

## De-Legitimizing the Russian War in Ukraine in US President Biden's Speeches: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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### Abstract

This study adopts a critical discourse analysis approach to examine the strategies employed by US President Joe Biden in his speeches to de-legitimize the Russian war in Ukraine that started in 2022. The study applies van Leeuwen's (2007) (de) legitimization strategies model. Two speeches, extracted from the White House official website and delivered by President Biden on two different occasions during the first few months of the war being waged, are analyzed. The results reveal US President Biden's tendency to rely mainly on three de-legitimation categories.

The most frequently employed strategy is moral evaluation through evaluative modifiers and abstraction. The second most frequent strategy is authorization mainly through authority of conformity, in addition to impersonal and personal authority. Finally, both instrumental and theoretical rationalization are employed to delegitimize the Russian war in Ukraine and legitimize the US assistance provided to it.

**Keywords:** Political discourse, de-legitimation strategies, critical discourse analysis, Russian-Ukrainian War

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### Introduction

Language plays a vital role in political discourse (Chilton, 2004; van Dijk, 1997; Fairclough, 1992). Political actors use language to frame issues, construct narratives, appeal to emotions, and persuade audiences. Chilton (2004) argues that “political activity does not exist without the use of language” (p. 6). Linguistic tools are the primary means through which political actors communicate their ideas, positions, and arguments to the public (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Political discourse is therefore often characterized by particular language patterns, rhetorical devices, and argumentative strategies that are used to persuade and influence the audience, and to establish the credibility and legitimacy of a particular position or action. They are utilized to shape the way that political issues are framed, and to influence the way that the public perceives and evaluates them. van Dijk (1997) suggests that language is used to construct social categories and identities that can be used to marginalize or exclude certain groups while Lakoff (2014) argues that political actors use language to frame issues in ways that resonate with their audiences' values and beliefs.

Two important concepts in political discourse that are related to the question of political power and authority and which are constructed through discursive tools are legitimation and de-legitimation. Legitimation refers to the process by which political actors justify their actions and decisions to the public, while de-legitimation refers to the process by which an individual or group is stripped of their legitimacy or credibility in the eyes of their audience (van

Leeuwen, 2007). This process can involve various strategies, such as discrediting their qualifications or expertise, attacking their character, or questioning their motives. De-legitimation is often used as a tactic in political debates, where opponents seek to undermine each other's arguments and position by casting doubt on their legitimacy. It is the process by which political actors discredit others' actions.

Political actors employ legitimation and de-legitimation through several means. They may seek to legitimize their actions by appealing to democratic norms, the rule of law, or the public interest, while opposition groups may seek to de-legitimize the same actions by highlighting their undemocratic or unjust nature. Political actors may use authorization strategies, such as citing legal or constitutional provisions, to legitimize a particular policy proposal or action. Alternatively, they may use moralization strategies, such as framing an issue in terms of justice or human rights, to establish the rightness or morality of a particular course of action. The dynamics of legitimation and de-legitimation are complex and can vary depending on a wide range of factors, including political culture, historical context, and the media environment (Reyes, 2011).

Waging war is something that has long been legitimized by some political actors and de-legitimized by others according to political agendas (Brouwer & Zeelenberg, 2016; Chilwa, 2013; Kjeldsen, & Dervin, 2017). Utilizing linguistic sources for this end, as in giving political speeches and framing the war news in the media among others are common ways of bestowing legitimacy or de-legitimacy to war. Oddo (2011) states that “the political speech laying

out the case for war has become a genre in its own right" (p. 289). Many politicians rely on their discourse and discursive and rhetorical devices to build legitimacy to waging wars through justifying their choices. Political actors have been using a wide range of strategies to justify their decisions to go to war, including appeals to national security, self-defense, and humanitarian intervention, while others have discredited waging wars arguing that wars are often driven by economic-or-geopolitical interests rather than genuine concerns for security or humanitarianism.

### **Aim of the Study**

This study examines the building of de-legitimation in US President Joe Biden's speeches through utilizing discursive tools and de-legitimation strategies to discredit the Russian war in Ukraine. It applies van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation/ de-legitimation model. It aims to provide important insights into the ways in which language and discourse are used to shape public perceptions of war, and the strategies used by political actors to de-legitimize the decision to go to war. Therefore, the study attempts to add insights into the underlying power dynamics and agendas at play in political discourse, and to identify patterns and trends in the use of these strategies. It also seeks to highlight the complex relationship between language, politics, and war. Therefore, the study aims to answer the following research questions.

1. What are the de-legitimation strategies employed by US President Biden in his speeches to de-legitimize the Russian-Ukrainian war?
2. What are the linguistic devices utilized to realize the de-legitimization strategies?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study provides a deeper understanding of the ways in which language and discourse

are used to shape public perceptions of war. By analyzing the strategies used by politicians to de-legitimize war, the study adds insights into the underlying power dynamics and agendas at play in political discourse, and can identify patterns and trends in the use of these strategies. van Leeuwen (2007) states that "[t]he analysis of legitimation strategies can shed light on the underlying ideologies and power relations that shape social practices and institutions" (p. 14). Additionally, such a study can help to shed light on the role of language and discourse in shaping policy outcomes, and can provide important insights into the ways in which political actors seek to influence public opinion and shape political reality. The study also contributes to the development of more informed and effective policy-making and political communication strategies. Finally, the notion of de-legitimation has received little rigorous scholarly attention and remains underdeveloped and understudied (Long & Wilner, 2014).

### **Literature Review**

Critical discourse analysis examines how discourse can give rise to power relations, dominance, ideologies, injustices, oppression and manipulation (Fairclough, 2012; van Dijk, 2006; van Leeuwen, 2009). van Dijk (2015) states that it "focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power abuse in society" (467). Therefore, the language of politics, as a specialized discourse, lends itself to CDA. Schaffner (1996) states that "any political action is prepared, accompanied, controlled and influenced by language" (p.210). Examining language use in political discourse has been growing over the years (Obeng & Hartford, 2008). Beard (2000) states that "the language of politics ... helps us to understand how language is used by those who wish to gain

power, those who wish to exercise power and those who wish to keep power” (p.2).

Legitimation and de-legitimation are two key strategies used by political actors to exercise power in political discourse (Chilton, 2004; Hart, 2014). These strategies are employed for justifying policies, actions and decisions and to persuade others. They are part and parcel of the language of politics and the rhetoric of politicians. Legitimation through employing discursive tools has also been employed by politicians to justify war (Chang and Mehan 2008; Reyes, 2011; van Dijk 2005, 2006). “War is certainly one social practice that begs the question – why? Indeed – as a dangerous, deadly activity – war must be assigned legitimacy before it is undertaken” (Oddo 2011, 289). Scholars have investigated how politicians employ discourse to justify violent actions like war. Some politicians conclude that it is achieved through using what they term a “soft power”, a kind of power they possess to persuade the public of their actions which they have due to their status, rank or access to the media (Chouliaraki, 2005; Nye, 2004). Some scholars state that one of the key strategies to legitimate war is achieved through creating the US vs. THEM polarization through the positive self-presentation and the negative other-presentation (e.g. van Dijk, 1998; Oddo, 2011). This binary opposition is depicted as the good US against the evil aggressors THEM.

A few studies have examined legitimation/ de-legitimation strategies in relation to waging wars. These studies highlight the power of legitimation strategies in shaping public perceptions of wars and influencing decision-making processes. Oddo (2011) examines the legitimation strategies employed in two speeches by former US presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Second World War against the Nazis and two speeches by former US president George W. Bush against Taliban

and leaders of al Qaeda after the 9\11 attacks when he announced the “war on terror”. The study concludes that violence is legitimized in all four speeches through the construction of the “US” versus “THEM” technique which is achieved through polarizing lexical resources.

Employing van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation framework, Reyes (2011) analyzes speeches by former US president George W. Bush where he legitimates the US war against Iraq and speeches by former US president Obama legitimizing the war in Afghanistan. Reyes concludes that both political actors employ strategies including authorization, rationalization, moralization, and mythopoesis to justify the US involvement in these wars and to construct the invasion as a legitimate response to the threat of weapons of mass destruction and the need to protect national security and democracy. The study explains how these strategies are linguistically structured. In addition, the study proposes new legitimation/ de-legitimation strategies, such as utilizing emotive language, especially through evoking fear, projecting a hypothetical future and claiming altruism.

Sulaiman & Jamil (2014) investigate the use of emotions in two speeches by Egypt's former president Mubarak and Tunisia's former president Bin Ali during the Arab Spring. Both presidents were found to employ emotions as a strategy to de-legitimate demonstrations in their countries during the time through linguistic choices such as lexis and grammar which were also found to help in the “US” positive versus “THEM” negative portrayal.

Mirhosseini (2017) applies van Leeuwen's (2007) model to highlight former US president Obama's construction of legitimacy/ de-legitimacy of the war in Syria in his speeches. The study concludes that various strategies to de-legitimate the war in

Syria were employed, on the one hand, but also to legitimate a possible US military involvement there, on the other hand. The study concludes that moral evaluation of people, activities and events, along with theoretical rationalization through explanation are the most prominent legitimation strategies employed in the speeches under study, in addition to “labelling” which is another strategy proposed by the study and which involves categorizing people, objects and entities into marked categories. The study, therefore, highlights the power of discursive and rhetorical devices in shaping the public’s consent of wars.

Said (2017) also applies van Leeuwen’s (2007) model to examine the semantic-functional strategies employed by the Egyptian president Al Sisi in two of his speeches that were addressed to the public. The first speech meant to legitimate the signing of a maritime border decree that declares that the islands of Tiran and Sanafir belong to Saudi Arabia and the second legitimating the government’s resolution to reduce subsidies on utility bills. The study concludes that legitimation relied on the strategies of authorization and moral evaluation based on religious, nationalistic and cultural standards more than objective and rational arguments.

Critical discourse analysts and scholars have examined the issue of legitimation mainly across media texts (e.g. Ali et al., 2016; Rasti & Sahragard, 2012; Vaara, 2014). However, there is no adequate research on examining legitimation/ de-legitimation in American speeches in general and American speeches that legitimate/ de-legitimate war in particular (Mirhosseini, 2017). Therefore, this study attempts to fill in the gap in the existing literature by analyzing US President Biden’s de-legitimation strategies in his speeches about the Russian war in Ukraine.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Data

The study comprises two speeches delivered by US President Joe Biden about the Russian war in Ukraine. The first speech is President Biden’s first public and official speech about the Russian war. It was given on February 24<sup>th</sup> 2022 right at the start of the war and it was selected as it is the first speech given by President Biden on the topic and therefore marks the beginning of the crisis. The second speech is Biden’s official speech at the United Nations Council in September 21<sup>st</sup> 2022. Both speeches were employed to de-legitimize the Russian war in Ukraine and to legitimize the US assistance provided to Ukraine. The speeches were taken from the White House database <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/>

#### 3.2 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a critical discourse analysis approach as it investigates the connection between discourse and social practice. van Leeuwen (2007) proposed a framework for analyzing legitimation strategies in discourse in an attempt to gain insight into the ways in which social actors seek to justify their actions and positions, and the ways in which these strategies shape public opinion and policy outcomes. According to the framework, Legitimation/ de-legitimation is achieved by justifying one’s stance, decisions, actions or intentions through an attempt to provide answers to two vital questions, which are “Why should we do this? And Why should we do this in this way?” (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 93). The framework comprises four major discursive strategies with minor sub-categories for each that are employed to project both legitimation and de-legitimation: authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization and mythopoesis. The framework suggests that legitimation

strategies are often used in combination with different strategies being emphasized in different contexts or for different audiences.

### 3.2.1 Authorization

van Leeuwen's authorization strategy in legitimation involves bestowing credibility and legitimacy of a particular position or action by showing that it is backed by recognized people, authorities, traditions or institutions. As shown in figure (1), this authority can be invoked through six sub-categories which are personal authority, expert authority (with credentials), role-model authority (celebrities), impersonal authority (law – rules – policy – guidelines), authority of tradition and finally authority of conformity (we should do it because the majority does so) which is realized through high frequency modality e.g. the majority, many, etc. This strategy is often used to establish the legitimacy of a particular course

of action or decision by appealing to some kind of external authority that is widely recognized and respected. For example, in political discourse, authorization strategies can involve citing legal or constitutional provisions to legitimize a particular policy proposal or action, or appealing to the authority of recognized experts or leaders who are seen as having the necessary expertise or experience to make informed decisions. Authorization strategies can also involve invoking historical or cultural traditions to legitimize a particular course of action. For example, a political leader might argue that a particular policy proposal is consistent with the values and traditions of their country or community, and thus is worthy of support. Even wars are legitimized and de-legitimized through citing international law, treaties, or UN resolutions to establish the legality/ illegality of the war, and to emphasize the importance of upholding international norms and values.

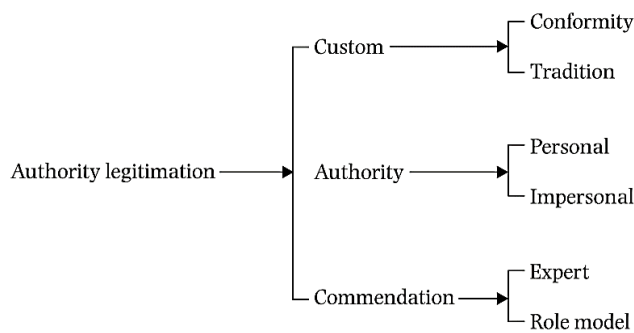


Figure (1) Types of Authority Legitimation  
Van Leeuwen (2007, p.97)

### 3.2.2 Moral Evaluation

In van Leeuwen's (2007) framework, moral evaluation strategies involve framing a position or action in moral terms, appealing to moral principles or values to legitimize/ de-legitimize one's stance. This can include

framing an issue as a matter of justice, fairness, or human rights, or casting one's opponents as immoral or unethical. This strategy is often used to establish the rightness or morality of a particular course of action or decision by framing it in terms of ethical or moral imperatives. For example, in

political discourse, moralization strategy in legitimation is a powerful tool for political actors seeking to establish the legitimacy of their positions or actions by framing them in terms of moral values and principles. Political actors may use moralization strategies to legitimize the morality or rightness of a particular war. This can involve framing the war as a moral duty, as a way of protecting innocent civilians, or as a way of defending against an evil or oppressive regime. Moralization strategies can be

particularly effective in mobilizing public support, as they appeal to deeply-held values and principles that are widely shared by the public. However, they can also be subject to critique and challenge by opposing viewpoints, particularly if there is disagreement over what constitutes ethical or moral imperatives in a particular context. Moral evaluation is achieved through employing modifiers to evaluate an action, highlighting abstract moral values or carrying out comparisons.

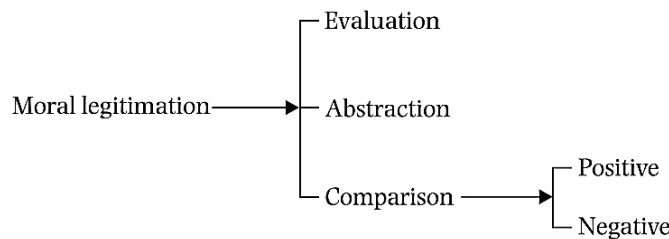


Figure (2) Types of Moral Evaluation Legitimation  
 Van Leeuwen (2007, p. 100)

### 3.2.3 Rationalization

Rationalization strategies involve offering justifications or explanations for a position or action based on reason, empirical evidence, or through stating their goals, significance and effects. This can include providing data or statistics to support one's position, or offering well-reasoned arguments to refute opposing positions. This strategy is often used to establish the rationality or logical coherence of a particular course of action or decision by presenting it as the most reasonable or logical choice based on the available evidence or on a careful analysis of the situation. Rationalization strategy in legitimation is an important tool for political actors seeking to establish the legitimacy of their positions or actions and the de-

legitimacy of their opponents' actions by presenting theirs as rational and logical choices, while presenting the others' as irrational and illogical. Political actors use various rationalization strategies to legitimize the reasons for going to war. This can involve framing the war as a necessary response to a threat to national security, as a means of protecting human rights or democracy, or as a way of preventing future conflicts. This can be achieved through instrumental or theoretical rationalization. The former involves (de) legitimizing actions through the use of reasons which are means-oriented, goal-oriented or outcome oriented which can be achieved through employing linking words. The later can be accomplished through providing rational definitions, explanations and predictions.

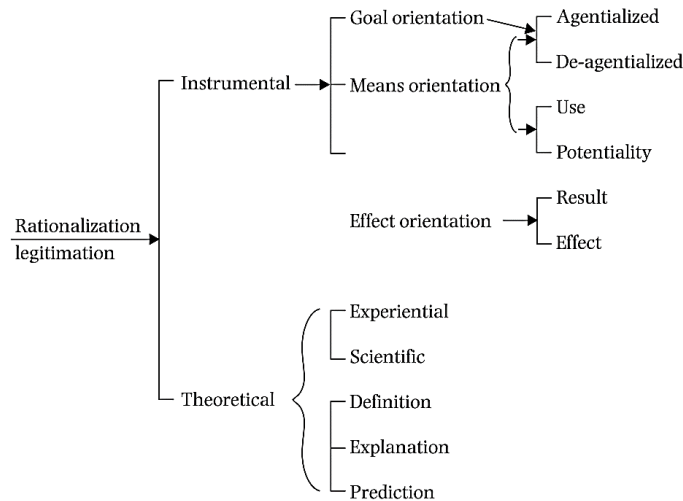


Figure (3) Types of Rationalization Legitimation

Van Leeuwen (2007, p. 105)

### 3.2.4 Mythopoesis

Mythopoesis strategy in legitimation refers to the use of narrative or storytelling to establish the legitimacy of a position or action. In political discourse, mythopoesis strategies can involve using a compelling story or narrative to create an emotional connection with the audience and to establish the legitimacy of a particular policy proposal or action. This can also involve framing a

particular decision or course of action as part of a larger historical or cultural narrative, and using this narrative to legitimize the decision or action. Political actors may use narrative or storytelling to legitimize a particular war. This can involve framing the war as part of a larger historical or cultural narrative, and using this narrative to legitimize the decision to go to war. This can be done through providing moral/cautionary tales or determination.

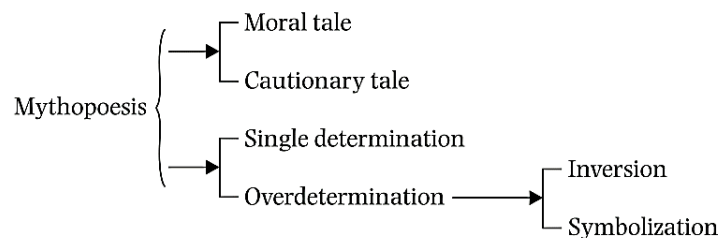


Figure (4) Types of Mythopoesis Legitimation

Van Leeuwen (2007, p. 107)

## 4. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis shows President Biden’s use of three major de-legitimation strategies in both speeches: moralization, authorization and rationalization respectively, as shown in table (1). Firstly, the war is primarily de-

legitimized through moral evaluation, which is the most prominent strategy employed with two sub-categories: evaluation and abstraction. Secondly, authorization is the second most employed strategy through three sub-categories: authority of conformity,



impersonal authority and finally personal authority. Finally, the war is de-legitimized

through both instrumental and theoretical rationalization.

Table 1: US President’s Biden’s Use of de-legitimation strategies

De-Legitimation Strategy	Category	SP (1)	SP (2)	Frequency	Percentage %
Moralization	Evaluation	25	22	107	36.02%
	Abstraction	34	26		
Authorization	Conformity	45	20	105	35.35%
	Impersonal	5	10		
	Personal	14	11		
Rationalization	Instrumental	14	15	85	28.61%
	Theoretical	45	11		
Mythopoesis	Moral/ Cautionary tales	0	0	0	0%
	Single/ over determination	0	0		
<b>Total</b>				297	100%

### 4.1 Moral Evaluation

Moral evaluation is the most frequently employed de-legitimation strategy by President Biden in both speeches with a total of 107 instances which counts for a percentage of 36.02%. War is de-legitimized in this category based on social and cultural

moral values. The Russian war is discredited through abundant negatively-connoted modifiers and negative abstract moral values associated with Russian President Putin, the Russian military and the Kremlin in both speeches as shown in the sample of examples in Figure (5).

Speech (1)	Speech (2)
<p>The Russian military has begun a <u>brutal assault</u> on the people of Ukraine.</p> <p>It was always about <u>naked aggression</u></p> <p>Putin has unleashed a <u>great pain</u> on them.</p> <p>this <u>aggression</u> cannot go unanswered</p> <p><u>missile strikes</u> began to fall on <u>historic cities</u> across Ukraine.</p> <p>Putin’s <u>desire for empire</u> by any means necessary — by <u>bullying</u> Russia’s neighbors through <u>coercion and corruption</u>, by changing borders <u>by force</u>, and, ultimately, by choosing a war without a cause.</p> <p>America stands up to <u>bullies</u>. We stand up for <u>freedom</u></p> <p>in the contest between <u>democracy and autocracy</u>, between <u>sovereignty and subjugation</u>, make no mistake: <u>Freedom</u> will prevail</p>	<p>a <u>brutal, needless war</u> — a war chosen by one man.</p> <p><u>horrifying evidence</u> of Russia’s <u>atrocities and war crimes</u></p> <p><u>...outrageous acts</u></p> <p><u>mass graves</u> ...signs of <u>torture</u></p> <p>A permanent member of the United Nations Security Council <u>invaded</u> its neighbor, attempted to <u>erase a sovereign state</u> from the map.</p> <p>we see <u>attacks</u> on schools, railway stations, hospitals, on centers of Ukrainian history and culture.</p> <p>We will stand in solidarity against Russia’s <u>aggression</u></p>

Figure (5): US President Biden’s use of *Moral Evaluation* to de-legitimize the Russian War in Ukraine

In the first speech, President Putin and the Russian military are described as “bullies” and “tyrants”. President Biden talks about Russia’s “naked aggression”, “brutal assault” and that this war is a “premeditated attack”. President Putin is the “aggressor” who caused the Ukrainian people “great pain”. The Russian claims that the war was triggered by a threat from Ukraine is described by president Biden as “outlandish and baseless claims”, “a made-up threat” and “never about “genuine security concerns”. Efforts carried out by the United States, on the other hand, are described as “good-faith efforts” and countries against this war are labelled as “freedom-loving nations” that aspire having “a free and democratic Ukraine” which implies that this war takes

away the freedom of the Ukrainian people and paves the way for an autocratic regime. Modifiers used evoke negative moral values in relation to Russia and positive moral values with regards to the United States and other supporting countries.

In the second speech, the Russian war in Ukraine is described as being “brutal” and “needless”. President Putin is portrayed as having “imperial ambitions” and to have “shamelessly violated” the United Nations Charter by making “overt nuclear threats” against Europe and “reckless disregard” for Russia’s responsibilities. The Russian military is accused of committing war crimes and its acts are described as “outrageous” and that the evidence is “horrifying” as “mass graves” show dead bodies with signs of

torture. Employing such adjectives trigger un-ethical moral concepts with regards to the Russian war through evoking negative emotions. The United States, on the other hand, is described in a positive light as a world-leading country with responsibilities. It has provided, for instance, “massive levels” of security assistance and “humanitarian aid” in an attempt to provide “direct economic support” to the “courageous Ukrainian soldiers”, which reaches “more than \$25 billion”. President Biden states that the United States wants this war to end on “just terms” through following the “clear, firm and unwavering” principles and beliefs of the United Nations which maintains “a stable and just rule-based order”. Using these adjectives help to create a positive “US” versus negative “THEM” polarization.

Evoking negative moral values regarding the Russian war is also achieved in both speeches through negative abstract values which de-legitimize the war. In the first speech, the war is associated with abstract moral concepts such as aggression, violence and intimidation as in “*Putin is the aggressor*”, “*this aggression cannot go unanswered*”, “*Putin’s aggression against Ukraine will end up costing Russia dearly*”, “*we’ve seen shelling increase in the Donbas*”, “*changing borders by force*”, “*missile strikes began to fall on historic cities across Ukraine. Then came in the air raids, followed by tanks and troops rolling in*”. The war is also de-legitimized through associating it with negative abstract moral values like imperial ambitions as in “*Putin declared his war*”, “*Putin chose this war*” and “*Putin’s desire for empire by any means necessary*”. Besides, abstract concepts such as illegality and corruption are also presented through “*bullying Russia’s neighbors through coercion and corruption*” and “*the Russian government has perpetrated cyberattacks against Ukraine*”. Finally, a contrast between democracy versus

autocracy and freedom versus fear and oppression as moral concepts are stressed and emphasized to de-legitimize the war as in “*We stand up for freedom*”, “*in the contest between democracy and autocracy, between sovereignty and subjugation, make no mistake: Freedom will prevail*”, “*Liberty, democracy, human dignity — these are the forces far more powerful than fear and oppression*”. Positive moral values such as unity and patriotism are also linked to the United States as in “*support the Ukrainian people as they defend their country*”.

In the second speech, negative abstract moral values are again utilized by President Biden to distort Russia’s International image in the UN. Moral values such as conflict and invasion as in “*Russia sought conflict*”, “*Russia is calling up more soldiers to join the fight*”, “*invaded its neighbor*”, “*attempted to erase a sovereign state from the map*”, “*seize a nation’s territory by force*” and “*annex parts of Ukraine*”. Besides, negative moral values such as aggression, atrocities and war crimes are evoked through lexical choices, as in “*attacks on schools, railway stations, hospitals ... on centers of Ukrainian history and culture*”, “*horrifying evidence of Russia’s atrocity and war crimes*”, “*mass graves uncovered*”, “*bodies showing signs of torture*” and “*the use of violence and war to conquer nations or expand borders through bloodshed*”. On the other hand, emphasizing values of freedom, democracy and solidarity in relation to the United States is achieved through lexical choices as in “*We chose liberty. We chose sovereignty. We chose principles*”, “*We will stand in solidarity against Russia’s aggression*”, “*The United States is determined to defend and strengthen democracy at home and around the world*” and “*the contest between democracy and autocracy*”.

### 4.2 Authorization

Authorization is almost as much employed by president Biden in both speeches as moral evaluation. It is utilized with a total of 105 instances all together which represents 35.35%. It is found that authority of

conformity is the most prominent authorization strategy utilized by president Biden to delegitimize this war in both speeches, followed by personal and impersonal authority respectively, which were used less frequently as shown in the sample of examples in Figure (6).

Speech (1)	Speech (2)
<p>For months, we've been <u>building a coalition of partners representing well more than half of the global economy</u>. <u>Twenty-seven members of the European Union</u></p> <p>I just spoke with <u>the G7 leaders</u> this morning, and <u>we are in full and total agreement</u>. We will limit Russia's ability to do business</p> <p><u>NATO will convene a summit</u> — we'll be there — to <u>bring together the leaders of 30 Allied nations</u> and close partners</p> <p><u>NATO came together and authorized</u> and activated — an activation of response plans</p> <p><u>the United Nations Security Council was meeting</u> to stand up for Ukraine's sovereignty to stave off invasion</p> <p>But now <u>the entire world sees</u> clearly what Putin and his Kremlin</p> <p>We saw <u>a flagrant violation of international law</u>.</p> <p>the United States and every NATO Ally will meet our <u>Article 5 commitments</u>, which says that an attack on one is an attack on all.</p> <p><u>I'm authorizing additional strong sanctions and new limitations</u></p>	<p>That's why <u>141 nations in the General Assembly came together</u> to unequivocally <u>condemn</u> Russia's war against Ukraine</p> <p>Our <u>allies and partners around the world</u> have stepped up as well. And today, <u>more than 40 countries represented in here have contributed billions</u> of their own money and equipment to help Ukraine defend itself.</p> <p><u>We're working with the G7</u> and likeminded countries to prove democracies can deliver..</p> <p><u>193 member states — have willingly embraced its principles</u>. And standing up for those principles for the U.N. Charter is the job of every responsible member state.</p> <p>Like you, the United States wants this war to end on just terms, <u>on terms we all signed up for</u></p> <p>Russia has shamelessly violated the core tenets of the <u>United Nations Charter</u>.</p> <p>the <u>U.N. Charter's</u> very basis of a stable and just rule-based order is under attack</p> <p><u>the United States — and I, as President</u> — champion a vision for our world that is grounded in the values of democracy.</p>

Figure (6): US President Biden's use of *Authorization* to de-legitimize the Russian War in Ukraine

Having the subject of de-legitimizing a war by Russia, a long-time rival of the United States, president Biden focuses on the authority of conformity to show that this war is discredited not just by the United States, but by other sovereigns as well. In the first speech, for instance, he emphasizes that there is some kind of consensus in de-legitimizing the war in Ukraine. Therefore, this war is de-

legitimized by the United States “*together with our allies and partners in Europe*”, “*a coalition of partners representing more than half of the global economy*”, “*twenty-seven members of the European Union*”, “*G7 leaders*”, “*the leaders of 30 allied nations*”, “*NATO alliance*” and the “*United Nations Security Council*”. He relies heavily on the pronouns “we” and “us”. He de-legitimizes

the war through lexical choices like “*we came together and authorized*”, “*we are in full and total agreement*”, “*bring together*”, “*joint impact*”, “*the entire world sees*” and “*mutual security concerns*” which all emphasize that this war is de-legitimized as it is discredited unanimously.

In the UN speech, president Biden also relies heavily on authorization of conformity. Giving his speech in front of UN members, he attempts to highlight that this war is de-legitimized by many others like “*more than 40 countries represented in here*”, “*141 nations in the General Assembly*”, “*193 member states have willingly embraced its principles*” “*our allies and partners around the world*”, etc. In addition, he uses action verbs like “*came together to unequivocally condemn*”, “*with many of you, we worked to try to avert it*”, “*we have stepped up as well*”, “*we are working with the G7*”, “*have contributed*”, “*like you, the United States wants this war to end on just terms*” to emphasize this consensus and to justify de-legitimizing the war.

Impersonal authorization is also used in both speeches to delegitimize war through invoking international law, rules and regulations. The war is presented as a breach to international rules, norms and standards. In the first speech, Biden states that the war is “*a flagrant violation of international law*” and that the war goes against the NATO’s “*Article 5 commitments, which says that an attack on one is an attack on all*”. In the second speech, he emphasizes that Russia has “*violated the United Nations Charter*” which strongly strengthens the de-legitimization of war.

Finally, as a president of a world power, president Biden also employs personal authorization. In the first speech, he employs it to discredit the Russian war as in “*I’m authorizing additional strong sanctions and new limitations on what can be exported*

*to Russia*” and to justify the United States’ military, economic and financial assistance to Ukraine as in “*I’ve authorized the deployment of ground and air forces already stationed in Europe to NATO’s eastern flank Allies*” and “*I’m authorizing additional U.S. forces and capabilities to deploy to Germany as part of NATO’s response*”. Relying on the pronouns “I” and “my”, in addition to employing modality as in “must” and “should” show president Biden’s power which grants him the authority to de-legitimize the war.

In the second speech, personal authorization is again employed, first through the use of “I” as in “*I reject the use of violence and war to conquer nations or expand borders through bloodshed*”, but mostly through “The United States as a country and not through its president as in “*The United States — and I, as President — champion a vision for our world that is grounded in the values of democracy*” and “*The United States is determined to defend and strengthen democracy at home and around the world*” and “*we warned it was coming*”. This shift can be justified through the context as in the first speech, Biden is addressing the public, but in the second speech he is addressing the United Nations members and therefore, personal authorization involves not just Biden as president, but also the United States as a world-leading country.

### 4.3 Rationalization

Rationalization is the third most frequently de-legitimation strategy employed by president Biden in both speeches with a total of 85 instances which represents 28.61% for its two sub-categories: instrumental and theoretical rationalization. The Russian war is discredited and the United States assistance to Ukraine is legitimized in both speeches through providing rational goals, significances and effects, in addition to explanation and predictions.

Speech (1)	Speech (2)
<p>We have purposefully designed these sanctions <i>to maximize the long-term impact on Russia</i> and <i>to minimize the impact on the United States and our Allies</i>.</p> <p>We will limit Russia’s ability to do business in Dollars, Euros, Pounds, and Yen [...] <i>to stunt the ability to finance and grow the Russian military</i></p> <p>we provided over \$650 million <i>in defensive assistance to Ukraine</i> just this year.</p> <p>Our forces are not going to Europe to fight in Ukraine but <i>to defend our NATO Allies and reassure those Allies in the east</i>.</p> <p>I ordered thousands of additional forces to Germany and Poland <i>as part of our commitment to NATO</i>.</p> <p>Any nation that countenances Russia’s naked aggression against Ukraine <u><i>will be stained by association</i></u>.</p>	<p>.....<u><i>to help Ukraine defend itself</i></u>.</p> <p>.....<u><i>to impose costs on Russia, to deter attacks against NATO territory, to hold Russia accountable for the atrocities and war crimes</i></u>.</p> <p>I reject the use of violence and war <u><i>to conquer nations or expand borders through bloodshed</i></u>.</p> <p>this aggression cannot go unanswered. <u><i>If it did, the consequences for America would be much worse</i></u>.</p> <p>The next few weeks and months <u><i>will be hard on the people of Ukraine</i></u>.</p> <p>When the history of this era is written, Putin’s choice to make a totally unjustifiable war on Ukraine <u><i>will have left Russia weaker and the rest of the world stronger</i></u>.</p>

Figure (7): US President Biden’s use of *rationalization* to de-legitimize the Russian War in Ukraine

As shown in the sample examples in Figure (7), instrumental rationalization is used 14 and 15 times across the first and the second speeches respectively through providing reasons that are goal-oriented, outcome-oriented or means-oriented through the use of purpose linking words such as “to”, “in”, “as” and transitive action verbs. In the first speech, president Biden employs purpose linking words to states reasons to legitimate the US assistance to Ukraine as in “*to hold Russia accountable for the atrocities and war crimes*”, “*to avoid needless conflict and avert human suffering*” and “*We have purposefully designed these sanctions to maximize the long-term impact on Russia and to minimize the impact on the United States and our Allies*”. In the second speech, he also

states rational justifications as in “*I reject the use of violence and war to conquer nations or expand borders through bloodshed*” and also to justify the US assistance to Ukraine as in “*to help Ukraine defend itself*” and “*to deter attacks against NATO territory*”.

President Biden also justifies his stance and de-legitimizes the war through providing theoretical rationalization such as highlighting the natural order of things and stating common-sense facts through explanations and predictions. These explanations and predictions help to positively and negatively characterize actors. He provides rational explanations regarding why the United States is against this war through stating facts such as numbers to justify de-legitimizing this war. For instance,

in the first speech he states “*we provided over \$650 million in defensive assistance to Ukraine just this year*”, “*assets that exceed \$1.4 trillion*”. He also uses predictions as in “*this aggression cannot go unanswered. If it did, the consequences for America would be much worse*” and “*The next few weeks and months will be hard on the people of Ukraine*” and “*This is a dangerous moment for all of Europe, for the freedom around the world*”. He employs explanations and definitions as in “*Putin’s actions betray his sinister vision for the future of our world — one where nations take what they want by force*”.

It is worth noting that the mythopoesis strategy was not employed in both speeches which could be explained in terms of the nature, topic and context of the speeches which are related to war, a thing which could lend itself to the employment of other strategies other than mythopoesis.

## Conclusion

Although political actors have been using discursive and rhetorical strategies to legitimate waging wars across history, the same tools were also employed by other/same political actors to de-legitimize other wars, based on political agendas. There are plenty of studies in the literature that examine how wars are legitimized by political actors in their speeches, however, there is paucity in the number of studies that investigate how wars are de-legitimized through discursive

strategies. In an attempt to fill in the gap in the present literature, the current study applies a critical discourse analysis approach to analyze US president Biden’s construction of de-legitimation of the Russian war in Ukraine in two of his public speeches. Through applying Van Leeuwen’s (2007) model of (de) legitimation strategies, the results reveal the president’s tendency to utilize moral evaluation through modifiers that create the good US versus bad THEM polarization, in addition to abstract nouns/values that portray the war in a negative moral light. Authorization is almost as much employed as moral evaluation with a special focus on authority of conformity which emphasizes that the war is not just de-legitimized by the US, but by the international community as well. The results also show an adequate use of impersonal authorization that de-legitimize the war through showing how it represents a breach to international laws and agreements. Personal authorization was also employed sporadically to emphasize the power of President Biden and the US as a world-leading country. Finally, President Biden also employs rational reasoning to de-legitimize the war through both instrumental and theoretical rationalization. Given that the study analyzes two speeches by president Biden, it is recommended to conduct future studies with more speeches that de-legitimize war to increase generalizability.

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