

# Leaders, Personality Traits, and the Foreign Policy Decision Making Process: Theoretical Aspects and Insights from Case-studies

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## Abstract

Numerous factors influence a state's foreign policy actions and decisions. These factors can be internal to the state (relating to domestic politics) or emanate from the external environment (international politics). Regarding the internal factors, the personality traits of political leaders (notably presidents or prime ministers) remain central in foreign policy analysis, especially from a psychological and behavioural analysis perspective. Understanding leaders' personalities has been deemed to be critical for explaining why they make certain foreign policy choices and decisions. Methodologically anchored on a scoping review of literature and drawing insights from the United Kingdom (UK) foreign policy under Prime Minister Tony Blair, the United States under the George W. Bush presidency, Türkiye under Recep Tayyip Erdogan presidency, and Nigeria under Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammdu Buhari presidencies, this article discusses how leaders' personalities and behavioural traits shape foreign policy directions of states. This review highlights the continued relevance of leaders' personality traits and the centrality of human agency in a state's foreign policy actions and directions.

## Keywords:

Leadership Traits Analysis (LTA); Personality; Foreign Policy Decision-Making;  
Behavioural Analysis; Human Agency.

## Article info

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## Introduction

The conduct of diplomatic relations between and among states is as old as the history of the modern state system (Hudson and Vore 1995, 212). There is documented evidence of relationships between and among European kings and princes, as well as among the Greek city-states. Similar relationships had been recorded among Kingdoms, Chiefdoms, and Principalities in Africa before the advent of colonial rule. This being said, it is important to highlight the fact that the conduct of inter-state relations in the contemporary world has greatly advanced beyond what was usual in the past. Emerging issues, notably the advancement in communication and information technology, have greatly aided the conduct of relations between and among states in the contemporary international system.

Scholars have conceptualized what foreign policy stands for. While there has been variation in conceptualization, a common thread in the discourse is that foreign policy is seen as the behavioural pattern which states adopt in the conduct of foreign and diplomatic relations with other states within the context of global power politics (Bindra 2019, 26-27; Mushtaq and Choydhry 2013, 2). Critical to the country's relations with other states in the international system is the need to preserve and advance certain objectives couched within the discourse of "National Interest". Of course, what constitutes national interest is determined by policy actors, notably the chief executive (presidents and/or prime ministers) and their policy advisers. It is important to note that what constitutes the national interest of a state is dynamic rather than static. It is equally important to note that what constitutes the determinants of a state's foreign policy and the factors that influence foreign policy decisions have also been of significance in the discussion of foreign policy of states in academic literature.

Speaking about issues driving foreign policy, Bindra (2019, 26) noticed that the behaviour of the global community results at least in part from the interactions among the foreign policies of all states whose concrete goals and values are often hard to define as they are influenced by innumerable cultural, economic, geographical, historical, social, and even (irrational) psychological factors. It is also important to affirm that both internal and external factors to the state do influence the foreign policy decisions and/or course of actions that a state's foreign policy actors decide to pursue, either in holistic terms or on a case-by-case basis, as it relates to specific issues in their foreign relations and diplomatic dealings.

Some of the key external factors that have an impact on foreign policy decisions and actions of state's include the following: the politics of the international system, the roles of international organizations, international laws, norms, treaties and agreements that a state willingly signed onto, the activities of multinational corporations, the roles of non-state actors, notably international terrorist groups, criminal networks and insurgents, among others. These factors, which are external

to the domestic socio-economy and politics of a state, do impact the foreign policy direction and course of actions that a state pursues in relations with other states in the international system. Without mincing words, the world beyond national borders significantly impacts foreign policy decisions of states, sometimes forcing states to align national interests with global realities ([Marijke 2007](#), 9).

While factors that are external to the state impose constraints on foreign policy decisions and actions as states largely have to respond to the vagaries of the international system, the domestic environment also has a significant impact on determining the course of actions that the states pursue in their relations with others within the international system. The centrality of domestic factors to the formulation and implementation of foreign policy becomes significant within the context of the position that a state's foreign policy is essentially an extension of its domestic politics ([Mushtaq and Choundhry 2013](#), 12). Issues such as the population size and dynamics, geography, resource endowment, level of economic development and technological advancement, national capability (military strength), culture, values and national history, social structure, power politics and its configuration, the nature of the political system, roles of the press, national ideology and, of course, the world view, perception and orientation of state's political leadership are important internal factors affecting the foreign policy behaviour and/or decisions of a state.

There have been extensive discussions about the roles and impacts of the internal factors influencing state foreign policy decisions and actions in foreign policy literature. There have also been extensive discussions on the roles of political leaders (Presidents and Prime Ministers) as key internal factors that shape the foreign policy directions of states. The discourse on leadership and foreign policy making has been re-energized within the context of emergent discussion in the sub-field of political psychology ([Thiers 2025](#); [Suresh 2022](#), 9; [Houghton 2017](#); [Puscas and Ciot 2012](#), 53; [Greenstein 1992](#), 106-107). The perception and belief of a state's leader about the nature of the international system, the interest that ought to be pursued by the state, the intellectual strength and weakness of the leader, especially as it relates to the analysis of information for foreign policy decision making, life background, emotional stability, among other personality traits of the Chief executive (presidents and/or prime minister) can exert significant influence on foreign policy directions of state. While there is no denying the fact that governmental and social structures constrain the role of leaders in the formulation and execution of their state's foreign policy, idiosyncratic qualities and/or traits of leaders play a significant role in determining the foreign policy formulation and execution, especially as it relates to foreign policy directions and objectives.

While emphasis on the need to understand leaders as individuals is not new, in the context of rising geopolitical tensions and disruptions characterising international politics of recent times, understanding leaders' personality, beliefs, and worldview is no longer a luxury but rather a necessity ([Thiers 2025](#)). Thus, the need to continually

re-examine the centrality of leadership personality traits and the influence they exert on a state's foreign policy formulation and execution is, by all means, more important now than before.

To this end, utilizing data from a scoping review of literature and drawing insights from case studies, this article contributes to the discourse on personality in decision-making by re-examining the centrality of leadership personality theory in the formulation and execution of foreign policy. Following this introduction, the article discusses personality, politics, and the foreign policy decision-making process, underscoring the strong impact of personality traits on a leader's worldview and foreign policy outlook. The next section of the article draws insights from various cases to show how the personalities of leaders shape the nature and dynamics of nations' foreign policy, using as examples Britain under Prime Minister Tony Blair, the United States of America under the presidency of George W. Bush, Türkiye under the Recep Tayyip Erdogan presidency and Nigeria under the Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari's presidencies. Using these countries and leaders, the article demonstrates how leaders' personalities and behavioural traits influence state foreign policy actions and directions.

### **Personality, Politics, and Foreign Policy Decision Making**

Understanding human psychology is crucial for grasping how political leaders and policymakers as individuals navigate the complex web of policy process, especially in the realm of foreign policy and diplomatic relations. Indeed, it is important and a worthwhile venture to engage in analysing how individuals' leadership traits influence the policy decisions of states. To this end, one of the primary objectives of the sub-field of political psychology is the application of insights relating to human cognition and personality to study the centrality of political leaders in the policy-making process and how leaders' perception, worldview, and other personality traits shape the course of actions they take on behalf of their states. While studies on political psychology, including leadership traits analysis of individual political leaders and policy makers, signal inherent challenges, nonetheless, progress has been made in the subfield of behavioural analysis and policy process. Integrating behavioural analysis (leadership traits analysis) into discourse on leaders' decision-making is essential as this approach aids scholars to understand how the worldview, beliefs and leadership style of political leaders influence their policy choice, decisions, and courses of action in the domains of domestic and international politics ([Levy 2023](#), 350; [Dyson 2006](#), 290-291; [Hermann 2005](#), 178-179; [Schafer 2000](#), 511).

Understanding leadership disposition and personality traits' influence on political decisions is crucial. This is because political institutions and processes operate through human agency. Thus, it would be difficult to assert that the process of arriving at a policy decision is not in any way influenced by human agency. Underlying the centrality of human agency in the political decision-making process, Greenstein (1992, 105)

notes that “personalities of political actors impinge on political affairs in countless ways, often with great consequences”. Drawing from the above position, Renshon and Renshon (2008, 511) note that, “while system level variables aid the efforts at explaining or predicting broad historical trends, no crisis or war is understandable without direct reference to the decision making of individual leaders”. The handling of the ‘Cuban Missile Crisis’ of 1962 was highly influenced by the psychological disposition and personality traits of the late President John F. Kennedy.

This, in essence, affirms the centrality of political leaders to the making of critical foreign policy decisions, especially those that deal with the initiation of wars and policy directions in conflict resolution. As human agency, the personality of leaders greatly impacts the courses of action that states pursue in their relationships with other states within the international system. Indeed, the general assumption within the broad field of international relations is that foreign policy crises and wars involve conditions which favour the influence of personality, and that individuals’ distinctive policy preferences, decision making styles, and relationships to advisers are crucial elements in accounting for policy positions and outcomes (Galea 2022; Dyson 2006, 290; Winter 2003, 112; Preston and ‘t Hart 1999; Preston 1997). To this end, Dev and Arli (2025, 1-2) further stressed that “personal attributes influence how actors, whether students making career choices or political leaders making foreign policy decisions, interpret information, cope with uncertainty and choose among competing options”. Understanding the psychological foundations is essential for explaining variation in behaviour, whether in foreign policy, leadership evolution, or decision-making under pressure.

Commenting on the centrality of the human agency in international relations, Hudson and Vore (1995, 209) note that students coming of age in the post-Cold War period intuitively grasp the notion that the study of International Relations is ultimately about human beings, and that the ways in which human beings engage in such relations on behalf of the state as the most significant actors in inter-state relations is difficult to simplify. In order to provide adequate explanations and offer predictions about states’ behaviour in international politics, International Relations requires a theory of human political choice (Gaddis 1992/1993, 6). A sub-discipline of International Relations that has engaged in an attempt to develop a theoretical perspective that gives primacy to human agency in International Politics is foreign policy analysis. According to Hudson and Vore (1995, 210), foreign policy analysis, from its inception as a sub-discipline of international relations, has engaged in the examination of how foreign policy decisions are made and has assumed that the source of much behaviour and most changes in international politics are attributable to human beings, acting as individuals or in groups.

Without doubt, certain systemic issues, such as the Cold War bipolar system, may somewhat constrain the importance of human actors, yet it becomes apparent with every system transformation that human will and imagination are major influences

shaping world affairs (Hudson and Vore 1995, 210). Arising from this, it can be argued that the major events that have shaped the configuration of international politics such as the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and subsequent reactions that accompanied it, especially from the United States are highly determined by the personality of the major political actors that were involved in formulation of US foreign policy, notably then President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Dick Cheney. The proactive position of former President Olusegun Obasanjo over the military coup and ensuing crisis in Sao Tome and Principe and the closure of Nigeria's borders with the Benin Republic in 2003 were largely shaped by the personality traits of then-President Obasanjo, his views on what Nigeria's role in Africa's affairs was supposed to be, and his demonstrated interest in foreign policy.

The importance that should be attached to personality traits of political leaders as it relates to the making of foreign policy was acknowledged by former US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger when he was quoted to have stated that "As a professor, I tended to think of history as run by impersonal forces. But when you see it in practice, you see the differences personalities make" (Byman and Pollack 2001 cited in Kesgin 2012, 29). Kissinger's statement reifies the long-held position of scholars of foreign policy that the individual constitutes the heart of international politics (Hudson 2005, 1-3). Indeed, for scholars who follow in the footsteps of Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin, political leaders' individual personality traits influence state behaviour in a significant manner (Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 1962 cited in Kesgin 2012, 29). Thus, personality traits "beliefs, motives, decision-making style, and interpersonal style) affect personal orientation to behaviour, which in turn shapes a leader's general orientation to foreign affairs" (Hermann 1980, 12, cited in Kesgin 2012, 29). Arising from this, it is then clear that a leader's orientation towards foreign affairs gives information on the kind of policy choice they will make on behalf of the state. In essence, "individuals or groups of individuals are the sources of all state actions" (Kesgin 2012, 29) and ultimate makers of state foreign policy decisions (Kesgin 2012, 29; Hudson 2005, 3). In an article titled, "Who makes foreign policy decisions and how", Hermann and Hermann (1989, 384) note that, "at the apex of foreign policy making in all governments or ruling parties are actors with the ability to commit resources of the state and the power to prevent other entities within the government from reversing their position". They characterized such actors as the "ultimate decision unit". To them, the ultimate decision-making units, be it a predominant leader, single group, or multiple autonomous actors, hold a strong influence in determining the foreign policy direction of the state or the particular line of action as it relates to a specific issue of international concern. While they agree that internal and external pressures may predispose a government to act in a particular manner, they argued that "the precise character of state actions will be modified by properties of the ultimate decision unit" (Hermann and Hermann 1989, 384). In essence, the personality traits of the human agency working through the medium of the ultimate decision unit in all three units of analysis that they identified are central to the determination of the foreign policy decisions and actions of the state (Hermann and Hermann 1989, 384).

In an earlier work, Hermann, Margaret G. (1980a) had noted that debates concerning whether the personal characteristics of political leaders could have effects on policy decisions had been conducted more in the sub-discipline of foreign policy. Studies including Crow and Noel (1977), Driver (1977), Falkowski (1978), Hermann (1974, 1977), and Winter and Stewart (1977) showcase portraits of national political leaders who influence their governments either towards an aggressive or conciliatory relationship with other states. Hermann (1980a, 7-8) notes that data from previous studies mentioned above suggest that aggressive leaders are high in need for power, low in conceptual complexity, distrustful of others, nationalistic, and likely to believe that they have some control over the events in which they are involved. In contrast, conciliatory leaders are high in need for affiliation, high in conceptual complexity, trusting of others, low in nationalism, and likely to exhibit little belief in their own ability to control the events in which they are involved. All the leaders' portraits that the studies tried to build are inferred from the personal idiosyncratic qualities of political leaders. Personality traits aid in the drawing up of four types of personal characteristics, which are *beliefs*, *motives*, *decision style*, and *interpersonal style*. Hermann, (1980a, 8) notes that these four personal characteristics strongly impacted the content and means of making political decisions by national political leaders. Thus, there is no controversy regarding the position that leaders' idiosyncratic traits have a strong controlling influence on foreign policy decisions taken in the name of the state.

The position advanced by Hermann (1980a, 12) in the study is that the personal characteristics of leaders that were the focus of the study interrelate to form a personal orientation to behaviour or a general way of responding to one's policy environment. The personal orientation is transformed by the head of government (presidents or prime ministers) into a general orientation to foreign affairs and international politics. Knowing a head of government's orientation to foreign affairs helps in predicting their predispositions and course of action when faced with a foreign policy-making task. This is because the leader's orientation will influence how he/she defines the situation and the style of behaviour he/she is likely to emphasize. Heads of government with the personal characteristics discussed in Hermann's study (1980a) are thought to be predisposed toward either an independent or participatory orientation to foreign affairs, depending on how the characteristics interrelate. Thus, leaders who portray aggressive behavioural traits are more predisposed to assert independence in foreign policy orientation and decision-making, while those who portray conciliatory traits are more likely to engage in participatory foreign policy decision-making (Hermann 1980a, 12-13).

The portraits of national leaders referred to by Hermann (1980a) represent, by far, a pioneering work in the psychological analysis of leaders' personality traits and their implications for foreign policy decision-making. The study was an offshoot of what now becomes 'Leadership Traits Analysis' (LTA), an approach that has been extensively deployed in studies that assess the impacts of leaders' traits on a state's foreign policy (Niek 2014; Kesgin 2012; Dyson 2006; Hermann 1980b, 2002; 2005).

Leadership trait analysis developed by Hermann (1980a, 1980b, 2002, 2005) is an attempt to assess leaders' personal styles based on content analysis of written or spoken words available in public domains (Niek 2014; Kesin 2012).

"At-a-distance" techniques designed to overcome the problem of access in the conduct of analytical research on important political figures are the process of profiling political leaders based on their publicly available verbal records (speeches, interviews, letters, memoirs, among others). The methods entail meticulous designed procedure of coding and operationalization of selected personality measures and an adaptation of conventional psychological personality measurements deployed for studying leaders' behavioural traits and how it influences their foreign policy decision-making (Hermann 1980b; Winter 1992; 2003; Schafer 2000).

As Young and Schafer (1998, 63-64) note, "LTA is a significant research agenda that seeks to measure leaders' cognition and its implications for foreign policy decision-making process". The techniques advance the position that leaders' choices of certain words reflect their personalities (Kesgin 2012, 32). As a methodological approach to studying the implications of personality traits for leaders' foreign policy decisions, LTA entails a careful content analysis of leaders' discourse and quantifying it into seven traits. These traits are: the belief that one can influence or control what happens; the need for power and influence; conceptual complexity (the ability to differentiate things and people in one's environment); self-confidence; the tendency to focus on problem solving and accomplishing something versus maintenance of the group and dealing with others' ideas and sensitivities; general distrust or suspiciousness of others; and the intensity with which a person holds an in-group bias (Kesgin 2012, 32; Dyson 2006, 292; Hermann 1980a; 1980b; 2002; 2005). By measuring the score that a particular leader earns in each of the traits, proponents of the techniques argued that one will be able to determine the disposition of the leader's foreign policy decisions on important issues as they arise (Kesgin 2012; Dyson 2009a; 2009b; 2006; Dyson and Billordo 2004; Hermann 2003). These studies, among others, illustrate the importance of leadership traits analysis as a method for explaining foreign policy behaviour and linking this behaviour with the personalities of decision makers (Kesgin 2012, 36).

Recent empirical investigation has extended the application of personality psychology to foreign policy decision-making during global crises, offering a critical bridge between individual traits and transnational policy coordination. Medeiros, Nai. Erman and Young (2022, 1-2) studied the leaders' personality attributes in 61 countries as part of a broad study on government response patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic, relying on the NEGex expert surveys and focusing on leaders' meta-factors of *plasticity* (covering extraversion and openness) and *stability* (covering conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability). Using data from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker, the authors used regression models to show that, especially in centralized political systems, leaders with a high level of plasticity enacted stronger responses and implemented relief and travel restrictions more quickly. Conversely, leaders with high stability prioritized

rapid fiscal stimulus, reflecting a preference for group maintenance and procedural certainty. The findings illuminate how personality moderates the speed and scope of crisis response, even under systemic pressures such as GDP and infection rates. While focused on domestic policy outputs, the study's implications for foreign policy are profound: border closures, vaccine diplomacy, and multilateral aid coordination, all core foreign policy instruments, were shaped by leaders' cognitive and affective dispositions ([Medeiros et al. 2022](#), 8-9).

While appreciable progress has been recorded in the academic study of the individual role in shaping foreign policy behaviour and decisions of the state, reservations continue to be expressed about the utility of studying the personalities of political actors on a number of grounds. The first criticism is that political actors are randomly distributed in roles and therefore their personalities are cancelled out by those of others. There is also the argument that political action is determined more by the political actors' operating environments than by their own characteristics. Critics have also advanced the position that the social characteristics of political actors are more important than their psychological characteristics ([Borna and Randy 2023](#); [Judge, Piccolo, and Kosalka 2009](#); [Zaccaro 2007](#)). It has also been argued that individuals are typically unable to have much effect on political outcomes, contrary to the position of studies that have sought to give significance to leaders' personality traits as important variables in explaining foreign policy decisions ([Greenstein 1992](#), 106-107).

Aside from the above, the LTA methodology that has been used to profile personality traits of many notable political leaders and the impact on their states' foreign policy directions and actions have also been subject to criticisms. For instance, LTA has been criticized for its inability to capture the leader's personality. Instead, it was argued that the methodology at best provides a snapshot of a leader's personality at a certain moment. Responding to the criticism, [Hermann \(1980b\)](#) makes it clear that personality can be contextually dependent, and this can be determined by studying diverse materials. Notwithstanding the criticisms, levied at LTA, [Hermann \(2003\)](#) notes that it is still widely acknowledged that many leaders' profiles that were assessed using the methodology correspond with the image of those leaders in the eyes of other leaders, their advisers, public commentators and analysts, as well as political journalists. Thus, criticism notwithstanding, the academic study of foreign policy has and will continue to benefit much from research and studies that focus on the roles of individual political actors and how their personality traits shape the foreign policy decisions they make on behalf of the state.

### **Leadership Traits and the Making of Foreign Policy Decisions: Insights from Case Studies**

Leaders can be found across professions in society; thus, leadership and issues surrounding it have been the focus of study in many academic disciplines. In politics, leaders occupy positions of prominence as heads of state or governments. The power

invested in their political offices and personality dispositions can make a significant difference in galvanizing the growth of business and economic development. Political leaders can push the frontier of knowledge through investment in education and technological acquisition. Moreover, political leaders have used their charisma to cheer their sports teams to victory in crucial sporting tournaments, as demonstrated by President Mandela's crucial message to the Springboks during the 1996 Rugby World Cup.

In the field of politics and foreign relations, the character of national political leaders becomes an important intervening variable in decision-making, especially in crisis situations and notably on issues of conflict and war. While internal and external variables act as factors constraining foreign policy decisions that states adopt, the centrality of leaders' personality and traits as an important factor in the making of foreign policy decisions cannot be undermined. Studies including Kesgin (2012), Dyson (2006; 2009a), Hermann (1974, 1977, 1980a, 2002, 2005) have demonstrated the importance of political leaders' personality in the attempt to understand foreign policy decisions taken on behalf of the state on an issue and to predict what actions a leader will take on issues of importance in the future (Breuning 2007, 33).

It has often been posited that leaders' experience over time results in the development of stable patterns of choice, as well as a constant outlook on the nature, patterns, and operation of the international system. This brings into discussion issues of character psychology, strategic worldview, and operational codes. Thus, leaders must also confront, to some degree, the complexities of the real circumstances that they face. Leaders also need to juxtapose these realities with hosts of other matters, including the views and intentions of adversaries and friends that they engage with, the histories of the issues they intend to address, the range of options available to them, and the implications of each course of action and/or decision. In essence, leaders operate in the context of information, and it is important that they gather and process data with the objective of arriving at decisions and courses of action that fit both the facts available to them and the political and strategic realities that face their nations. How a leader gathers such information, how this is framed and understood, the cognitive aids that are used in so doing, and their accuracy and effectiveness profoundly affect the course of world politics (Renshon and Renshon 2008, 510).

Studies have approached cognition, psychology, and personality traits of leaders and used them as yardsticks to analyse foreign policy positions, decisions, and courses of action they take on important international issues. As demonstrated in the previous section of this article, a number of influential studies have been conducted on leadership personality, characteristics, and behavioural traits, and how these impact foreign policy decisions of states. There have been single-leader, single-issue studies on United States presidents and the foreign policy decision-making process on critical issues of war and peace. Studies have also been conducted on the personality traits of political leaders from Europe and how

these traits and personal attributes shaped the nature and course of foreign policy directions of states under their regimes.

In a comparative study on prime minister leadership styles and foreign policy decision making, Kaarbo (1997, 553) notes that prime ministers exhibit variation in their leadership styles, especially as it relates to leaders' work habits, how they relate to those around them, how they like to receive information, and how they make up their mind on important foreign policy issues. Kaarbo (1997) argued that the differences exhibited by prime ministers in the discharge of the duties of their offices are not trivial. Indeed, Kaarbo (1997) averred that prime ministers' leadership styles can influence the foreign policy of parliamentary democracies.

While there is a noticeable difference in the structure of power and decision process between presidential and parliamentary system, however, just as with presidents, there are systematic ways in which prime ministers' leadership styles differ within similar political constraints. These differences in leadership style can have both direct and indirect effects on foreign policy. The primary mechanism through which a prime minister's leadership style affects foreign policy is the decision-making process. Prime ministers can shape the decision-making process in a number of ways. They can establish subcommittees or inter-ministerial consultation groups, absent themselves from important meetings, make decisions on their own, allow issues to be placed on cabinet agendas, and block the moving of a decision from an inner cabinet to a full cabinet. This process, in turn, shapes the final foreign policy decision (Kaarbo 1997, 554). In summary, Kaarbo (1997, 560) notes that individuals and their personality traits are important under certain conditions, and that the study of the characteristics of a prime minister's leadership style can add to our understanding of policy (foreign) decision-making processes and outcomes in parliamentary systems. Kaarbo (2020) further explains that while a leader's personality influences foreign policy, leaders do not stay psychologically static and often change in troubling ways. Often, as leaders remain in power, instead of consistently improving through experience, many grow more authoritarian, overconfident, insulated, and less complex in their thinking. Kaarbo (2020) further argues that the effect of aging, accumulated power, and prolonged authority can distort judgment and increase the likelihood of poor foreign policy decisions.

To highlight how a leader's traits, personality, and worldview shape the foreign policy actions, decisions, and directions of states, this article draws insights from the United Kingdom under Prime Minister Tony Blair, the United States under President George W. Bush, Türkiye under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Nigeria under Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari. The first two choices were anchored on the need to understand how these leaders' personality and traits shaped their decisions to initiate the 2003 invasion of Iraq against strong objection from key members of the United Nations Security Council. The choice of Türkiye was determined by the way President Erdogan's personality led to the transformation of its foreign policy to an assertive, transactional, and independent one, positioning the country as an influential *Middle Power*. And, last but not least, the argument for

choosing the two Nigerian leaders was to show how personality differences between them manifested in foreign policy actions, postures, statements, and how these ultimately shaped the country's foreign policy directions.

In assessing UK foreign policy under Tony Blair (1997-2007) and the interventionist role he pushed Britain to take on, the crises that he tackled as Prime Minister, Dyson (2009c, 2006) argues that Blair was never likely to keep Britain out of Iraq. This is because his personality and worldview, as demonstrated in the pre-Iraq wars he fought, show his predisposition to an interventionist agenda, should there be the need for a military invasion of Iraq. Dyson (2007, 2006) notes that Blair has a distinctive worldview and leadership style, and that these shaped the nature of British foreign policy in Blair's years, especially as it relates to the country's foreign policy direction in the Kosovo crisis, the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack in the United States, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Thus, if another person had been prime minister, the foreign policy issues of that decade would have been dealt with differently (Dyson 2009c, 236-237). In essence, the personality of Blair, his worldview, and belief in his ability to influence the course of events all came out to play in the foreign policy directions he pursued as Prime Minister. The argument was that Blair's personality traits are influential in explaining the interventionist role he made Britain play in Kosovo, the invasion of Afghanistan after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Dyson 2009c, 2006).

Using the response in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, notably the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq as a point of reference, Pfiffner (2004) notes that President George W. Bush demonstrated an impressive display of political leadership. Through his leadership quality, President Bush was able to overcome the skepticism of the professional military in the US, the opposition of much of the world, and the lack of support from the UN Security Council to take the United States to war with Iraq in order to depose Saddam Hussein. Over the crisis period spanning the time immediately after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack till the deposing of Saddam, President Bush exhibited several patterns of behaviour that provide some insight into his policy choices. Pfiffner (2004: 161) says that "President Bush showed a preference for moral certainty over strategic calculation, tendency for visceral reaction rather than reflection, preference for clarity rather than complexity, a bias toward action rather than deliberation, and a preference for the personal over the structural or procedural". President Bush exuded confidence and moral certainty and exhibited no evidence of self-doubt or ambivalence about major decisions (Pfiffner 2004, 161). While recognizing the fact that many presidential options are constrained by the established structure of the office and by environmental demands on the president, Pfiffner (2004, 161) argued that the Bush presidency illustrates the impact of personality on the major policies of a presidency.

Pfiffner (2004, 176) notes that the presidential personality makes a difference in an administration's policy priorities and achievements, irrespective of environmental and

structural constraints on the office. Deriving from this, President George W. Bush's personality as exhibited in his bias for action, his moral certainty, and his personalistic approach to politics has made important differences in his policy choices and thus in the direction of the United States foreign policy during his reign. President Bush's bias for action led to his early decisions about war in Iraq, his willingness to use factually incorrect documents to argue for it, and his decisions to begin the war with a "rolling start". The President's moral certainty, based in part on religious beliefs, led to his conviction that God had chosen the United States to "extend" universal values throughout the world, sometimes through war. His personalistic approach to politics led to easing relations with Russia and aggravating relations with North Korea. The manifestations of the traits inherent in President G.W. Bush can confer advantages or prove detrimental to the conduct of foreign policy, as with the personality traits of other notable national leaders ([Pfiffner 2004](#), 176).

While studies on personality and foreign policy have focused more on United States presidents and leaders in Western Europe, as well as Russia, there have been reports that have sought to assess the impact of personality traits of leaders of emerging economies on their nation's foreign policy directions. Utilizing the LTA methodological approach, [Kesgin \(2012\)](#) studies the leadership traits of Turkish female Prime Minister Tansu Çiller (1993-1996) that led Türkiye through the turbulence that characterized the period immediately after the Cold War. Drawing insights from the results of Çiller's LTA, [Kesgin \(2012, 31\)](#) concludes that, compared to other Turkish prime ministers since the 1990s, Çiller lacked self-confidence, had a high distrust of others, and a high in-group bias. These traits are reflected in her radical proposals to deal with various complex issues during her mandate. Of significance is the disposition to send troops to the contested Mediterranean islet of Kardak at the height of tensions with Greece and the proposal to bomb "suspected" terrorist camps in Iran. During the Kardak crisis, Çiller was noted to have averred that "This is our legacy: We do not give away territory. We do not concede even an inch of territory or a pebble. We can sacrifice lives, but not pebbles..." ([Kesgin 2012](#), 42).

Studies have also used the LTA methodological approach to analyse how Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdogan's personality traits have shaped Türkiye's foreign policy over more than two decades of his leadership, first as Prime Minister (2003-2014) and then as president (2014 to date) ([Balci and Efe 2021](#); [Kutlu et al. 2021](#); [Gorener and Ucal 2011](#)). For instance, using LTA, [Gorener and Ucal \(2011\)](#) performed an analysis to assess the influence of personality traits of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Turkish foreign policy actions and directions. The authors noted that Erdogan is by any standard the most controversial and enigmatic political leader in recent Turkish history ([Gorener and Ucal 2011](#), 357-359). Given the preponderance of Erdogan's influence and control over the political structure and institutions in Türkiye, they averred that any attempt to explain Türkiye's recent foreign policy outcomes will be seriously lacking in merit without a thorough consideration given to Erdogan's leadership impact. Flowing from [Gorener and Ucal's \(2011, 375\)](#) analysis of Erdogan's personality traits, the authors

note that he portrays an “evangelist” orientation to politics. This style results from a combination of the tendency to challenge constraints in the environment, closedness to information, and having a relationship focus.

Gorener and Ucal (2011, 376) note that Erdogan’s leadership style impinges upon Türkiye’s most controversial foreign policy position that departs from the established line. Erdogan’s personality traits and leadership style, without doubt, significantly impacted contemporary Türkiye’s foreign policy decisions as it relates to the relationship with the European Union, the United States, the civil war in Syria, the clash with Russia and later rapprochement, on Iran and the nuclear issue, on Armenia and Greece, and the persistent Kurdish questions in the region. Gorener and Ucal (2011, 377) aver that while the conceptual framework of Turkish foreign policy was originally placed on a solid foundation in AKP’s led government, the day-to-day working of this scheme has been captive to snap judgments, emotional rhetoric, and idiosyncratic preferences of its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan”. Thus, discussing recent Turkish foreign policy without adequate consideration given to the influence of Erdogan will be but an incomplete and fruitless discussion.

Deploying the LTA methodological approach, Balci and Efe (2021) examine how exogenous variables lead to changes in the personality traits of the Turkish President. The central thesis of their study is to determine whether leadership attributes change or persist over time and experience in office, and after a traumatic event. Justifying their choice, Balci and Efe (2021, 150) argued that Erdogan provides an excellent case for a study aimed at measuring the effect of experience in office and traumatic events on a leader’s personality attributes. Their findings suggest that exogenous dynamics, traumatic events, and tenure in office have a significant effect on a leader’s traits (Balci and Efe 2021, 161). Thus, instead of explaining policy change by comparing leaders in power with their predecessors, Balci and Efe argue that personality shifts in a specific leader can lead to varying analytical implications (Balci and Efe 2021, 161). In the case of Erdogan, findings prove that using the average scores of political leaders who stay in office for a long period of time and experience traumatic events can be misleading. Thus, instead of conceiving traits as situation-free, LTA scholars should allow for the effects of experience and traumatic events as exogenous dynamics alongside role change (Balci and Efe 2021, 162). The conclusions from the quoted study constitute a call for re-examining the methodological approaches in doing LTA.

The global surge of populist leadership has introduced a distinct foreign policy style, characterized by anti-pluralism and personalistic decision-making, as revealed through LTA. Thiers and Wehner (2022) profiled Hugo Chavez and Donald Trump using Hermann’s (2005) seven-trait model, coding public speeches via automated content analysis. Both leaders scored exceptionally high on distrust in others and in-group bias, with low conceptual complexity, fostering a Manichean “people versus elite” worldview. These traits translated into confrontational foreign policies:

Chavez anti-imperialist coalitions (e.g., Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) founded in 2004 to serve as counter-balance alliance to US led alliance and coalition in Latin America) and Trump's unilateral withdrawals (e.g., Paris Agreement) signifying a deviation from global leader norms were significant, indicating that populist ideology amplifies aggressive LTA profiles. While structural variables (e.g., oil dependence, party system) moderated outcomes, personality remained the primary driver of foreign policy style ([Thiers and Wehner 2022](#), 5-9).

Although [Ojieh \(2016, 203\)](#) makes a case for the consideration of extraneous variables that shaped leadership's behaviour and implications for foreign policy with reference to Nigeria, he did acknowledge the roles of leadership personality as an intervening variable in explaining Nigeria's foreign policy decisions. There are several studies that have assessed the influence of leaders' personalities on Nigeria's foreign policy actions and directions. Notable among these is [Ogwu \(1986\)](#) study on the country's leaders between the first and second republics. [Ogwu \(1986, 52\)](#) notes that Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa was calmer and more moderate, his personality being more calculated to placate than to provoke, and as such Balewa's positions on foreign policy were marked by conservative and moralistic gradualism. Thus, Balewa's personality traits shaped the state's relations with Britain and the West, the handling of Equatorial Guinea's mistreatment of Nigeria's migrant workers, its position on the establishment of the Organization of African Unity, and relations with Apartheid South Africa ([Olusanya and Akindele 1986, 3](#)).

On the contrary, individual assertiveness, the belief that one can influence the environment and persuade others were noticeable personality traits of General Murtala Muhammad and they largely made informed decision such as the unilateral recognition of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and other policy decisions on Angola, the resolution of the Zimbabwe independence issue and on Apartheid in South Africa ([Fawole 2003](#); [Garba 1987, 18-19](#)). For General Muhammadu Buhari, the traits of personal convictions, strong will, and unyielding personality are important, valid bases for explaining Nigeria's foreign policy under his regime as Military Head of State, with the tit for tat attitude that characterizes the handling of Umaru Dikko kidnapping saga as case in point ([Ojieh 2016, 2009](#); [Fawole 2003, 14-16](#)). President Olusegun Obasanjo's second term as a civilian president was reminiscent of his first stint as military Head of State. [Ojieh \(2016\)](#) notes that Obasanjo was resolute in his word; this was demonstrated in his decision to enter into a prejudgment agreement to abide by the decision of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the disputed Bakassi Peninsula. President Obasanjo also demonstrated strong will and the penchant to take unilateral actions even as a democratic president. These traits were demonstrated in his decision to abide by the ICJ rulings and the granting of asylum to President Charles Taylor of Liberia, both against public opinion and without much consultation with the Nigerian parliament and other foreign policy decision-making institutions ([Ojieh 2008, 87](#)). As a democratically elected president, Muhammadu Buhari (2015-2023)

demonstrated bluntness, strong will, and a lack of tact in the management of Nigeria's foreign policy. These personality traits were visible in President Buhari's statements on foreign policy. His personality traits profoundly impacted the country's foreign image and shaped its foreign policy directions, diplomatic engagements, and courses of action in his eight years of rule in his second stint as a democratically elected president (Saliu 2016; Samson 2015).

## Conclusion

The specialized literature in the sub-discipline of foreign policy analysis shows that increasing attention has been devoted to the examination of the role that individual, notable political leaders play in the determination of the foreign policy directions of their states. Across the three levels of analysis in foreign policy (individual, national/state, and international system), the role of the individual in determining the nature and dynamics of international politics and the course of global events cannot be underestimated. As studies have affirmed, explanations of many important historical events give considerable causal weight to the role of individual political leaders and the way their psychological and personality traits influence the decisions they take on behalf of the state. To this end, understanding leaders' personalities is essential for explaining why they make certain foreign policy choices; thus, personality-based analyses help to deepen our understanding of past decisions and may even offer some ability to anticipate how specific leaders are likely to behave.

Hardly can there be a meaningful discussion of the Second World War and the Holocaust without reference to Adolf Hitler. In the same vein, explaining the United States wars in Afghanistan and Iraq will not be complete without a critical assessment of the personality of President George W. Bush and, of course, his ally across the Atlantic, Prime Minister Tony Blair. Discussion of contemporary Russian politics and foreign policy without an assessment of the influence of the personality traits of President Vladimir Putin will result only in a partial analysis. The same can be said of Türkiye without Erdogan, South Africa without President Tambo Mbeki, and Nigeria without President Olusegun Obasanjo. These, among other prominent examples, have led some International Relations scholars to acknowledge that "who leads matters" and to reify the important role of psychological variables in foreign policy decision-making.

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