

A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF JOE BIDEN'S SPEECH ON RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

This study is one of Critical Discourse Analysis on a speech text by Joe Biden about Russia-Ukraine conflict which was delivered on February 22nd, 2022. Through the application of Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis framework along with Systemic Functional Linguistic theory by Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday as the supporting theory, this study aims to reveal certain intentions and motives behind the discourse that is delivered by Joe Biden in the form of a speech. This study employs descriptive qualitative method which examines the sources and data collected beforehand and serves theoretical or personal interpretations based on the conclusions drawn from examined sources and data. This study finds several linguistics features of Personal Pronouns of 96 data, Transitivity Process of 73 data, and 5 vocabularies that are chosen with particular intentions along with 3 words that are dominantly repeated across the speech text. Three stages of Critical Discourse Analysis conducted on this study shows that Joe Biden's speech discourse is a medium that is utilized to achieve a certain political goal in international level through United States intervention in the Russia-Ukraine conflict which was initiated by the deliverance of the speech itself.

Keywords : politics, Russia-Ukraine, critical discourse analysis, intentions, three-dimensional.

Introduction

Aristotle once famously described humans as *zoon politikon* or "political animals" (Gintis et al., 2019), meaning humans are social creatures living in a community. In modern times, politics involves managing the interests of a community and influencing others. Supposedly, in influencing other people actions, it is not enough that the politicians only have higher power over the people they want to influence, they also need a way and medium to apply their influence effectively and thorough. One of the most common medium is through the use of language or discourse, and in practice of politics the way language or discourse is mainly used is in the form of speech (Nyako, 2013). Effective political discourse is crafted to subtly influence the audience, often

without their awareness. With this in mind, it is no doubt that language in politics is crucial, as it can regulate power, control actions, and shape ideologies. Consequently, understanding political discourse, particularly through critical discourse analysis, is essential for grasping how influence is exercised. By way of critical discourse analysis, this study aims to analyze and find the deeper contents, and therefore, problem identification that this study formulates is how critical discourse analysis can find the elements and features that are used in Joe Biden's speech about Russia-Ukraine conflict through three stages of analysis and consequently identify Joe Biden's intention behind his from Critical Discourse Analysis perspective.

This study is a great improvement for the linguistic field of study that will increase the general comprehension and be a development toward linguistics theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis theory. Despite already having several studies and researches in discourse analysis, the thoroughness of this study in applying all of Fairclough's three stages analysis will be of significant addition of information and knowledge for readers and next researchers that are conducting similar research in linguistics and critical discourse analysis. Additionally, This study is expected to be able to provide additional knowledge for readers about daily discourse they encounter, not just political discourse. After reading this thesis, the readers should be more critical and be aware of the discourses they are encountering every day in any situations be it informal or formal. In further, readers are expected to also identify any subtle meaning, motives, intention, or even ideologies that are hidden behind the discourse that are delivered to them in any situations in their daily lives.

In conducting the CDA research this study employs qualitative descriptive approach. Creswell J. W and Cresswell J. D (2018: 279) mentions that the qualitative method is a method of great function when used in interpreting information. Since this study focuses on analysing discourse, which has to do a lot with interpreting a speech text, author realizes that qualitative method is the ideal one to be employed for this study. Additionally, the qualitative approach is assumed to be the best suiting approach for this study because the research data of this study is a speech transcription (text) and author believes that qualitative method is the most ideal approach to use in this study because not only does qualitative method suits the analytical process of data analysis, which is discourse analysis, but also this method suits the entire theme and purpose of this study because qualitative method because among the purpose, qualitative

method has been traditionally used for research in the field of sociology and humanity.

In conducting the descriptive qualitative analysis, this study employs Norman Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis framework, which consists of three important stages of analysis to be undergone in order to achieve comprehensive result of the analysis. Fairclough's three stages of analysis are: Description stage, Interpretation stage, and Explanation stage. Description stage corresponds with textual level analysis or analysis of the linguistic features of a discourse in which the main object of analysis is the text of a discourse on surface level. Interpretation stage corresponds with discursive level analysis which analyzes the process of text production and text consumption (interpretation). Explanation stage corresponds with social level analysis in which analysis is focused on the use of language with regards to society in context. All the three stages of analysis are done to generate a comprehensive result that conclude not only Linguistics field, but also Social and Political fields of study.

This study uses Joe Biden's speech transcription (text format) as the primary data. The data used in this study were obtained from Rev.com. The website, fortunately, provides transcription of Joe Biden's speech of Ukraine-Russia war. The speech transcription itself is in a form of text consists of 1352 words and divided into 11 paragraphs according to Rev.com. This research takes the entire transcription of the speech as the data, however, not all words or utterances in the speech will be marked to be analyzed. The data collection process involved several steps: first, browsing for speeches by world leaders on recent international events relevant to 2022; then, locating the transcription of Biden's February 22nd, 2022 speech; next, gathering references such as journals and articles to support the critical discourse analysis; and finally, thoroughly reading the speech to identify linguistic features that align with the Critical Discourse Analysis framework.

Data analysis in this study involves a series of procedural steps that include examination, evaluation, interpretation, and drawing conclusions based on the theories and frameworks applied. Given the study's descriptive qualitative approach, the data analysis follows these stages: first, the primary research data is observed in its entirety to identify unique features for analysis using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, which includes the Description, Interpretation, and Explanation stages. Next, a descriptive explanation is provided for the features

found in Joe Biden’s speech transcription that align with this framework. Following this, conclusions are drawn from the analyzed data, and finally, the study addresses the research questions by providing answers based on these conclusions.

Discussion

1. Description Stage

A. Personal Pronouns

The variations of personal pronoun such as Objective (me, you, them, us, him, her, it), Possessive (my, your, their, our, her, his, its), and the other variations are not analyzed separately in this section since this study finds that the variations of pronouns serve the same purpose for the entire study.

Datum 1

“**We**’re implementing full blocking sanctions on two large Russian financial institutions, VEB and their military bank.”

The pronoun *we* in this excerpt refers to the speaker and his administration exclusively. The use of exclusive pronoun *we* followed by action verb also indicates that the *we* in referent act as the subject of the sentence and doer of the action.

Datum 8

“As I said last week, defending freedom will have cost for **us** as well and here at home.”

The inclusivity of the pronoun *us* here can be seen in the juxtaposition of *here at home* in the same sentence, where *home* refers to United States, therefore the *us* and *here at home* can be concluded as referring to his United States citizen which is the audience of his speech. Therefore, the pronoun *us* refers to the speaker and his audience.

Datum 10

“So, **I**’m going to begin to impose sanctions in response far beyond the steps we and our allies and partners implemented in 2014.”

In this sentence the speaker referenced with pronoun *I* is functioning as the subject of the sentence and also as the doer of the action of imposing *sanctions*. The singular character of pronoun *I* also emphasizes the speaker as the sole person who is responsible for the action.

Datum 16

“And if we listened to his speech last night, and many of **you** did I know, he’s setting up a rationale to go much further.”

In this sentence the pronoun *you* is used to directly refer to the intended audience of the speech. Since there is *he* pronoun used to refer to Vladimir Putin, the pronoun *you* is not used to refer to unintended audience, which can also include the Russian government and Vladimir Putin.

Datum 1

“We’re implementing full blocking sanctions on two large Russian financial institutions, VEB and **their** military bank.”

The third-person plural pronoun here is in the possessive variant, *their*. This pronoun refers back to the word *Russian* which means Russia’s possession or belonging that are mentioned in parallel structure in the sentence. Additionally, the pronoun can also be omitted to be *Russian, financial, institutions, VEB, military bank* since the nature of parallel structure already indicates the same referent which is *Russian*

Datum 22

“To put it simply, Russia just announced that **it** is carving a big chunk of Ukraine.”

In this sentence there are two pronoun *it(s)*. In the first one in *to put it simply*, pronoun *it* does not have any referent because it is part of a fixed phrase *to put it simply*. In the second one, pronoun *it* is referring back to the word *Russia* (anaphoric), which is the subject of the clause *Russia just announced that it is carving a big chunk of Ukraine*.

The number of total personal pronouns used across the speech is as the following:

Personal Pronouns	Number of Occurence
We (Exclusive)	44
I	18
It	12
They	7
He	7
You	3
We (Inclusive)	2
She	0

As can be seen, the most used personal pronoun is exclusive *we* pronoun by huge margin compared to others, consequently making exclusive *we* pronoun the one being emphasized across the speech. In the sense of Nur (2019) exclusive *we* represents a speaker and his team and excluding the audience, hence creating distance between speaker and the audience, and it is normally associated with power. The association of power from the exclusive *we* can also be seen in examples given above where the speaker constantly mention that he and his administration are conducting several actions and plans as they have the authority to do so and hence, clearly showing their power to take the said actions. In the light of this, it can also be concluded that the constant use of exclusive *we* pronoun is also a way in which speaker tries to emphasizes his power and authority on the matter (the Russia-Ukraine war).

B. Transitivity

In transitivity process, Halliday recognizes there are three primary or principal (Major) types of process in English clause, which are Material process, Relational Process, and Mental Process, and additionally, Halliday also mentions subsidiary (Minor) process types which are Behavioral process, Existential process, and Verbal process

(Halliday, 2004:245). Accordingly, this study only includes Major or principal types of process, for these three types of process are the fundamental ones.

Material Process

Datum 10

“So, **I’m going to begin to impose sanctions** in response far beyond the steps we and our allies and partners implemented in 2014.”

I	‘m going to begin to impose	Sanctions
Actor	Process	Goal

The table above shows the speaker *I* that will start to take an action in the future which is *begin to impose*. The *sanction* here is what the speaker will begin to impose, hence categorized as the Goal.

Relational Process

Datum 34

“**This is the beginning of a Russian invasion of Ukraine**, as he indicated and asked permission to be able to do from his Duma.”

This	is	the beginning of a Russian invasion of Ukraine
Token	Process	Value

According to Halliday, one of the indicators of an Identifying Relational process is reversibility of Value and Token, for example *the beginning of a Russian invasion of Ukraine is this*. This reversibility is possible if there’s sense of definiteness in the clause, which in this case is the definite article *the*. Therefore, this clause is Relational process in the type of Identifying.

Datum 35

“**This is a flagrant violation of international law** and demands a firm response from the international community.”

This	is	a flagrant violation of international law...
Carrier	Process	Attribute

In the highlighted clause, *This* acts as the carrier which is the referent that is being described, the linking verb *is* acts as the process of giving attribute to the Carrier, and lastly, *a flagrant violation of international law* is the Attribute that is assigned to Carrier, *this*.

Mental Process

Datum 21

“Yesterday Vladimir Putin recognized two regions of Ukraine as independent states, and he bizarrely asserted that these regions are no longer part of Ukraine and they’re sovereign territory.”

Vladimir Putin	recognized	two regions of Ukraine...
Senser	Process: Cognition	Phenomenon

In the highlighted clause the Process, indicated by verb *recognized*, is suggesting Vladimir Putin’s (the carrier) cognitive process, of which the cognitive process is recognizing the phenomenon of *two regions of Ukraine as independent states*.

C. Vocabulary

Word Repetition

Vocabulary analysis of this study finds that there are several words that are repetitively used by the speaker throughout the length of his speech that are worth noting for this study. As one of the words that is mostly used by the speaker in his speech is *sanction* which is used nine times in different part clauses in the speech.

Datum 10

“So, I’m going to begin to impose **sanctions** in response far beyond the steps we and our allies and partners implemented in 2014.”

Datum 47

“These have been closely coordinated with our allies and partners and will continue to escalate **sanctions** if Russia escalates.”

Datum 48

“We’re implementing comprehensive **sanctions** on Russian’s sovereign debt.”

Datum 2

“Starting tomorrow and continuing in the days ahead, we’ll also impose **sanctions** on Russia’s elites and their family members.”

Datum 24

“Russia will pay an even steeper price if it continues its aggression, including additional **sanctions**.”

Datum 9

“But as we do this, I’m going to take robust action to make sure the pain of our **sanctions** is targeted at the Russian economy not ours.”

The frequent use of the word *sanctions* indicates the speaker’s emphasis on the matter of the topic of his speech, as similar to Palilogy, in which word is repeated for emphasis. Here speaker is emphasizing the importance of giving sanctions to Russia, hence the need to say the word repetitively which consequently, focusing the topic on giving punishment to Russia. At the same time, this emphasis on sanctioning Russia also connotes a meaning that Russia is a violator (sanction is a penalty given to those who violate or disobey law or rule), which makes Russia in the wrong, and gives a negative quality characterization to Russia. Additionally, this also indicates an implication that the speaker is trying to position himself and his administration as having authority to give sanctions since traditionally, a sanction is given by the authoritative one, and therefore,

connotatively putting America in the higher authoritative position than Russia.

Words Choice

According to Fairclough, the choice of wording depends of the *experiential*, *relational*, and *expressive* values of the word. *Experiential* value is related to the how the producer or, in this case, the speaker wants to represent his experience of natural or social world. *Relational* value deals with relations and social relationship, and *expressive* value indicates producer's evaluation of the reality which concludes the producer's attitudes, judgments, and emotional stances (Fairclough, 2001). All of these values are used to determine the speaker choice of words to use in his speech.

Datum 21

“Yesterday Vladimir Putin recognized two regions of Ukraine as independent states,

and he **bizarrely** asserted that these regions are no longer part of Ukraine and they're sovereign territory.”

In the sense of Fairclough (2001), adverb is a grammatical value that presents expressive values, meaning that adverb is used to express the speaker's attitude towards the matter he is discussing (Fairclough, 2001, p.107).

It is important to prompt a question as to why the modifier adverb “bizarrely” is presence in the sentence above as well as why the speaker opted for it. There are several other options that Joe Biden could have used in the place of the word “bizarrely” that also act as a modifier. The word *bizarrely* could have been replaced with other modifiers such as *formally* (since it is a formal occasion), or *diplomatically*, making the sentence goes as follows:

“...he **formally** asserted that these regions are no longer part of Ukraine and they're sovereign territory.”

Or, the speaker could have even removed the word “bizarrely” completely from the sentence:

“...he **bizarrely** asserted that these regions are no longer part of Ukraine and they’re sovereign territory”

As shown by two examples given above, the replacement or the deletion of the word *bizarrely* in the sentence will not change the essentiality of meaning of the sentence itself. The audience will still understand that Vladimir Putin has asserted that those “regions are no longer part of Ukraine and they’re sovereign territory”, even without the word *bizarrely*. The important information in the sentence will still be retained. The addition or selection of the word *bizarrely* as a modifier of the sentence gives a certain attribute towards the pronoun *he* which refers to Vladimir Putin. In the sense of Fairclough, this can be categorized as the ‘experiential’ value of the text. In this case Joe Biden, as the speaker, uses the modifier adverb “bizarrely” to represents his view (Experiential value) towards Putin’s claim, favoring the word “bizarrely” as modifier over other possible modifier adverbs available. Ultimately, the speaker’s choice to use the word *bizarrely* represents his judgment (*expressive* value) towards Vladimir Putin’s act in asserting that the “regions are no longer part of Ukraine” which he deems as bizarre, and giving it a negative value.

2. Interpretation Stage

Joe Biden's speech focuses on how he wants the audience to interpret his message. He uses the exclusive pronoun "we" most frequently, which creates a sense of distance between himself, his administration, and the audience. This indicates that Biden is prioritizing authority over solidarity, highlighting his and his administration's power (Nur, 2019) rather than fostering a sense of togetherness. This aligns with his role as the president, where emphasizing authority reinforces his position as the leader of the country. The repeated use of the word "sanctions" further underscores his administration's authority to act against Russia. Another key point is Biden's portrayal of Russia through negative attributes. In the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, he uses repetition of the word "threat" to establish Russia as the negative side of the conflict. According to Fairclough (2003), this strategy naturalizes the idea that Russia is the aggressor, making it seem self-evident to the

audience. At the same time, Biden employs euphemisms when describing American actions, using neutral terms like "respond" to avoid negative connotations. By choosing "respond" instead of a more aggressive term like "retaliate," he presents the U.S. as reacting to, rather than provoking, the conflict. This approach helps maintain a neutral image for America while promoting the view of Russia as the villain. In summary, Biden's speech emphasizes his administration's power, portrays the U.S. as neutral and responsive, and frames Russia as the clear antagonist in the conflict.

In addition to situational context, this study underscores the significance of historical context in Biden's speech on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The conflict didn't simply begin with Putin's February 2022 announcement of military operations in Donbas; it has a long, complex history. The origins trace back to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, which itself was preceded by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, when Ukraine declared independence. Despite this, there remained a significant pro-Russia population in eastern Ukraine, including Crimea, which Putin views as vital to Russia's interests. Additionally, from a geopolitical standpoint, Ukraine's potential membership in NATO is seen by Putin as a direct threat to Russian security, given NATO's expansion toward Russia's borders. In Biden's speech, however, these historical and geopolitical contexts are omitted. Instead, Biden simplifies the situation, focusing on recent events and framing Russia's actions as straightforward aggression. For example, in speaker's expression from datum 22:

Datum 22

"To put it simply, Russia just announced that it is carving a big chunk of Ukraine."

The expression "to put it simply," indicates the speaker tries to reduce the conflict to a mere land grab, avoiding any discussion of the underlying reasons Putin provided in his own speech, while in reality, there's a lot of complex background factors preceding the current event in question. This approach discourages the audience from seeking further information or understanding the deeper complexities of the situation. By oversimplifying the conflict, Biden uses a strategy to shape the audience's

interpretation, emphasizing the immediacy and severity of Russia's actions while omitting the broader context. Furthermore, Biden takes care to present the U.S. as purely defensive in its actions. This narrative control is a deliberate strategy to ensure the audience aligns with his interpretation, overlooking the complex historical and political factors that contributed to the conflict. The analysis of the Interpretation stage reveals how the discourse production process is influenced by the context and the audience's background knowledge. The speaker carefully assesses the audience's intertextual and contextual experiences, shaping the discourse to achieve specific objectives. In Joe Biden's speech, this means crafting the language to serve a particular purpose. Ultimately, the speaker uses language as a tool to convey information and guide the audience's understanding in line with their intentions, as outlined in Fairclough's framework on the role of language.

3. Explanation Stage

The Explanation Stage examines how discourse relates to society and acts as a medium for social struggle, as discussed by Fairclough (2001). It highlights two aspects: discourse as a tool for social struggle, which can maintain or challenge the status quo, and discourse as a product shaped by power relations. Fairclough argues that both the social effects and determinants of discourse should be analyzed at three levels: societal, institutional, and situational.

Situationally, Joe Biden's speech, delivered in response to Vladimir Putin's announcement on February 21, 2022, addresses Russia's impending military action in Ukraine. The speech aims to alert the audience to the situation and outline the U.S. government's planned response. This immediate reaction helps the U.S. coordinate its actions at both national and international levels in response to the escalating conflict in Donbas.

In terms of institutional matrix, the discourse involves two key institutional matrices: the media broadcasting Biden's speech globally, and the political institutions of the U.S. government, extending to international affairs, including NATO and European countries. Biden's speech aims to counter Putin's narrative from the previous day by portraying Russia negatively and the U.S. as neutral or defensive, which is also the determinant factor of the happening of Biden's speech itself.

This narrative struggle seeks to position the U.S. on the "right" side of the conflict and to rally NATO and other nations to collectively impose sanctions on Russia. The U.S. leverages its leadership within NATO and its military power to reinforce its influence and maintain its status as a global superpower by disadvantaging Russia, a key competitor. This reflects America's ongoing effort to sustain its dominance through strategic discourse. In terms of effect, the speaker's struggle in gathering international countries and organizations to help imposing collective sanctions to Russia is aimed to put Russia in detrimental conditions economically and militarily.

In terms of situational matrix, this discourse reflects the speaker's role as the U.S. leader and his relationship with both domestic and global audiences. On a societal level, Biden uses the speech to shape a positive moral image of the U.S. in response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. He aims to counter potential negative perceptions, particularly concerning U.S. military actions and the resulting domestic impacts, such as rising gas prices. In countering the negative interpretation, speaker is bringing up moral factor in attribution to the U.S. actions. By emphasizing moral elements, with expression such as in:

Datum 8

“As I said last week, defending freedom will have cost for us as well and here at home.”

By emphasizing moral values like "defending freedom," as seen in the phrase "defending freedom will have cost for us," Biden seeks to justify U.S. involvement and foster a sense of solidarity. The use of inclusive language, like "us," is intended to align the audience with his objectives, reinforcing the idea that the sacrifices are shared for a just cause, even if they come with economic drawbacks.

Taking these findings into consideration, this study also manages to discover further findings in terms of political aspect in Explanation stage, which also answers the question about what is the speaker's intention behind his speech discourse. The repetition of the word "threat" in Biden's speech, which can be found in Interpretation stage, is a deliberate strategy to shape the audience's perception of Russia as a danger in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This aligns with Chomsky's

concept of preventive war, where portraying an entity as an imminent threat justifies preemptive action (Chomsky, 2003). Despite Biden's effort to depict the U.S. as a responsive rather than initiating force, the intention to conduct a preventive war contradicts this narrative, revealing the U.S. as the initiator.

Moreover, Biden's speech reflects the U.S.'s broader strategy to maintain its status as a global superpower by disadvantaging Russia, a key competitor. This strategy mirrors the approach described by Ikenberry in Chomsky's book, where the U.S. aimed to preserve a unipolar world with no peer competitor through its National Security Strategy (Chomsky, 2003), and one of its very competitor is Russia itself (Pezard, 2022). The current speech can be seen as part of this ongoing imperial grand strategy, continuing the efforts of previous U.S. presidents to sustain American dominance.

Chomsky's "Hegemony or Survival" (2003) suggests that preventive war and maintaining a unipolar world are key aspects of America's Imperial Grand Strategy. This study concludes that Biden's speech is a continuation of this strategy, in line with CDA's purpose to reveal how discourse contributes to sustaining or challenging power relations (Fairclough, 1989). Biden uses his speech to justify U.S. involvement in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, similar to how President Bush justified the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Richardson, 2007).

The U.S.'s involvement in international conflicts often has underlying motives, including capital benefits tied to the Military-Industrial Complex. Major defense contractors like Lockheed Martin and Raytheon profit from wars, influencing U.S. foreign policy decisions through funding and lobbying (Hartung and Freeman, 2023). Between 1991 and 2022, the U.S. engaged in over 251 military interventions (CGTN, 2023), reflecting how these economic interests drive conflict engagement.

As far as the critical discourse analysis, it should be kept in mind the rather broad discussion which includes political and economical relevancy of this discourse is to ultimately points out what power abuse presents in this study. The findings, and descriptive analysis has shown how the speaker, as the president of his country, asserts his power in their authority to involve his country and countrymen to intervene in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and how U.S., as the global superpower, asserts its power in its authority to take actions influence other countries to take actions against Russia. All of which contain certain purposes that serve the speakers' interests. The discussion contains the results of the research and discussion. The

general discussion includes articles that explain and reveal the results of research, and analysis between parts. (Cambria Fonts, 10.5 pt)

Conclusion (Calibri Fonts, 12 pt)

Using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis framework, this study identifies the speaker's use of personal pronouns, transitivity, and vocabulary—particularly repetition and word choice—as key textual features in the Micro level analysis (Descriptive stage). The study finds 96 personal pronouns in the speech, with "we" (exclusive) being the most used at 44 times, followed by "I" at 18 times. The speech also includes 73 transitivity processes, with Material process being the most frequent (33 occurrences). In terms of vocabulary, "sanction/s" is repeated 9 times, "response/respond" 7 times, and "threat" 5 times.

In the Meso level (Interpretation stage), the analysis considers historical, social, and political contexts to reveal the strategic intentions behind Biden's language choices. At the Macro level (Explanation stage), the study examines the social relationships and power dynamics within the discourse, analyzing how Biden uses his speech as a medium for social struggle. The Explanation stage explores how power relations shape discourse and how discourse, in turn, influences social and political structures. Through these stages, the study demonstrates how Biden employs linguistic strategies in connection with the speech's context to advance his interests. The analysis shows that Biden's speech aims to justify U.S. intervention in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, asserting and maintaining U.S. political power on a global scale by showcasing authority in a critical international issue.

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