highly improbable*¹⁵⁹ that it would lead to deterring Putin from an EU perspective. However, the possibility remained that Putin was bluffing and had no intention of invading Ukraine; thus, this probability range allows

¹⁵⁶ CD #3: RD/E = 3 (P); 2 (N).

¹⁵⁷ Catie Edmondson, "Senate Democrats Try to Advance Russia Sanctions Over Ukraine," New York Times, January 12, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/12/world/europe/russia-sanctions-ukraine-nord-stream-pipeline.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

¹⁵⁸ CD #3: RD/D = 8 (P); 6 (N).

¹⁵⁹ CD #3: RD/EUT = 20% (P); 80% (N).

for such an unlikely but possible eventuality. Nevertheless, based on the intelligence Biden was receiving before and during the crisis, it is unlikely that he believed Putin was bluffing.¹⁶⁰

The preference ranking is shown below in Figure 5.3. All four theories accurately predicted the preferred choice of RD, but RC and PH achieved a more desirable sensitivity rating. The qualitative explanation above aligns well with the predictions of the preference rankings. Indeed, Putin's coercive strategy was flawed from the beginning. He gave no incentives or assurances for NATO to agree to his demands and could not directly threaten the alliance since he knew the power bloc significantly outmatched Moscow economically and militarily. Thus, Putin's gambit failed, which would almost certainly be true if NATO leaders followed any of the decision-making strategies. From a PT perspective, the riskiest option was an MG approach, given the wide variance in possible outcomes concerning political survival and economic conditions. RD was the least risky in that regardless of whether Putin invaded, every dimension except for the economic had relatively high positive implications.¹⁶¹

Decision Theory	RC	PH	EUT	PT
Preference Ranking	RD>MG>AD	RD>MG	RD>MG>AD	RD>AD>MG
Sensitivity Level	MS	MS	VHS	VHS

Fig. 5.3. Critical Decision (CD) #3: Biden's preference ranking order and sensitivity level.¹⁶²

Critical Decision #4: Zelensky – Continue on NATO Path (NP)

After Washington and Brussels formally rejected the Kremlin's demands in January, intelligence estimates only increased the likelihood of an invasion, and Russian troop levels

¹⁶⁰ See Chapter 4 for an overview of the intelligence streams regarding Russian activities and intentions.

¹⁶¹ The composite decision matrix for CD #3 can be found in the Appendix (A.3)

¹⁶² Alternative AD is missing from the preference ranking order for PH because it had negative political implications and was therefore not considered under the two-stage PH decision rule.

continued to rise. Moreover, in February, Putin broke his silence and responded to the West's counteroffer by saying "that fundamental Russian concerns ended up being ignored."¹⁶³

Consequently, at the start of February, Zelensky faced less uncertainty about the crisis outcome than when it started. First, it was clear that all he could expect from the West to deter Moscow was reactive sanctions and the promise of providing more defensive weapons to Kyiv. Further, no state was willing to risk its military personnel to defend Ukraine. Hence, Zelensky was undoubtedly aware that if Moscow chose to invade, his nation would be fighting alone, although with some undetermined amount of economic and military equipment aid from the West.

Second, and diplomatically, it was apparent that Putin was not satisfied with the West's response to his demands, further increasing the likelihood he would, at the very least, use his military in some way and possibly with the intent of toppling the Zelensky government. Indeed, after Putin made his public remarks concerning the West's counteroffer, it would have been implausible that Putin would back down after declaring he had not gained what he truly desired regarding NATO expansion and its presence on his borders. Therefore, only if Zelensky believed Putin was willing to incur high reputational costs would he, in early February, believe that Putin would back down. The best case for him at that point in the crisis was for Putin to continue diplomatic talks for several more months, allowing Ukraine to prepare further and receive more aid before Putin decided to move.

Put another way, it was significantly more likely that Putin would invade than NATO, through negotiations, would concede to Putin's major demands. As discussed in CD #3, Putin's coercive gambit was flawed from the start, whether by design or simply a lack of options. As a non-NATO member, Putin was implicitly threatened to invade Ukraine, but his *demands* were

¹⁶³ Radio Free Europe, "Moscow's Security Demands 'Ignored.'"

levied at NATO. Therefore, Brussels and Washington had no pressing positive or negative incentive to acquiesce to Moscow's demands other than to avoid a catastrophic war in Ukraine, which was not considered a *vital* interest for any NATO member.¹⁶⁴

Accordingly, Zelensky faced three viable options going forward, directly affecting the likelihood of Putin deciding to invade or back down through negotiations or de-mobilization on the border. First, Zelensky could continue on an unambiguous path toward NATO (NP). Second, he could introduce uncertainty about his country's future concerning alliance membership and strike a more balanced tone, a so-called middle ground (MG), between Brussels and Moscow. Interestingly, during his presidential campaign and early in his term, he appeared more measured in his approach and timing for joining NATO.¹⁶⁵ Finally, he could unilaterally declare a path towards military non-alignment (NA), which would not exclude closer integration with the EU but would dismiss membership in NATO.

Three statements from Zelensky, one before the invasion and two after help to illustrate what type of comments would be associated with each of the three alternatives. For example, ten days before the invasion, he clarified that his country still desired to join NATO, saying, "There is no signal from us that NATO membership is not our goal," clearly reflecting the NP option.¹⁶⁶ However, 12 days into the invasion, the Ukrainian President articulated a more conciliatory path regarding NATO membership, which would have been consistent with the MG alternative when

¹⁶⁴ "Ukraine is a vital interest for Putin but not for Europe and US." See Trenin, "What Putin Really Wants."

¹⁶⁵ Tetiana Gaiduk, "Does Zelenskyy's Ukraine still want to join NATO?" Atlantic Council, April 13, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/does-zelenskyy-ukraine-still-want-to-join-nato/>.

¹⁶⁶ Volodymyr Zelensky, "We Are Not Removing the Question of Ukraine's Membership in NATO," President of Ukraine, 14 Feb. 2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/glava-derzhavi-mi-ne-znimayemo-pitannya-pro-vstup-ukrayini-d-72885>.

he said: “I have cooled down regarding this question a long time ago, after we understood that... NATO is not prepared to accept Ukraine.”¹⁶⁷ Finally, his statement at the end of March reflects the NA option when anticipating upcoming negotiations with Moscow, and he stated, “Security guarantees and neutrality, non-nuclear status of our state — we are ready to go for it.”¹⁶⁸ Accordingly, before the outbreak of war, Zelensky chose the NP alternative, and only after the invasion shifted towards the MG and eventually closer to the idea of NA.

Alternative – NATO Path (NP): For Zelensky, and from a political survival standpoint, hoping to diminish domestic opposition while continuing on a path towards NATO was in his best interest due to the majority (52.7%) of its citizens seeking membership in the alliance.¹⁶⁹ Moreover, an even higher percentage of Ukrainians (59%) did not believe that “Russia would end its aggressive policy towards Ukraine if Kyiv abandoned its aspirations to join EU and NATO.”¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, Zelensky’s approval ratings were already at all-time lows (31%),¹⁷¹ and Washington and Kyiv had just signed the U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership on

¹⁶⁷ Michael Hirsh, “Hints of a Ukraine-Russia Deal?” *Foreign Policy*, March 8, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/08/ukraine-russia-deal>.

¹⁶⁸ Yuras Karmanau, “Ukraine’s Zelensky to offer neutrality declaration to Russia for peace ‘without delay,’” *PBS NewsHour*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/ukraines-zelensky-to-offer-neutrality-declaration-to-russia-for-peace-without-delay>.

¹⁶⁹ In 2021, 52.7% of Ukrainians believed that Ukraine should become a NATO member, compared to 48.4% in 2020. See New Europe Center. “Diplomacy-2022: Foreign Policy Expectations of Ukrainian Society.” December 21, 2021. <https://www.promoteukraine.org/diplomacy-2022-foreign-policy-expectations-of-ukrainian-society>, 7. “Note, the field phase of the research lasted from November 8 to 29, 2021. The sample comprises 1007 people over the age of 18. The sample is representative of the population by sex, age, size of locality and a region of residence in accordance with the data of the State Statistics Service of Ukraine as of January 1, 2019. The poll was conducted only in the territories controlled by the Government of Ukraine. The maximum theoretical error does not exceed 3.1%.”

¹⁷⁰ New Europe Center, “Expectations of Ukrainian Society,” 11.

¹⁷¹ Afiq Fitri, “How President Zelensky’s approval ratings have surged,” *New Statesman*. March 1, 2022. <https://www.newstatesman.com/chart-of-the-day/2022/03/how-president-zelenskys-approval-ratings-have-surged>.

November 10, 2021.¹⁷² Thus, a policy reversal on NATO in the face of Russian threats would have undoubtedly ended Zelensky's government¹⁷³ and perhaps led to an armed paramilitary insurrection.¹⁷⁴ Finally, legal constraints may have prevented him even if Zelensky had attempted to abandon NATO membership unilaterally. In 2019, an overwhelming majority amended the Ukrainian constitution by its parliament to reflect the nation's strategic aspirations to join the EU and NATO and designated the President as the guarantor of its implementation.¹⁷⁵ Therefore, it may have been necessary to hold a national referendum on the issue, as Zelensky had once suggested,¹⁷⁶ and based on the above polling numbers, such a referendum would have failed. Considering the above, the implications associated with the NP alternative were *highly positive* if Putin backed down.

However, had Putin invaded, the negative effects would have been enhanced because Zelensky's political and biological survival hinged on Ukrainian forces successfully defending Kyiv from being overrun and preventing Zelensky from being killed or captured by Russian forces.¹⁷⁷ Nevertheless, he could expect a moderate-to-large "rally round the flag" effect on his

¹⁷² United States Department of State, "U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership." United States Department of State, Media Note. November 21, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-ukraine-charter-on-strategic-partnership>.

¹⁷³ Alexander Vindman and Dominic Cruz Bustillos. "The Day After Russia Attacks: What War in Ukraine Would look like – and How America Should Respond." <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-01-21/day-after-russia-attacks>

¹⁷⁴ Andrew E. Kramer, "Armed Nationalists in Ukraine Pose a Threat Not Just to Russia," *New York Times*, February 10, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/world/europe/ukraine-nationalism-russia-invasion.html>.

¹⁷⁵ The amendment was passed 334 – 17 see "Ukrainian Parliament Passes Constitutional Amendment To Reflect EU, NATO Aspirations," Radio Free Europe. February 7, 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-parliament-passes-constitutional-amendment-to-reflect-eu-nato-aspirations/29756695.html>; and Chapter V, Article 102 of the Ukrainian Constitution, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/44a280124.pdf>

¹⁷⁶ "Ukraine's President Promises NATO Referendum As Part Of Path To West," Radio Free Europe, June 5, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-president-promises-nato-referendum-as-part-of-path-to-west/29982943.html>.

¹⁷⁷ Zelensky also had the option of fleeing the country if the situation became too precarious in Kyiv.

domestic popularity if an invasion did commence, as is typical in most attacked states.¹⁷⁸ All told, this popularity boost would temper what would normally be a highly negative implication associated with physical survival and, in turn, assign a *negative* rating for the political dimension if the Russian invasion occurred.¹⁷⁹

On the other hand, from a military perspective of trying to avoid further territorial loss, sticking to the NP alternative came with significant risks. As previously discussed, based on national capabilities alone, Russia had a significant advantage over Ukraine and pessimism from Ukraine's generals. Additionally, no direct military support was expected from any of Ukraine's partners. Therefore, even if its military could stalemate Russia, it would likely have lost at least some additional territory, resulting in a *highly negative* outcome if Russia invaded. However, if Putin backed down, the result would, at best, only be *marginally positive* since NATO membership was still optimistically years away, with ample opportunities to lose more territory to Moscow in the interim in eastern Ukraine or the next crisis.¹⁸⁰

As the pre-war crisis unfolded, the room for compromise narrowed, and the prospects for war increased, leading to a rise in energy prices.¹⁸¹ Therefore, the NP alternative, being the least conciliatory option, presented the most significant risk and negative implications for stable economic conditions. Moreover, even if Putin decided to back down, it would have been unlikely that a long-term arrangement to his satisfaction would have been reached, and therefore, the

¹⁷⁸ For example, George W. Bush's boost to his approvals in the wake of al Qaeda's attacks in 2001. Even when another country is the aggressor, we can see popularity rise for the invading leader, as was the case with Putin after seizing and annexing Crimea.

¹⁷⁹ CD #4: NP/P = 9 (P); 2 (N).

¹⁸⁰ CD #4: NP/M = 6 (P) 1 (N).

¹⁸¹ Yoruk Bahceli, "Ukraine crisis-led gas price surge revives demand for inflation hedges," Reuters, February 28, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/ukraine-crisis-led-gas-price-surge-revives-demand-inflation-hedges-2022-02-28/>.

threat of another flare-up would be looming over the horizon. As such, a step back from Putin would have had *somewhat positive* implications economically, whereas, in the event of an invasion, the impact would be catastrophic and *highly negative* for the Ukrainian economy.¹⁸²

Lastly, and diplomatically, if Zelensky had stayed the course with his backers in NATO, it would have likely been perceived as providing *positive* implications had Putin backed down in that he would have demonstrated resolve and courage under threat of invasion. Moreover, if Putin had invaded, he would have likely seen this alternative as *highly positive*, strengthening his partnerships with the West. While not all NATO members were willing to commit to providing Kyiv weapons,¹⁸³ many were. Hence, Zelensky would expect Ukraine to receive much sympathy and strengthen diplomatic ties.¹⁸⁴

It is challenging to assign an accurate subjective probability that Zelensky perceived regarding the likelihood that Putin would invade if Zelensky adopted the NP alternative. While he regularly and publicly downplayed the threat,¹⁸⁵ he also touted the strength of the Ukrainian military and that they were ready for any eventuality.¹⁸⁶ His reasons for downplaying the threat were likely pragmatic to ensure the economy did not implode and panic did not ensue.

¹⁸² CD #4: NP/E = 7 (P); 1 (N).

¹⁸³ Jenny Hill, "Why Germany isn't sending weapons to Ukraine," BBC News, January 28, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60155002>.

¹⁸⁴ CD #4: NP/D = 8 (P); 9 (N).

¹⁸⁵ Quint Forney, "Ukrainian president downplays U.S. assessment of imminent invasion," Politico, January 28, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/01/28/ukrainian-president-downplays-imminent-invasion-00003219>.

¹⁸⁶ "We are not afraid of any predictions, we are not afraid of any people, any enemies. We are not afraid of any dates, because we will defend ourselves on February 16, 17, March and April, September and December - days and months are not important. The year is important: this is 2022, not 2014. This is an important difference. The war has been going on for eight years. We have become just as many times stronger." Volodymyr Zelenskyy, "Volodymyr Zelenskyy met with defenders in Mariupol: The war has been going on for eight years, and Ukraine has become just as many times stronger" The President of Ukraine Official Website, 16 February 2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/volodimir-zelenskij-zustrivsyia-iz-zahisnikami-v-mariupoli-vi-72929>.

Nonetheless, the Biden administration was predicting a high likelihood of an invasion.¹⁸⁷

Therefore, without a strong indicator of what he believed would happen, we will assign *roughly even odds*, on the low end, that the NP alternative would result in Putin not invading.¹⁸⁸

Alternative – Middle Ground (MG): With the polling data above favoring NATO membership and the threat of paramilitary groups violently opposed to concessions with Moscow, adopting the MG alternative during the pre-war crisis would have likely been perceived by Zelensky as having *somewhat negative* implications even if Putin decided to back down. While he may have been credited for helping to avert an invasion, those who viewed joining the alliance as necessary would not have easily been convinced that a more conciliatory route would be productive in deterring Russian aggression, as polling numbers cited above indicated. If Putin invaded, however, we would expect similar *negative* results as was the case for the NP alternative.¹⁸⁹

Militarily, the MG option would have posed a slightly higher potential for avoiding a conflict than the NP alternative and, therefore, be associated with a *somewhat positive*

¹⁸⁷ As Jake Sullivan, the U.S. National Security Advisor, responded when asked about Putin's intention to invade, "Look, it's *hard to assign percentage probabilities* to any of this. We have to think about the range of scenarios that we confront, and it's our job to be ready for all of them. So, what I will say is that the way that he has built up his forces and put them in place, along with the other indicators that we have collected through intelligence, makes it clear to us that there is a very distinct possibility that Russia will choose to act militarily, and there is reason to believe that that could happen on a reasonably swift timeframe. Now, we can't pinpoint the day at this point, and we can't pinpoint the hour, but what we can say is that there is a *credible prospect that a Russian military action would take place even before the end of the Olympics*. (emphasis added) See Jake Sullivan, "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, February 11, 2022," The White House, February 11, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2022/02/11/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-and-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-february-11-2022/>.

¹⁸⁸ CD #4: NP/EUT = 45% (P); 55% (N).

¹⁸⁹ CD #4: MG/P = 3 (P); 2 (N).

implication in the event of Putin backing down, but clearly, a *highly negative* result if Putin invaded.¹⁹⁰

Economically, he would expect a more *positive* effect for MG than for NP if Putin backed down as it would point to a higher probability for a peaceful resolution to the Ukrainian NATO question since Kyiv would have seemed more pliable in its position, but a similarly *highly negative* implication for the economy if Putin still attacked.¹⁹¹

Finally, diplomatically, Zelensky could have expected to see a dip in support from some of its partners in NATO if it started to move away from a clear path toward joining the alliance. Again, the reason would be reasonably straightforward. If NATO nations saw that Putin's threats were affecting Zelensky's resolve, they would be less inclined to invest valuable economic and military resources to defend Kyiv if it was ultimately not committed to joining the alliance. However, those effects would mostly be felt if Putin had decided to back down and then Zelensky continued on the MG path, leading to, at best, a *marginally positive* effect on strengthening Western partnerships. Conversely, had Putin invaded, Zelensky would still have expected to receive strong sympathy and support from NATO allies, although perhaps slightly less than had he remained firmly on a path toward joining Brussels. Accordingly, an invasion would be associated with *positive* diplomatic implications.¹⁹²

Based on our assignment of roughly even odds for Zelensky's probability assigned to the NP option, we would expect a slight rise in the likelihood that the MG would dissuade Putin

¹⁹⁰ CD #4: MG/M = 7 (P); 1 (N).

¹⁹¹ CD #4: MG/E = 8 (P); 1 (N).

¹⁹² CD #4: MG/D = 6 (P); 8 (N).

from invading, but instead of being at the bottom of that probability category, it would towards the high end.¹⁹³

Alternative – Non-Alignment (NA): Based on the discussions above and the position of the Ukrainian electorate, Zelensky could expect to receive a *negative* result politically if he chose the NA alternative even if Putin backed down. This is based on most of the Ukrainian electorate favoring NATO membership and Zelensky already having low approval ratings when following the public's preferred alternative (NP). If he opted for a complete reversal, he would expect severe backlash even if it averted a war, primarily because those who opposed a non-alignment status would likely suggest that Putin was only bluffing and an invasion was never imminent, which would also align with Zelensky's rhetoric throughout most of the early crisis which downplayed the threat of a full-scale invasion.

If the Kremlin moved forward with a war, we would expect, perhaps counterintuitively, only a *somewhat negative* implication, slightly improved over NP and MG for two reasons. First, as was the case for the other alternatives, Zelensky could expect a boost in approvals as Ukrainians united around their troops and commander-in-chief. Second, the minority who had advocated for non-alignment and those who were undecided on which direction to proceed would have seen that even after declaring a path towards non-alignment, Russia still invaded and consequently more likely to throw their full support behind the president as he did all things within his power to avoid an invasion. Nevertheless, the threat to Zelensky's life posed by an invasion would have prevented the alternative's political implications from crossing into positive territory.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ CD #4: MG/EUT = 55% (P); 45% (N).

¹⁹⁴ CD #4: NA/P = 2 (P); 3 (N).

From a military perspective, the NA option had the highest chance of de-escalating the crisis. Moreover, if Putin were to back down, this alternative would provide the greatest space for crafting a long-term diplomatic solution to the Ukraine problem. Of course, it is always possible that Moscow would still find a reason to invade after declaring non-alignment, perhaps if a subsequent nationwide referendum took place and Ukrainians rejected the abandonment of NATO membership. Nevertheless, if Zelensky shared the view of many of his fellow Ukrainians that such a move would not deter continued Russian aggression against Kyiv, then we would expect this alternative to be perceived as having only a modest increase in its *positive* implications for preventing further territorial losses over the MG alternative. Conversely, if Putin invaded, we would expect the same *highly negative* implications as described for both NP and MG concerning the military dimension.¹⁹⁵

Economically, NA would be expected to provide more stable economic conditions than the MG alternative as, once again, the prospects for a longer-term peace would bring greater foreign investment and global stability to energy prices. Moreover, the assumption for this NA alternative does not include abandoning Kyiv's goal for EU membership. Thus, this alternative is economically associated with a highly positive outcome if Putin backed down, and the reverse is true if he pursued war.¹⁹⁶

Finally, diplomatically, Zelensky would expect to damage his long-term relationships with Western partners if Putin backed down after Zelensky declared a non-aligned status. As part of such a declaration, military assistance would necessarily cease. With it, essential relationships with Western militaries resulted in a *somewhat negative* implication while being cognizant that

¹⁹⁵ CD #4: NA/M = 8 (P); 1 (N).

¹⁹⁶ CD #4: NA/E = 9 (P); 1 (N).

economic partnerships with the West and EU could still grow if Putin backed down.

Paradoxically, it is reasonable to contend that worldwide sympathy, especially from Europe, would be greatest if Zelensky adopted this option and Putin still invaded. After all, once an invasion commenced after the Ukrainian President publicly declared the abandonment of NATO aspirations, there would be little justification Putin could fall back onto beyond a contrived false flag operation or claims of denazification. Moreover, Zelensky would likely abruptly change course towards seeking NATO membership in that eventuality, leading to even more significant support and a *highly positive* diplomatic outcome.¹⁹⁷

Lastly, we would expect Zelensky to assign the highest (relative) probability of avoiding an invasion by choosing NA. However, as discussed above, assuming Zelensky felt like most Ukrainians, he likely only believed that by adopting the NA decision, he would only delay an invasion but not further Kremlin aggression in the long term. Nevertheless, it only considers whether it avoids an invasion during this crisis to calculate the implications for the negative outcome. Therefore, given the considerations above, it is likely that Zelensky believed that the NA alternative would have avoided the invasion, for this crisis, as *probable* and in the middle range of that category.¹⁹⁸

Figure 5.4 shows that all theories correctly predicted the observed decision, with RC and PT achieving the MS threshold, PH a VLS level, and EUT faring worst with a VHS. PH discarded MG and NA outright due to their negative implications. Only PT differed in ranking

¹⁹⁷ CD #4: NA/D = 3 (P); 9 (N).

¹⁹⁸ CD #4: NA/EU = 65% (P); 35% (N).

the second and third preference since MG is considered riskier than NA, and as expected, NP is associated with the highest risk.¹⁹⁹

Decision Theory	RC	PH	EUT	PT
Preference Ranking	NP>NA>MG	NP	NP>NA>MG	NP>MG>NA
Sensitivity Level	MS	VLS	VHS	MS

Fig. 5.4. Critical Decision (CD) #4: Zelensky’s preference ranking order & sensitivity levels

Critical Decision #5: Putin – Invade Ukraine

One of the looming questions regarding Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine is whether he had already made up his mind in December to invade and just kept up the appearance of pursuing diplomacy as a credibility measure when, in reality, he was waiting on all the necessary troops to be in place, the land of freezing sufficiently, and the Olympics to end. This question remains unanswerable unless multiple defectors in Putin’s inner circle suggest he had already decided in December or January. Inevitably, Putin would never admit to such a deception, even if true. Thus, short of an admission from the Russian President or well-placed defectors, one of the only indicators is based on Western intelligence. As of February 11th, the U.S. intelligence community was assessing that Putin had still not yet decided.²⁰⁰ However, on February 18th, President Biden, based on intelligence, declared that “we have reason to believe the Russian forces are planning to and intend to attack Ukraine in the coming week — in the coming days.”²⁰¹ Given that U.S. intelligence proved highly prescient throughout the crisis, this study

¹⁹⁹ The composite decision matrix for CD #4 can be found in the Appendix (A.4)

²⁰⁰ Sullivan “Press Briefing Jake Sullivan.”

²⁰¹ Joseph R. Biden Jr., “Remarks by President Biden Providing an Update on Russia and Ukraine,” The White House, February 18, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/18/remarks-by-president-biden-providing-an-update-on-russia-and-ukraine-2/>.

will defer to their assessment that Putin had not decided to invade until approximately mid-February.

Hence, until that date, Putin effectively had three options after the West provided their counter-offer to his December demands. First, he could attempt to negotiate a new security framework (NF) regarding military exercises, major troop deployments, and nuclear weapons, which Washington had proposed in their counteroffer. Next, having failed to coerce NATO, he could opt for the previously considered option of escalating in the Donbas (ED) to seize and annex the entire region. Third, he could launch a full-scale invasion (FI) of Ukraine intended to capture Kyiv, topple the Zelensky regime, and install a pro-Moscow leader and government, which is what he decided. The positive and negative outcomes for the three alternatives above remain the same as for Putin's first critical decision: Ukraine moves away from NATO aspirations and adopts non-alignment, or Kyiv continues to seek membership in the alliance, respectively.

The same implications and rationale for the ED alternative in CD #1 will be used here. Therefore, there are only two additional options to evaluate. First will be the option to negotiate a new security framework (NF) regarding conventional forces on Russia's European border and nuclear weapons placement and capabilities. Washington's response proposed negotiating areas related to arms control in Europe, including nuclear weapons, force postures in Ukraine, and "measures to increase confidence regarding military exercises and maneuvers" in Europe.²⁰² However, what is relevant now is to derive the associated implications of negotiating such a deal,

²⁰² Antony Blinken, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Press Availability," United States Department of State, January 26, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-a-press-availability-13/><https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-a-press-availability-13/>.

and Ukraine remained on a course towards joining NATO or shifted to a more non-aligned status.

Politically, the NF option would unlikely diminish domestic opposition to Putin's regime. Some of the more moderate elites may have perceived a negotiated framework as a positive development, but on the other hand, hardliners who preferred to use military force in Ukraine would likely have viewed the move as a weakness. Thus, a conservative estimate would have a *somewhat positive* effect if Ukraine abandoned NATO aspirations due to pursuing NF, as Putin would expect a popularity boost domestically for moving Kyiv further away from the West. However, we would expect a *somewhat negative* effect if Kyiv did not, as it would validate hardliners' views that military options should have been pursued after the West rejected Putin's demands and emboldened opposition groups within Russia.²⁰³

Economically, Putin would expect a *positive* impact if Ukraine moved towards non-alignment combined with the de-escalatory effects of Putin's willingness to negotiate a new security framework. Arguably, such shifts would lead to fewer sanctions on Moscow, more European business opportunities, and likely more significant foreign investment in Russia as signs of regional stability materialized. Alternatively, if Ukraine stayed the course with NATO, there would still be a *somewhat positive* implication for the reasons above, but attenuated by the persistent friction that would inevitably persist regarding Kyiv's eventual membership.²⁰⁴

Regarding preventing NATO expansion in Putin's near-abroad and strengthening Chinese partnerships, we expect similar positive and negative implications as were discussed for

²⁰³ CD #5: NF/P = 7 (P); 3 (N).

²⁰⁴ CD #5: NF/E = 8 (P); 7 (N).

the SQ alternative under CD #1.²⁰⁵ However, in contrast to the SQ alternative under CD #1, we would expect Putin to place even less likelihood in the NF option moving Kyiv away from NATO than the SQ option, making the NF's alternative *highly probable* that Ukraine still attempts to join NATO.²⁰⁶

CD #5's final alternative (FI) is likely the most consequential of this study as it highlights the constraints and incentives likely considered by Putin before invading. Some observers called Putin's rationality into question when he decided to invade.²⁰⁷ Regardless, we carefully consider the implications for each dimension in the following analysis. The negative and positive outcomes being evaluated with this alternative differ from the two previous alternatives. Instead, the FI outcomes are either a short and successful invasion and replacement of the Zelensky government with a pro-Kremlin leader or a protracted, costly, and high-casualty war.

Putin would undoubtedly perceive a successful invasion as a *highly positive* result for his political survival. He would have demonstrated the nation's military might and defiance against the so-called decadent and corrupt West to the Russian people. As discussed previously, Putin enjoyed massive and sustained popularity boosts when he annexed Crimea, and he would only expect an even more substantial popularity boost for a bolder gambit.

On the other hand, he would likely have perceived a stalemated conflict with high casualties as a *negative* outcome, with several factors preventing it from being considered a highly negative outcome. First, Putin controls the media and, in turn, the narrative of the war,

²⁰⁵ CD #5: NF/M = 8 (P); 2 (N) & NF/D = 6 (P); 5 (N).

²⁰⁶ CD #5: NF/EU = 10% (P); 90% (N).

²⁰⁷ For a discussion of some of the claims suggesting Putin was irrational and why those claims are ill-advised, see Mark F. Cancian, "Putin's Invasion Was Immoral but Not Irrational," Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 10, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/putins-invasion-was-immoral-not-irrational>.

allowing him to unify the Russian people behind the armed forces and prevent dissenting voices from spreading. Moreover, he could expect anti-war demonstrations to erupt, but whereas in democratic states, such protests would be seen as a negative, in Russia, it allows for the police to identify, detain, and imprison the most passionate and vocal opponents to the personalist regime.

After more than a year into the war, even Putin is likely surprised at the resiliency of his popularity numbers despite the war's heavy toll on its military and moderate, but not catastrophic, economic disruptions. Indeed, if one were to evaluate the political implications of the war after one year, most observers would likely consider the implications somewhat positive versus *negative*.²⁰⁸ Consider it took almost 500 days of war before someone in Putin's inner circle defied the Russian President when Yevgeny Prigozhin led his *Wagner* mercenaries to seize the Russian town of Rostov and began moving toward Moscow. While Prigozhin quickly abandoned his so-called quest to remove the military leadership, it was the first significant elite-led challenge to Putin since the outbreak of the war. Regardless, this study evaluates what each leader likely perceived the implications were for each alternative *at the time of the decision*. Therefore, this study remains committed to Putin perceiving *negative* political implications associated with a stalemated high-casualty war.²⁰⁹

Economically, there were severe implications for Putin if he chose the FI alternative regardless of its success. Most prominently is the role played by the Nord Stream 2 pipeline,

²⁰⁸ When the crisis began in December, Putin saw a steady increase in popularity, reaching 71 percent in February and then an additional 12-point boost to 83 percent in March after the outbreak of the war. Like Crimea, this “rally-round-the-flag” effect was not a blip and has demonstrated staying power. It was not until his September decision to institute a national mobilization that his numbers fell out of the 80s, but interestingly, he only lowered his ratings six points to 77 percent. However, as officials announced an end to the mobilization in October, his numbers gradually returned to the low 80s. Levada-Center, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings>.

²⁰⁹ CD #5: FI/P = 9 (P); 2 (N).

which was estimated to deliver significant amounts of new annual revenue.²¹⁰ Indeed, Putin would have considered the project at risk if he invaded, as even the U.S. Congress had attempted but failed to pass sanctions against the pipeline in January 2022.²¹¹ With such a sizeable addition to Russia's economy and, more importantly, Putin's ability to increase wealth to his key supporters, the Nord Stream Pipeline issue would have certainly been considered.

Consequently, if the war went well, some of the revenue lost from the pipeline possibly being abandoned could be recouped through the new partnership with the puppet regime in Kyiv. This income would probably come from corruption and increased (lopsided) trade between the two countries. Nevertheless, the potential for long-term disruptions to Europe's willingness to buy energy from Russia would be risky.²¹² Furthermore, the West was threatening severe economic sanctions if Putin invaded, and thus, he would have expected those sanctions to last longer if the war was protracted than if it were short, but regardless, they would be significant. We would expect the economic implications of a successful war to be *negative* and a stalemate war to be *highly negative*.²¹³

From a military perspective, a successful invasion would undoubtedly be perceived as a *highly positive* implication associated with FI, as it would assure Kyiv's long-term protégé status

²¹⁰ Martin Russell, "The Nord Stream 2 pipeline," European Parliamentary Research Service, July 2021. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/690705/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)690705_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/690705/EPRS_BRI(2021)690705_EN.pdf).

²¹¹ Timothy Gardner and Richard Cowan, "Cruz's Nord Stream 2 sanctions bill fails in U.S. Senate," Reuters, January 13, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-democrats-slam-cruz-nord-stream-2-sanctions-bill-ahead-vote-2022-01-13/>.

²¹² Indeed, between the end of 2019 and through the end of 2021, the EU was making progress on adopting and implementing measures associated with the "European Green Deal," which calls for no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050. Of course, such a direction would place Putin's fossil fuel-based economy at great risk. See European Commission, "A European Green Deal," 2023, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en.

²¹³ CD #5: FI/E = 2 (P); 1 (N).

to Moscow, and to an even greater degree than Belarus. This outcome assumes that a popular uprising does not overthrow the newly installed regime. However, we can be reasonably confident that if Putin believed that would be the outcome, he would not have considered this alternative. Moreover, while a successful regime-change campaign would not formally prevent Georgia from joining the alliance, such a victory would send a strong warning to Tbilisi if it continued on its path toward NATO and likely temper their aspirations since they, like Kyiv were years away from joining the alliance.²¹⁴

Conversely, if the war stalemated, Putin could expect the NATO countries to provide even greater financial and military support to Ukraine and likely continue to train its forces outside its borders. While a protracted invasion may lead to a generational delay in Kyiv joining the alliance, it would undoubtedly lead to increased and continual cooperation with NATO to previously unseen degrees and a symbol of democratic strength. Therefore, a stagnate invasion would result in a *negative* outcome.²¹⁵

Finally, diplomatically, we would expect Putin to emerge in a stronger position and a more capable partner for Xi if the invasion was a success, leading to a *somewhat positive* outcome. On the other hand, if Russia became bogged down in a major war in Ukraine, it would be perceived as a weaker and less valuable partner for Beijing. Indeed, Russia's dependency on China would increase dramatically as Western trade and sanctions forced Russia to send its energy to India and China at discounted rates. Consequently, while a failed invasion may lead to

²¹⁴ Russian troops remain in Georgia's breakaway region of South Ossetia which makes NATO membership highly unlikely until the frozen conflict is resolved.

²¹⁵ CD #5: FI/M = 9 (P); 2 (N).

a strengthened partnership with Xi, it would place Putin as the junior partner in the relationship, thus resulting in *somewhat negative* implications.²¹⁶

Using the previous discussion in CD #1, from an expected utility perspective, based on national capabilities alone, Putin would have perceived his chances of victory as *highly probable*.²¹⁷ As a result, Putin would have anticipated significant positive expected utility from the FI alternative.

The preference ranking order for CD #5 is shown below in Figure (5.5). Interestingly, RC and PH predicted rankings were incorrect and did so confidently, earning a VLS rating. This is despite PH removing the ED option as it presented negative political implications. At first glance, such a finding may indicate that Putin did not make a rational choice. However, with the added precision of probabilities expected utility brings, it demonstrated a robust positive utility compared to the other alternatives despite the anticipated negative economic outcome. PT presented the correct preference ranking and once again selected ED as the second preference, given that it was riskier than NF and only slightly missed reaching the HS threshold.²¹⁸

Decision Theory	RC	PH	EUT	PT
Preference Ranking	NF>FI>ED	NF>FI	FI>NF>ED	FI>ED>NF
Sensitivity Level	VLS	VLS	MS	VHS

Fig. 5.5. Critical Decision (CD) #5: Putin's preference ranking order & sensitivity levels

²¹⁶ CD #5: FI/D = 7 (P); 3 (N).

²¹⁷ CD #5: FI/EUT = 82% (P); 18% (N).

²¹⁸ The composite decision matrix for CD #5 can be found in the Appendix (A.5)

Summary

Depicted below is a summary of the findings. Figure 5.6 provides an overview of each theory's overall prediction accuracies and their sensitivity levels averaged across all five CDs.²¹⁹ Notably, only PT achieved 100% accuracy, suggesting hypothesis #4 (H4) is the strongest decision theory tested to fully answer the research question of why the Russo-Ukrainian pre-war crisis erupted and ended in war instead of de-escalation. In Chapter 3, two questions were required answers to test the hypothesis effectively. First, from an independent variable perspective, PT's predictions emerged as the most consistent with the observed real-world observations compared to the other three theories. Second, regarding the causal effect of the proposed intervening variables, PT eliminated the de-escalatory options.²²⁰

Sensitivity levels were originally added as an added discriminator if multiple theories achieved a 100% accuracy rate. Despite a tie in accuracy not emerging, a few comments on the sensitivity results are warranted. For example, PT tied EUT with the highest sensitivity level. Interestingly, however, after removing the incorrect predictions of RC and PH, and only correct predictions are included, their sensitivity levels noticeably increased, whereas EUT decreased, as shown in Figure 5.7. Regardless, PT's predictions emerged as the most sensitive of the four theories, sitting in the upper range of the moderately sensitive category when averaged across all five CDs. While a lower sensitivity level would be preferred when combined with a 100% prediction accuracy, PT secures the position as the leading candidate theory to explain best the decision strategy of all three Presidents across each of the five CDs. Finally, Figure 5.8 depicts

²¹⁹ Percentages are assigned to each sensitivity level to produce the average sensitivity ratings: VHS = 85%, HS = 70%, MS = 55%, LS = 40%, VLS = 25%. A *lower* percentage is preferred as it indicates lower sensitivity to changes in the underlying implication ratings.

²²⁰ The third hypothesis testing question was contingent and only required if multiple theories achieved 100% prediction accuracy, which did not occur.

the overall sensitivity distribution across the theories and all CDs, with PT being the most evenly distributed across all five categories.

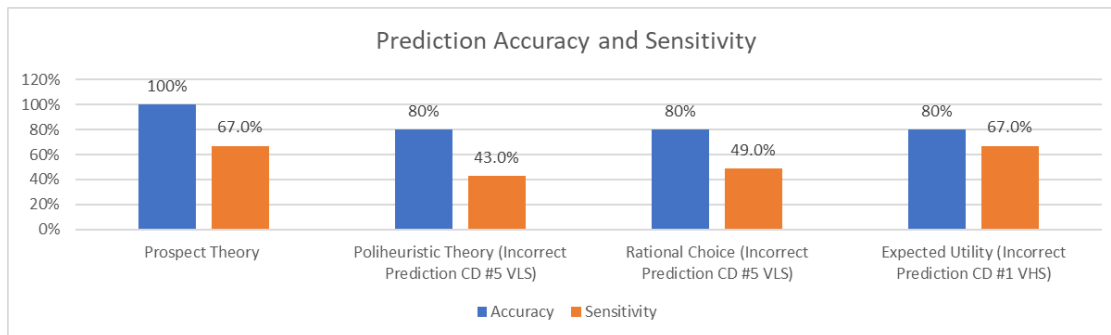


Fig. 5.6. Summary of Prediction Accuracy and Sensitivity Levels by Decision Theory.

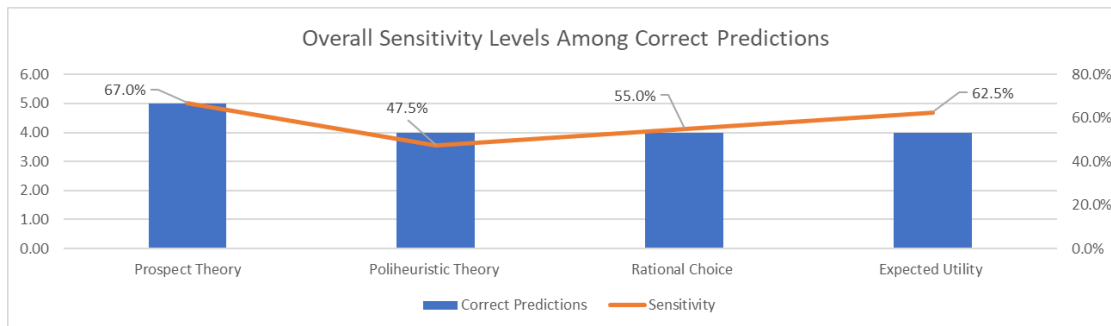


Fig. 5.7. Sensitivity Levels by theory when including only correct predictions

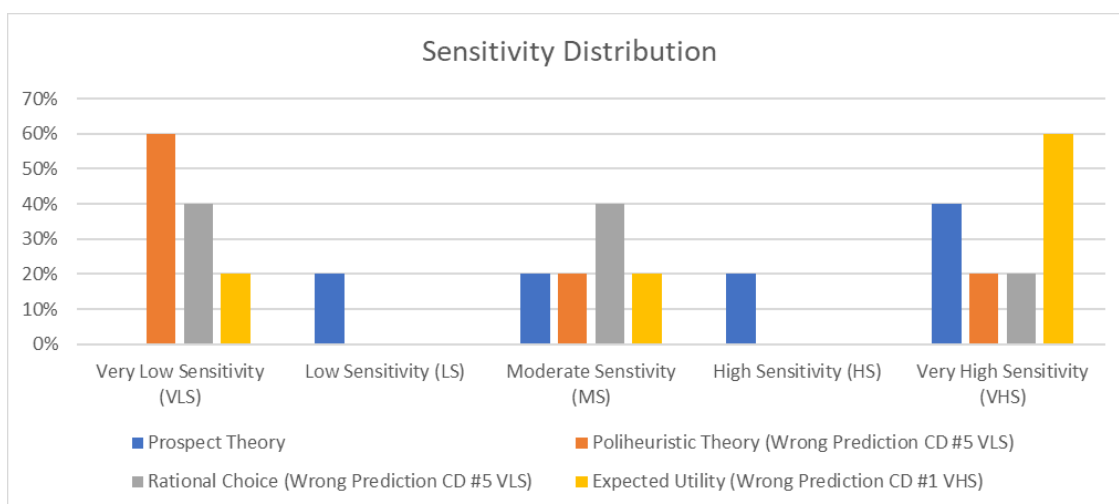


Fig. 5.8. Sensitivity Distribution by Theory

These findings above will be further contextualized in the next and final chapter, providing new insights and several conclusions and recommendations for policymakers, intelligence analysts, and scholars.

Chapter 6 – Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

This study aimed to explain the instantiation and outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian pre-war crisis through the lens of decision theory. On this, four distinct decision theory-based frameworks have been tested against the real-world choices of three presidents to ascertain which one most accurately predicted their observed decisions throughout the crisis.¹ Importantly, reliability, parsimony, and elegance are considered, but only secondarily, to accuracy.² Accordingly, the following conclusions and recommendations are informed by the findings derived from the analysis conducted in the previous chapter.

Conclusions

Conclusion 1: Rational Choice Theory – Moderate Accuracy with higher reliability

Rational Choice (RC) demonstrated an 80% overall accuracy rating against the five critical decisions (CD), which matches the accuracy of Poliheuristic (PH) and Expected Utility (EUT) frameworks but falls short of Prospect Theory's (PT) 100% rating. However, one of RC's strengths was its relatively high reliability (low sensitivity) rating, the second-lowest of the four tested theories. In addition, RC is perhaps the most parsimonious of the theories as it avoided relying on any probability calculations and merely selected the alternative with the highest overall score after averaging the best and worst outcomes for each alternative. RC is also

¹ *Accuracy* is determined simply by comparing each theory's predicted first-ranked preference to the observed Presidential decision for each critical decision (CD). The accuracy rating is presented as a percentage with a higher number more desirable.

² *Reliability* is based on the sensitivity of each preference ranking order to small changes in the underlying dimensional values. The sensitivity analysis results are also presented as percentages, with lower percentages indicating less sensitivity, and thus, a lower value is preferred. Conversely, higher reliability indicates lower sensitivity. For a complete discussion on how the sensitivity analysis is conducted, see Chapter 5. *Parsimony* refers to the simplicity of the theory and the number of required assumptions, whereas an *elegant* theory is easily understood and has broad explanatory power.

considered quite elegant as the concept of individuals as outcome maximizers is easily understood and broadly applies to multiple domains of human behavior, including economics, society, and politics. Nevertheless, as discussed in Chapter 2, considerable empirical evidence exists of individuals making irrational decisions and violating the maximization principle.

Such a violation of rationality is seen in RC's sole incorrect prediction of CD #5, which was Putin's decision to conduct a full-scale invasion of Ukraine instead of simply limiting the invasion to the Donbas or negotiating a new security framework with the West. This should not be overly surprising, given the highly negative implications associated with a failed or stalemated war. Notably, RC incorrectly predicted Putin's real-world choice by a high margin and suggested he would achieve the greatest maximization if he negotiated a new security framework. However, this prediction was also rated as having very low sensitivity and thus should have been considered very reliable. In this case, one could argue that Putin deviated from selecting the most rational choice, which is why RC failed to predict the correct choice.

On the other hand, some could suggest that the RC model used in this study was too simplistic and needed to include each President's subjective probabilities to predict their selections more accurately. Indeed, in the case of CD #5, they would be correct, as we see EUT correctly predicting a full-scale invasion after Putin's expected probability of winning the war was added to the underlying data.

Overall, RC was generally effective in predicting most of the CDs; however, its simplicity led to an inaccurate prediction of arguably the most consequential decision of the entire crisis. Moreover, while the accurate results were generally considered reliable, the high confidence associated with its inaccurate prediction should pause analysts for future analyses if they consider using RC with the associated decision rules used in this study.

Conclusion 2: Expected Utility – Moderate accuracy with moderate reliability

Serving as the second decision framework underpinned by rationalist assumptions, EUT is considered not just a normative theory for how people *should* make decisions but also by its advocates that it is an effective *descriptive* theory of how people intuitively make decisions, albeit without necessarily involving explicit mathematical calculations. Nevertheless, as discussed in Chapter 2, EUT has been repeatedly challenged with empirical evidence demonstrating individuals deviating from maximizing their expected utility. Still, from an accuracy perspective, EUT performed on par with the other theories, which achieved an 80% success rate but fell short of PT's 100% accuracy. In contrast, however, EUT performed worse regarding overall sensitivity (67%) compared to RC (43%) and PH (49%).

This spike in sensitivity is a necessary result of the added complexity of EUT and its operationalization, which required subjective probabilities assigned to each alternative. Accordingly, sensitivity tests were conducted against EUT predictions similar to the other theories, but an additional layer of sensitivity testing was performed on the assigned probability ratings. Hence, the added variable of probabilities can be both a strength and a weakness of EUT.

From a strength perspective, as discussed above, when EUT considered probabilities, it correctly predicted Putin's decision to invade, whereas RC did not. Indeed, when an 82% chance of victory is assigned to Putin's expected probability, the prediction is accurate and only moderately sensitive to underlying value changes. Only when the expected probability of success drops to 54% is a full-scale invasion no longer seen as the alternative with the highest expected utility, and then negotiating a new security framework is the preferred alternative.

On the other hand, the added probability creates a challenge for analysts attempting to predict future decisions and explain ones from the past. Such a task is appropriately illustrated

with CD #1, which was Putin's decision on whether or not to initiate a militarized crisis, continue with the status quo, or escalate militarily in the Donbas. EUT incorrectly predicted that Putin would choose the status quo over initiating a crisis, albeit with a very high sensitivity indicating relatively minor changes to the underlying dimensional values and probabilities would result in the predicted rank-order switching. Further, both the alternative of status quo and initiating a crisis were perceived to have a low probability of success in achieving their goals of moving Ukraine away from NATO membership or coercing NATO to close its doors to Kyiv. This suggests an apparent weakness of the EUT approach when the first and second-ranked alternatives are assigned probabilities that diverge only minimally, leading the analyst to lose confidence in the reliability of the results.

As demonstrated above, operationalizing subjective probabilities is a challenging task. In some cases, it becomes easier when considering objective and measurable capabilities, as was done when arriving at the 82% expected probability of success for Putin's invasion or Biden's expected probability of the U.S. being able to defeat Russia in a conventional conflict. Still, if there is a lesson to be learned from the Russo-Ukrainian war, objective measures of national capabilities do not always accurately reflect a state's ability to win a war. As the Ukrainian military has demonstrated, resolve and morale are intangible and subjective measures that perhaps made the critical difference in compensating for Kyiv's relative weaknesses to Moscow on purely objective capabilities.

Still, if the leader in question relies upon objective metrics for assigning subjective probabilities, then the usefulness of EUT remains intact if one wishes to predict the leader's choices. Hence, like many experts in the West, Putin likely relied upon these more quantifiable metrics to assess if Russia would prevail if it invaded. Importantly, EUT does not claim to

guarantee a successful outcome for the decision maker, only that if the probabilities and utilities for each outcome are what is *expected*, then the decision maker *should* and *will* select the alternative with the highest overall utility. Thus, if Putin followed this formula and assigned an 82% chance of success, he would have made the proper decision to maximize his utility.

Overall, while EUT may be the most appropriate normative theory for decision-makers to follow, it may not be the best decision theory for analysts trying to predict or explain the choices of international leaders. Leaders appropriately and deliberately mask their perceptions of probabilities and their capabilities to add uncertainty to their adversary's decision calculus, complicating the analyst's task. Moreover, these challenges to the analyst become more pressing when dealing with nebulous decisions that lack observable measures or a historical precedent. For example, when trying to determine if Ukraine would be dissuaded from joining NATO with various levels of pressure from Moscow. In contrast, the final two theoretical frameworks, PH and PT, provided a more straightforward and less subjective way of predicting decisions while accounting for known deviations from rational choice and expected utility models.

Conclusion 3: Poliheuristic Theory – Moderate Accuracy with the highest reliability

Poliheuristic (PH) Theory was explicitly constructed to blend aspects of rational choice and psychological models to create a more accurate descriptive theory. In order to achieve this, PH theory proceeds in two stages by eliminating any alternatives that may lead to significant risk to the leader's political survival, then proceeding with a more holistic, analytical, and compensatory approach of evaluating alternatives across multiple dimensions. While PH theory did not achieve the highest accuracy, it maintained equivalency with RC and EUT at 80%. What was particularly favorable for PH was that it achieved the lowest overall sensitivity (43%), indicating that the results are likely the most reliable of the four theories tested.

PH and RC theories' sensitivity remained the same for all CDs except for CD #4, which was Zelensky's decision not to deviate from a path towards joining NATO. RC had a moderately sensitive prediction, whereas PH had a more desirable, very low sensitivity rating. This occurred because two of the three alternatives had such negative political implications that PH immediately eliminated them, leaving only the NATO path alternative. Further, a significant change in the underlying political values was required before either of the two alternatives would be sufficiently acceptable politically even to be considered, which led to a lower sensitivity rating.

The same scenario almost appeared for CD #5, Putin's decision to invade, with one of the three alternatives being outright eliminated due to adverse political implications. Had the alternative of negotiating a new security framework been rated slightly lower politically, PH would have predicted the correct alternative, further distinguishing itself from RC and achieving a 100% prediction accuracy.

Another challenge of PH is determining the threshold for adverse political risk. The theory often invokes the term *avoid-major-political-loss*, but what determines *major*, and does that imply a *minor* political loss becomes compensatory and is then holistically considered across dimensions? While this study adopted the decision rule that *any* aggregate negative rating in the political dimension would be automatically eliminated, the theory's lack of specificity on the loss threshold may lead to widely divergent findings when the theory is applied to the same scenario by multiple analysts using slightly different rulesets and, in turn, result in repeatability challenges.

In terms of elegance and parsimony, PH is generally less so in both areas than RC and EUT, although not considerably. As discussed in Chapter 2, PH has been successfully applied to

many decision types but is still relatively new and understudied relative to RC and EUT. Its two-stage decision process also adds assumptions and a level of complexity not required in RC. However, it is arguable that PH's two stages are no less parsimonious than EUT's additional requirement of assigning subjective probabilities. Ultimately, it may be appropriate to sacrifice some parsimony if one can achieve more reliable results (e.g., CD #4) and perhaps more accurate results, as was almost the case of CD #5.

Conclusion 4: Prospect Theory – Highest Accuracy with moderate reliability

Prospect Theory (PT) was the only theory to achieve a 100% accuracy rating but tied with EUT for the highest sensitivity at 67% (lowest reliability), sitting in the upper range of the moderately sensitive category when averaged across all five CDs. Nevertheless, its performance was impressive, considering that PT's decision rules are entirely unlike the other three tested theories. Whereas RC, PH, and EUT all prefer the option with the highest overall score or utility, PT uses a wholly different rule set that focuses singularly on the variance in the outcome, yet all the theories rely on the same underlying values. A smaller variance in outcome is considered less risky and hence preferred by leaders placed in the domain of gains, and the reverse approach for leaders in a domain of losses. Notably, the domain for each leader was determined prior to any values being assigned to each alternative's dimensional values, and hence, had Zelensky and Putin been placed in a domain of gains and Biden in a domain of losses, PT would have failed to predict any decision correctly.

Such reality leads to a couple of meaningful conclusions. First is the criticality of correctly assigning the decision-makers' domain, especially if trying to predict future decisions. If an analyst falls short in this regard, one can expect an unsatisfactory level of accuracy. Indeed, a frequent criticism of PT is that it lacks any formal framework for determining how an

individual frames her domain. Still, as others have pointed out, this shortcoming is no more catastrophic for PT than the lack of a theory for preference formulation for RC.³ Moreover, frequently, it is relatively straightforward to determine if a leader is in a domain of gains and losses, especially when the status quo is used as their neutral reference point. Nonetheless, when a leader's domain is murky and challenging to assign, caution should be advised when attempting to predict decisions using PT.

Second, the rule set used in this study was straightforward in that the alternative, which was most or least risky, would be the one preferred by the leader in a domain of losses or gains, respectively. This case study had five critical decisions, each with three alternatives. It just happened that each leader picked the *most* or *least* risky of the three alternatives for each CD. However, there are conceivable situations where a leader's risk aversion or acceptance is not wholly skewed to one side or the other of the spectrum. In those cases, we expect the decision maker to select the alternative between the two extremes. Thus, while the model and ruleset created and used in this study demonstrated to be highly accurate for this crisis, it would not be particularly sensitive to leaders who may fall more or less into a domain grey zone.

On the other hand, it may be true that the alternatives leaders consider during a militarized crisis are often dichotomous, with middle-ground alternatives rarely being pursued. If true, which remains an empirical question, then how PT was operationalized for this study would remain an effective model for anticipating and explaining crisis-related decisions.

Ultimately, PT was highly effective despite acquiring a moderate sensitivity level, the criticality of adequately assigning a leader's domain, and the potential for leaders to operate in a

³ Rose McDermott, "Prospect theory in political science: Gains and losses from the first decade." *Political Psychology* 25, no. 2 (2004): 291.

domain grey zone. Indeed, in perhaps the most consequential of the CDs, only PT and EU correctly predicted that Putin would launch a full-scale invasion. Prospect theory is correctly considered by most as less parsimonious than the other three theories based on its requirement to assign a domain for each individual under consideration. However, as demonstrated by this study, the task of doing so is not overly onerous and, in the end, produces superior results. Finally, PT is a highly elegant theory. It is easily understood and effectively applied in a variety of fields.

Conclusion 5: Political Survival – The Most Significant Dimension

Perhaps the most striking conclusion is the predictive power of the political dimension when viewed in isolation and the associated effects of increasing the reliability of its predictions. Recall that the most salient dimension for each leader in this study was the political, which received the highest weighting. Still, in every case, the second most relevant dimension was only rated 10% less than the political dimension, and the third dimension was only 20% less. Moreover, the study's baseline findings discussed above all relied on the same distribution of weights for each leader for every CD, with the political dimension sitting at the top.

What becomes remarkable is when each dimension is considered hierarchically, with the political dimension being preferred over all others and the economic, military, and diplomatic dimensions only considered if there is a tie in the political dimension across alternatives. Such an approach is considered a lexicographic (non-compensatory) decision rule and was briefly discussed in Chapter 2 when explaining aspects of PH.⁴ However, a purely lexicographic (LEX)

⁴ PH theory's first stage employs an elimination-by-aspect (EBA) decision rule. As Mintz, Geva, and DeRouen write, "a major process component of the poliheuristic model of foreign policy decision-making is based on the elimination-by-aspect decision rule originally developed by Tversky (1972)." Mintz, Alex, Nehemia Geva, and Karl DeRouen. "Mathematical models of foreign policy decision-making: Compensatory vs. non-compensatory." *Synthese* 100 (1994): 453. In PH's second stage, in keeping with its notion of many heuristics, the

approach would not be consistent with PH theory.⁵ Therefore, this study suggests that this fifth decision framework is best described as a *political-lexicographic strategy* and offered here as the *political-lexicographic model* (PLM). Fascinatingly, when preference rankings are determined according to the PLM, its predictions are 100% accurate and tie RC with the second lowest sensitivity at 49% (See figure 6.1).

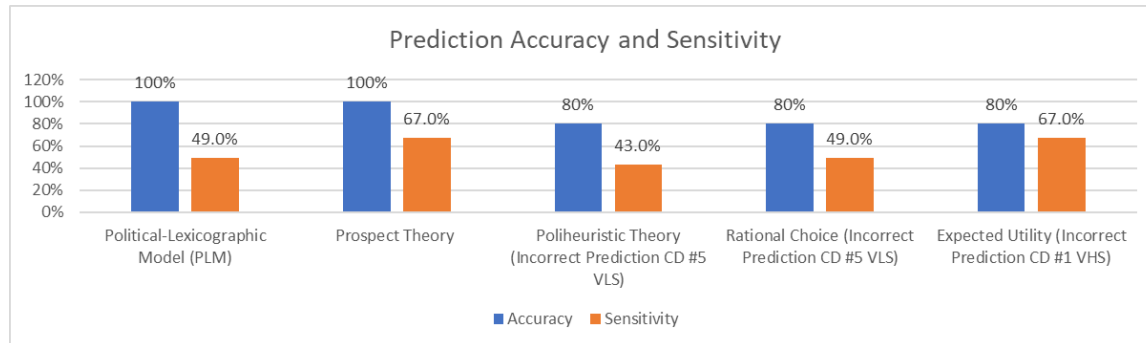


Fig. 6.1. PLM Prediction Accuracy & Sensitivity compared to baseline findings.

decision-maker will then employ “a lexicographic or maximizing decision rule used in selecting an alternative from the subset of ‘surviving’ alternatives. Steven B. Redd and Alex Mintz. “Policy perspectives on national security and foreign policy decision making,” *Policy Studies Journal* 41 (2013): S17.

⁵ For three reasons, a pure politically derived lexicographic (LEX) approach would not be consistent with PH theory. First, PH theory is fundamentally a two-stage decision theory, envisioned to incorporate non-compensatory (EBA) psychological heuristics in the first stage and compensatory rationalist decision rules intended to maximize outcomes in the second. In contrast, a LEX-only approach would be only one stage and contain only one decision rule. Second, when using EBA in the first stage and a compensatory maximizing approach in the second stage, such as RC, different predictions occur with PH compared to using a purely LEX approach. Indeed, for CD #5, PH predicted the incorrect alternative even after following a politically driven EBA decision rule, which eliminated one of the three alternatives in the first stage, but then selected the wrong alternative in the second stage when applying a compensatory RC-based maximizing approach, whereas a single-stage politically driven LEX decision rule considered all three alternatives and selected the correct one in only one stage. Third, when a politically driven EBA decision rule is employed strictly, and all three alternatives carry negative political implications, EBA would eliminate them all according to PH’s avoid-major-political loss principle. Conversely, a politically driven LEX decision rule would consider all three but select the least worst alternative in the political dimension. Indeed, as Mintz and Geva explain the PH perspective, “the political dimension is important in foreign policy decisions not so much because politicians are driven by public support but because they are averse to loss and would therefore *reject* alternatives that may hurt them politically” (emphasis added), Alex Mintz and Nehemia Geva. “The Poliheuristic Theory of Foreign Policy Decisionmaking.” In *Decisionmaking on War and Peace: The Cognitive-Rational Debate*, eds. Nehemia Geva and Alex Mintz. 1997 Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 84.

Further, suppose we remove the political dimension and only include diplomatic, economic, and military dimensions for the four tested theories and maintain their original weightings. In that case, the result is a sharp drop in accuracy for EUT (80% to 20%) and PT (100% to 60%),⁶ as shown in Figure 6.2. Moreover, this approach nearly produces an *additional* incorrect prediction for RC and PH by the narrowest of margins (.05) for CD #4. Additionally, all four theories' prediction reliability decreases (sensitivity increases) significantly among correct predictions (See Figure 6.3).

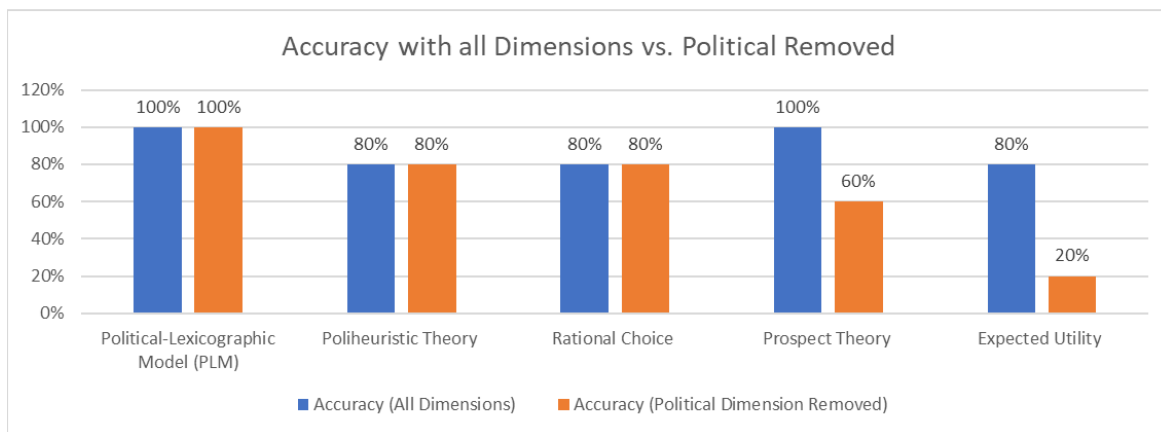


Fig. 6.2. Prediction accuracy with all dimensions vs. Political dimension removed

⁶ Removing the political dimension results in PT incorrectly predicting CD #1 and #4, and EU incorrectly predicting CD #3, #4, #5, in addition to #1.

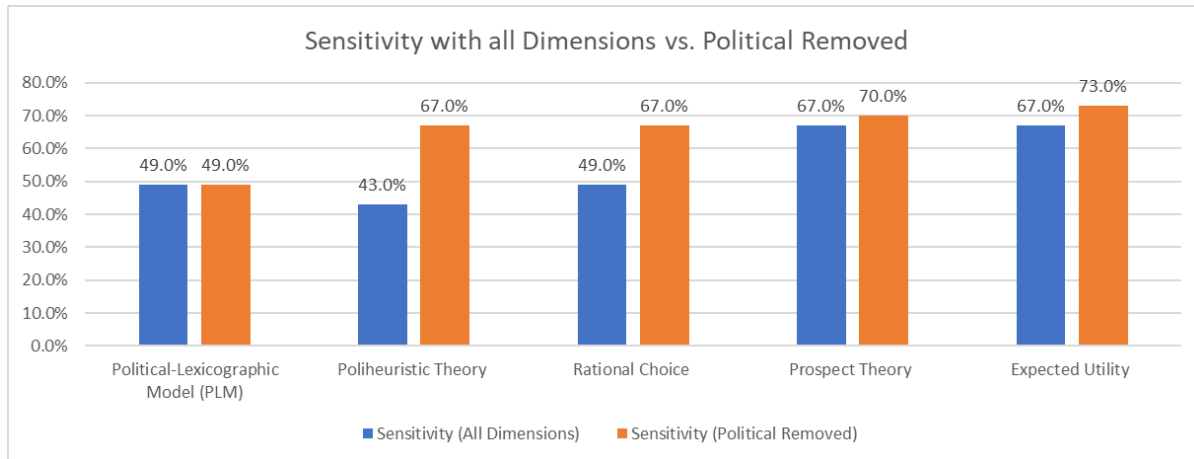


Fig. 6.3. Sensitivity with all dimensions vs. political removed.⁷

Additionally, when theories predict the wrong decision, they typically become more confident in those results when the political dimension is removed, meaning less sensitivity associated with the wrong prediction, which is not ideal.

Lastly, Figure 6.4 depicts PLM accuracy and sensitivity against the other four decision theory frameworks but with their political dimension removed, resulting in unfavorable performance across all theories except PLM. Arguably, the rationalist-based perspectives of RC and EUT, when not including the political dimension, provide insight into the predictions and reliability under certain neorealist-based approaches to explaining this crisis. Indeed, neorealism's defensive and offensive strands largely dismiss the explanatory power of domestic considerations in the context of international behavior. However, the findings of this study suggest that when one removes the role of domestic politics and political survival and limits the analysis to only the military, economic, and diplomatic dimensions, the outcome is less than optimal for both accuracy and reliability (see Figure 6.4).

⁷ Figure 6.3 depicts overall sensitivity, including the newly incorrect predictions that received lower sensitivity ratings. As a result, if incorrect predictions were removed, the sensitivity levels for all four theories would increase further.

Admittedly, however, the comparison of RC and EUT to offensive and defensive realism is somewhat inadequate. In the case of the former pair, their dimensional goals are individual-based in this study and not explicitly formulated around structural and balance-of-power considerations, as would be the case for the latter pair. Moreover, as previously discussed, structural realism, unlike defensive and offensive realism, does not claim to predict specific behavior and foreign policies. Nonetheless, the significantly unfavorable results produced when the political element is removed raise essential questions regarding defensive and offensive realism's ability to explain the crisis adequately without regard to domestic politics. Thus, the PLM offers a complementary framework to structural realism by providing a more complete understanding of war and its origins.

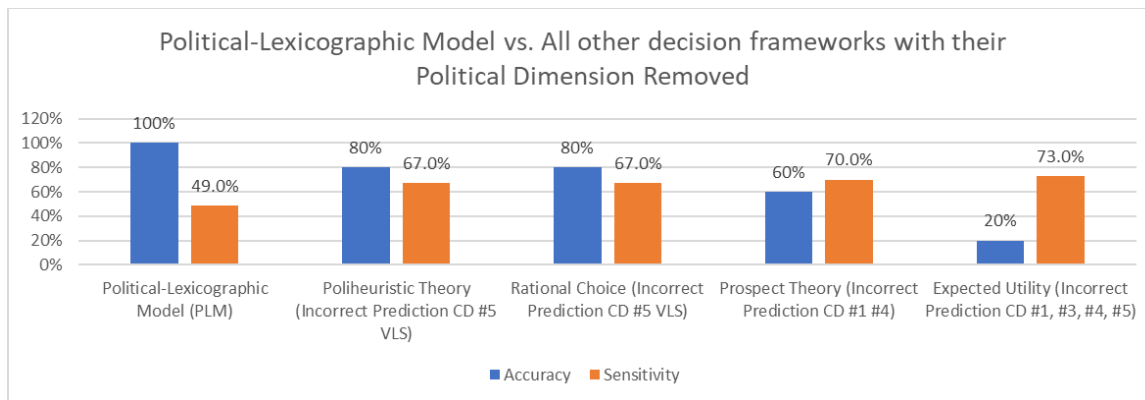


Fig. 6.4. Accuracy and Sensitivity: PLM vs. All Others (Political Dimension Removed)

Finally, a political-lexicographic model appears to be the most parsimonious and arguably as elegant as RC and EUT. From a simplicity perspective, its only assumption is that leaders will pick whatever policy benefits them the most politically, preventing the need to compare values in other dimensions unless there is a tie among alternatives in the political dimension. Further, it is elegant in that it is easily explained and understood: people make decisions according to what they think is in their best interest, and for political leaders, that

means selecting the alternative with the greatest political utility. Accordingly, in the final interpretation of these findings, one must conclude the oversized role the political dimension played in this crisis and potentially other international crises. However, the latter assertion requires further empirical study, although aspects of Selectorate Theory and Diversionary War Theory provide some support.⁸ Ultimately, an unexpected conclusion of this study is that a *political-lexicographic model* (PLM) most appropriately explains the crisis-related decisions when evaluated on accuracy, reliability, parsimony, and even elegance compared to the other four decision models tested.⁹

Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Analysts and scholars should incorporate multiple theoretical models

Like meteorologists who leverage the strengths and weaknesses of multiple weather forecast models, such as the European and American forecast models, international relations

⁸ While Selectorate and Diversionary War Theory are discussed in Chapter 2, the latter is only briefly introduced. For more on diversionary war theory, see: George W. Downs and David M. Roake, *Optimal Imperfection?: Domestic Uncertainty and Institutions in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Jack Levy, "The Diversionary Theory of War: A Critique," in *Handbook of War Studies*, ed. Manus Midlarsky (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 259-288. Alastair Smith, "International Crises and Domestic Politics," *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 3 (1998): 623-638; Suzanne Werner, "Absolute and Limited War: The Possibilities of Foreign Imposed Regime Change," *International Interactions* 22 (1996): 67-88; Hein Goemans, *War and Punishment: The Causes of War Termination and the First World War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Diana Richards, T. Clifton Morgan, Rick Wilson, Valerie Schwebach, and Garry Young, "Good Times, Bad Times and the Diversionary Use of Force: A Tale of Some Not-So-Free Agents," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 37 (1993): 504-535.

⁹ For those who may object to this study offering the Political-Lexicographic Model (PLM) as a significant conclusion despite not being identified at the outset as a hypothesis to be tested, see Timothy McKeown's critical review of King, Keohane, and Verba's (KKV) position regarding research design. McKeown contends that if researchers restrict themselves to KKV's view of interpreting statistical results through their particular lens of logic, it may lead to discounting "the impact of previously ignored variables," among other oversights. Further, McKeown suggests that case studies "are often more important for their value in clarifying previously obscure theoretical relationships than for providing an additional observation to be added to a sample." Accordingly, this study seeks to avoid such pitfalls by highlighting the unexpected yet strong empirical relationship between the political dimension and the critical decisions observed during the crisis, particularly when viewed in isolation from other dimensions. See Timothy J. McKeown, "Case studies and the statistical worldview: Review of King, Keohane, and Verba's *Designing social inquiry: Scientific inference in qualitative research*," *International Organization* 53, no. 1 (1999): 168, 174; and Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, Princeton University Press, 1994.

scholars and intelligence analysts should integrate several models into their analysis to explain and predict policy decisions. For instance, consider if this study had decided only to test RC and PH. In this example, both incorrectly and with very high confidence, predicted Putin would not launch a full-scale invasion.

Moreover, if an intelligence analyst relied solely on EUT, she would have done well in predicting Putin's invasion but likely emerged incorrect in forecasting Putin's decision to initiate a militarized crisis or, if done so correctly, had very little confidence in that assessment due to sensitivity. Conversely, we see that PT performed very well when the right domain was assessed for each leader. Therefore, when analysts are confident in their assignment of domains, they may prefer to rely on PT. In contrast, when they are less confident about domains, they may be better off considering EUT, especially if they are reasonably confident in the leader's subjective probabilities for success or failure.

Furthermore, if an analyst tests all four frameworks and each predicts the same decision, that should give the analyst and policymaker greater confidence in their overall assessment. On the other hand, a prediction consensus among all but one theory may highlight a possible flaw in the analytic assumptions and lead to a more realistic alternative analysis, potentially shifting the prevailing viewpoint in one's analytic organization.

Finally, the novel conceptual model presented in this study, built upon the ADA foundation, allows an analyst to easily compare the four theories tested without needing to produce different values for each theory. Indeed, one of the contributions of this study is offering an intuitive yet rigorous framework that enables analysts to compare predictions of multiple frameworks, in particular EUT and PT, for the same scenario using identical underlying data. Moreover, this model does not need to be limited to the four theories discussed in this study, and

it is recommended that future scholars attempt to integrate a wider variety of decision theories into the framework and improve upon the models offered. Finally, developing a more rigorous way to incorporate and test structural theories, such as neorealism, beyond the preliminary analysis offered above would also aid the field in delineating each theory's relative strengths and weaknesses within different international contexts.

Recommendation #2: Overweight the Political Dimension

Conclusion five and its underlying findings reinforced the study's early premise that political survival matters, but unexpectedly to a greater degree than even initially assumed by this author or PH theory contends.¹⁰ Prioritizing the political dimension according to the PLM, which adopts a straightforward decision rule, produces the most accurate and nearly highest reliability, and does so in the most parsimonious and elegant manner. Moreover, it accomplished this feat without needing formalized decision theory as a foundation. Although a limitation of any case study is the lack of generalizability of findings to other cases, at the very least, these findings should serve as a caution to scholars and analysts not to undervalue the salience of political considerations when reflecting on any crisis. Further, additional research should explore the validity of the PLM approach offered in this dissertation to determine its reliability in predicting and explaining past and future militarized international crises.

Lastly, given the findings and conclusions of this study, it is appropriate to consider how the insights gained here may aid policymakers and scholars in future militarized crises. In particular, and as a direct result of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the issue of Taiwan has become more worrisome for many observers. Undoubtedly, Washington and Beijing's relations have

¹⁰ PH theory's inclusion of a politically driven Elimination-by-aspect (EBA) decision rule in its first stage strongly skews it towards political inclinations. However, a politically driven Lexicographic (LEX) strategy, namely the PLM offered in this study, does so to a greater degree.

continued on a downward slope over the last decade, a trend that has only accelerated in the past few years.

As previously discussed in this study, in many respects, a militarized crisis erupting between Taipei and Beijing would share many similarities to the one seen in Ukraine but also many differences. First, Beijing is considered militarily superior to Taipei, as Russia was to Ukraine. Unlike in the case of Ukraine, however, President Biden has repeatedly stated he would send U.S. military personnel to defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese provocation. Therefore, if Beijing decides to initiate a crisis while Biden is in office, the risks of a great-power war are significantly higher than during the Russo-Ukrainian crisis. Additionally, how Washington's defense treaty partners react in Japan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, and Australia to any crisis will be an essential consideration along with non-aligned India. In some ways, having fewer allies in the region to coordinate with, compared to what was at the time, 29 in NATO, may be helpful to whatever U.S. administration is in office. On the other hand, the relative impact of defections or dissensions within the group would carry greater weight.

For analysts and scholars tasked with predicting the future trajectory of the Taiwan issue, and especially those who find themselves advising policymakers during a possible pre-conflict crisis, they would be well served to heavily weigh political considerations as was done in this study's baseline analysis, and perhaps to an even greater degree as suggested with the PLM approach. Further, identifying and closely monitoring the domains of the Presidents in Beijing and Washington is a worthwhile endeavor, given this study's findings concerning PT. However, significant effort must be made to operationalize each leader's criteria to identify domain shifts, as shifts in their domain will likely precede more tangible indicators of aggression, such as military personnel and equipment deployments. Finally, as alluded to in the previous

recommendation, U.S.-Sino analysts and scholars should incorporate multiple decision theories into their analysis to provide greater confidence in their assessments and highlight alternative viewpoints that may not be considered sufficiently.

Summary

The Russo-Ukrainian War has become the most significant conflict in the post-Cold War era. Great thinkers and scholars have tried to explain why conflict occurs for millennia using different theoretical frameworks. Just as scholars continue to grapple with the causes of World War I over 100 years later, a similar and enduring debate will likely occur for the Russo-Ukrainian War. As such, this study seeks to contribute to that seemingly timeless endeavor of explaining international conflict by answering why the Russo-Ukrainian pre-war crisis occurred and ended in war, not peace, and does so through the lens of decision analysis. The study tested four decision theory frameworks against the five critical choices of three of the most significant leaders during the crisis. Prospect Theory emerged as the most accurate of the four theories but with a higher sensitivity level among correct predictions than the Poliheuristic and Rational Choice models.

Surprisingly, a politically driven lexicographic decision strategy was the most accurate, reliable, parsimonious, and elegant explanation. As an incidental finding, the political-lexicographic model (PLM) was not one of the four baseline frameworks tested but was uncovered serendipitously through follow-on data analysis. As a result, this study offers the PLM as the preferred explanation for the crisis-related decisions in this particular scenario. The dissertation recommends that additional studies determine the model's applicability to other international crises.

Moreover, the study's findings suggest that Prospect Theory and Poliheuristic Theory deserve more prominent consideration in international relations research agendas and highlight the benefits to scholars when comparing and incorporating multiple decision theories into their research. Finally, the analytic framework presented here offers a practical and intuitive methodology for comparing these five decision frameworks, which now includes the PLM. Ideally, it will inspire future scholars to incorporate a broader set of decision theories and models to enhance the field of international relations further.

Appendix

A.1: Critical Decision (CD) #1 Decision Matrix

CD #1: (Putin) Initiate Crisis (Composite Matrix)	Alternative	Alternative	Alternative	
Dimensions	Maintain Status Quo	Escalate in Donbas	Coerce NATO	Weight
P-Diminish Domestic Opposition to Regime	5	4.5	5	1
E-Stable Economic Conditions	4.05	1.35	4.95	0.9
M-Prevent NATO's Presence & Expansion in Near-Abroad	4	3.6	4.4	0.8
D-Strengthen Chinese Partnerships	2.75	2.75	2.5	0.5
Rational Choice (RC) Score	15.80	12.20	16.85	
Poliheuristic (PH) Theory Score	15.80	12.20	16.85	
Expected Utility (EU) Score	12.20	10.90	11.15	
Prospect Theory (PT) Risk-Index (L)	12.00	13.00	16.30	
Decision Theory	RC	PH	EUT	PT
Preference Ranking	CN>SQ>ED	CN>SQ	SQ>CN>ED	CN>ED>SQ
Sensitivity Level	VHS	VHS	VHS	HS

A.2: Critical Decision (CD) #2 Decision Matrix

CD #2: (Biden) No Troops (NT)	Alternative	Alternative	Alternative	
Dimensions	No Troops (NT)	Ambiguous Troops (AT)	Threaten (TT)	Weights
P-Political Survival	8.5	5.5	5	1
M-Avoid Direct Military Conflict with Moscow	8.1	5.4	4.5	0.9
E-Stable Economic conditions	3.6	2	1.2	0.8
D-Strengthen NATO resolve and Unity	4.8	2.7	1.2	0.6
Rational Choice (RC) Score	25.00	15.60	11.90	
Poliheuristic (PH) Theory Score	25.00	15.60	11.90	
Expected Utility (EU) Score	23.50	14.99	17.06	
Prospect Theory (PT) Risk-Index (L)	5.00	12.20	17.20	
Decision Theory	RC	PH	EUT	PT
Preference Ranking	NT>AT>TT	NT>AT>TT	NT>TT>AT	NT>AT>TT
Sensitivity Level	VLS	VLS	VLS	LS

A.3: Critical Decision (CD) #3 Decision Matrix

CD #3: (Biden) Reject Putin's Demands	Alternative	Alternative	Alternative	
Dimensions	Agree to Demands (AD)	Middle Ground (MG)	Reject Demands (RD)	Weight
P-Political Survival	1	6	8	1
M-Avoid Direct Military Conflict with Moscow	7.2	7.2	7.2	0.9
E-Stable Economic conditions	4	3.6	2	0.8
D-Strengthen NATO resolve and Unity	0.9	1.5	4.2	0.6
Rational Choice (RC) Score	13.10	18.30	21.40	
Poliheuristic (PH) Theory Score	13.10	18.30	21.40	
Expected Utility (EU) Score	15.62	17.78	19.66	
Prospect Theory (PT) Risk-Index (L)	7.20	10.40	5.80	
Decision Theory	RC	PH	EUT	PT
Preference Ranking	RD>MG>AD	RD>MG	RD>MG>AD	RD>AD>MG
Sensitivity Level	MS	MS	VHS	VHS

A.4: Critical Decision (CD) #4 Decision Matrix

CD #4: (Zelensky) Continuing on Path towards NATO	Alternative	Alternative	Alternative	
Dimensions	NATO Path (NP)	Middle Ground (MG)	Non-Alignment (NA)	Weight
P-Diminish domestic opposition to regime	5.5	2.5	2.5	1
M-Prevent further territorial Loss	3.15	3.6	4.05	0.9
E-Stable Economic conditions	3.2	3.6	4	0.8
D-Strengthen Western Partnerships	5.95	4.9	4.2	0.7
Rational Choice (RC) Score	17.80	14.60	14.75	
Poliheuristic (PH) Theory Score	17.80	14.60	14.75	
Expected Utility (EU) Score	17.02	15.13	15.88	
Prospect Theory (PT) Risk-Index (L)	15.60	10.60	7.50	
Decision Theory	RC	PH	EUT	PT
Preference Ranking	NP>NA>MG	NP	NP>NA>MG	NP>MG>NA
Sensitivity Level	MS	VLS	VHS	MS

A.5: Critical Decision (CD) #5 Decision Matrix

CD #5: (Putin) Full-Scale Invasion	Alternative	Alternative	Alternative	Weight
Dimensions	Negotiate Framework (NF)	Escalate in Donbas (ED)	Full-Scale Invasion (FI)	
P-Diminish domestic opposition to regime	5	4.5	5.5	1
E-Stable Economic conditions	6.75	1.35	1.35	0.9
M-Prevent NATO's Presence & Expansion in Near-Abroad	4	3.6	4.4	0.8
D-Strengthen Chinese Partnerships	2.75	2.75	2.5	0.5
RC Score	18.50	12.20	13.75	
PH Score	18.50	12.20	13.75	
EU Score	14.42	10.90	18.71	
PT Risk-Index (L)	10.20	13.00	15.50	
Decision Theory	RC	PH	EUT	PT
Preference Ranking	NF>FI>ED	NF>FI	FI>NF>ED	FI>ED>NF
Sensitivity Level	VLS	VLS	MS	VHS

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