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Predictably Unpredictable: Trump's personality and approach towards China

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Abstract

It is often noted that former US President Donald Trump brought unpredictability to Washington's relationship with China. This may appear intuitively true, but in what ways was Trump actually 'unpredictable' towards China? We show that the most unpredictable feature of Trump's approach was his rhetoric, strongly defined by impulsivity, emotion, and provocation. This generated rhetorical unpredictability which we regularly saw in inconsistent and contradictory statements. Using political psychology and leadership personality approaches, we further demonstrate that this unpredictable rhetoric can be traced to Trump's psychological profile. We argue that while the composition of Trump's China rhetoric was often difficult to anticipate, as a component of his US China policy it was predictable to the extent that it was grounded in his personality. Trumpian China policy broadly followed longer-term trends, but the president's erratic rhetoric had domestic and international consequences for the relationship. The article further contributes to work on unpredictability in IR and on leadership personalities and foreign policy.

Introduction

A common refrain throughout scholarship on the relations between the United States and China is that former US President Donald Trump brought unpredictability to the relationship. Sutter (2019, 536) points to 'the avowedly unpredictable Donald Trump', and Kubo (2019, 73) remarks that Trump made 'unpredictable decisions'. Oliva (2019, 246) observes that Trump 'often acted impulsively and unpredictably' towards Beijing. Zha (2017, 701) notes that Trump introduced 'a new level of unpredictability' to the relationship. For some (e.g. Dittmer 2017, 679-680), Trump's unpredictability towards China was a strategy inspired by Nixon's 'madman theory', where 'in order to discombobulate an opponent it can be useful to appear unpredictable, irrational, or even 'mad'. Li (2017) suggests that Trumpian unpredictability in foreign affairs could 'increase miscalculations for its Chinese counterpart' and negatively impact the relationship by promoting suspicions about Washington's motives. Beyond these observations, however, there is little elaboration about exactly what this unpredictability was towards China, or why it emerged.

In the broadest terms, Trump considered himself a practitioner of unpredictability (see for example New York Times 2016), promoting perceived virtues in keeping others "off balance" and avoiding "predictable pattern[s]" (Trump 2015 45-46; see also New York Times 2016). Scholars and commentators tend to explain Trump's apparently 'unpredictable' approach to politics and foreign policy in one of two ways. For some it was deliberative, resulting in some form of self-conscious Trump Doctrine defined, at least to some extent, by unpredictability (e.g. Sullivan 2017). Some argue that this strategy backfired, diminishing US influence and security (Prescott 2019), while others question that conclusion (e.g. Dueck 2018). For others, Trump's unpredictability resulted unintentionally, from political naiveties and inexperience (Brown 2017) or disagreements between his advisors on the one hand and the so-called Washington Establishment on the other (Wright 2019).

In this article, we re-examine the extent to which Trump's approach towards China can be characterised as 'unpredictable'. We also aim to improve our understanding in more general terms of where unpredictability in US foreign policy under Trump may have come from, and of its significance. To do so, we seek to escape the 'intentionality binary' described above in favour of an alternative explanation. Specifically, we adopt a political psychological approach, drawing on frameworks for studying personalities of political leaders and extant research on Donald Trump's personality grounded in these research traditions. In particular, we examine the elements of Trump's personality that stand out and how we expect leaders like him to act. We then assess these expectations in Trump's rhetoric and foreign policy approach towards China between 2017 and mid-2020.

We show that the most unpredictable feature of Trump's approach towards China was his day-to-day rhetoric. Specifically, we find that this rhetoric was defined by three characteristics: impulsivity, emotion, and provocation, and that these key elements were responsible for creating rhetorical unpredictability. This unpredictability towards China is evidenced through statements which were frequently inconsistent and contradictory. Most importantly, we also show that this form of unpredictability can be traced to Trump's psychology and understood within larger patterns of his traits and behaviour which are in many ways extreme. Our central argument is that while the exact composition, tone, and sentiment of Trump's China rhetoric was often difficult to anticipate, as a component of US China policy under Trump, it was predictable to the extent that it was grounded in the president's personality. As such, we reveal clear connections between a psychological profile which is prone to inconsistency and contradiction and the behaviours it leads us to expect, offering an explanation which goes beyond unpredictability as merely an accidental outcome or a deliberative policy tool. Finally, we argue that while US-China policy under President Trump in many respects followed broad, longer-term trends, Trump's unstable rhetoric had both domestic and international consequences which impacted US-China relations.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it outlines political psychology research which helps us to understand Donald Trump's personality, and what its main characteristics lead us to expect in his behaviour. Second, it demonstrates how these expectations map onto Trump's approach to China between 2017 and mid-2020, and in particular how his personality profile contributed to his impulsive, emotive, and provocative - and in the end 'predictably unpredictable' - China rhetoric. Third, it explores the effects of this rhetoric on US-China policy in both domestic and international contexts. It concludes with a brief discussion of the article's main contributions to scholarly work on unpredictability in IR, and on leaders' personalities and foreign policy.

President Trump's personality

Trump's personality was in the spotlight since the beginning of his presidential campaign (e.g., McAdams 2016). Yet the psychological make-up of world leaders is not typically part of academic analyses of foreign policy and international relations. Indeed, dominated by systemic, sociological, and institutionalist perspectives, 'mainstream' IR scholarship has side-lined leader personalities as too reductionist and idiosyncratic.[1] As a result, many IR scholars have recognised the importance of Trump's personality, but lack the research toolkits to effectively analyse it.

Political psychological approaches in the subfield of Foreign Policy Analysis, however, have long assessed leaders' personalities and their effects on foreign policy.[2] These perspectives focus not on unique idiosyncrasies of leaders, but on personality types and associated patterns of behaviours. Decades of interdisciplinary research provide systematic, reliable, and valid ways for assessing and understanding the effects of leaders' personalities on foreign policies (for overviews, see Schafer 2018).

[1] E.g., Wivel (2005), Houghton (2007), Albert and Stetter (2015), Kaarbo (2015), Dyson and Briggs (2017), Jentleson (2018), and Yarhi-Milo (2018).

[2] For overviews of the Foreign Policy Analysis subfield, see Hudson (2005). For arguments on the importance of leader personality in international relations, see Hermann and Hagan (1998), Byman and Pollack (2001), Jentleson (2018), and Yarhi-Milo (2018).

Personality is a broad concept and includes cognitions, beliefs, emotions, motivations, traits, and orientations toward interpersonal relationships, information, and environments. To examine Trump's personality and its relationship to his rhetoric and foreign policy approach to China, we draw on research on Trump's operational code belief system, his leadership traits, his latent motives, and his 'Big Five' personality characteristics and related psychopathologies. This research is grounded in research traditions within Foreign Policy Analysis, but our analysis distinctly draws on multiple approaches, which are typically used independently. Using all four of these approaches has distinct advantages: it is a more comprehensive view of Trump, as each approach captures different aspects of personality; it is more methodologically robust as each approach has slightly different techniques for assessing personality; and it is a more thorough way of exploring how personality might link to rhetorical impulsiveness, emotionality, and provocation -- relationships not typically studied in personality research, despite the importance rhetoric and rhetorical unpredictability can have in international relations.

Trump's Operational Code

The operational code approach focuses on leaders' beliefs about the nature of the political universe and the tools for affecting political outcomes. Operational code research has a long pedigree (see Malici 2018) and has been used to study US presidents and many other world leaders (see, for example, Schafer and Walker 2006). This research demonstrates that leaders' operational code beliefs affect a broad range of political outcomes, including conflicts and military or diplomatic crises, interstate rivalries, alliance management, and the use of economic sanctions.

In contemporary research, operational codes of political leaders are assessed 'at-a-distance' by content analysing leaders' speeches or interviews via a computerised codebook (see Walker and Schafer 2006). The results are quantitative indicators of where a leader sits on a scale for five philosophical and five instrumental beliefs that comprise an operational code. Operational code research argues that even when speeches are written by others, leaders choose speech writers to reflect their beliefs and that leaders vary in the presentation of their beliefs beyond audience and role effects. A number of studies examine the validity of using speeches to assess beliefs and from this research there is 'plenty of evidence that supports the effectiveness of using prepared speech acts as psychological indicators' (Schafer 2014, 4).

Walker, Schafer, and Smith (2018) assess Trump's operational code beliefs by examining his speeches during the 2016 US presidential primary debates. Although Trump may have changed his beliefs since being elected or only spoke instrumentally to get elected, we know from prior research that beliefs are fairly resistant to change and that US presidential candidates exhibit considerable variation in word choice. There is also no indication that Trump presented a false persona during the campaign or had any major belief changes once in office. For the purposes of this article, it is useful to have indicators of Trump's beliefs as a candidate, as these are independent of what he would say in office. This allows us to assess the extent to which Trump's approach towards China (broadly defined) was predictable from how he presented himself in the campaign.

Walker, Schafer, and Smith (2018) compared Trump's operational code belief scores to scores for previous US presidents. With this norming group, they were able to provide a metric[3] for how different Trump's beliefs were to other presidents. A number of Trump's beliefs were extremely different. Trump's strong belief in using conflictual means 'makes him almost unique' (Walker, Schafer, and Smith 2018, 13), compared to other presidents. The general picture of Trump's operational code is that he is very conflict-oriented, in both his beliefs about the political universe and which tools are most effective in achieving goals. He is also risk averse and pessimistic about the realisation of political values. Trump also prefers changing between conflictual and cooperative foreign policy tools.

Given Trump's beliefs, we would expect him to prefer to act in more conflictual ways, opting for more 'sticks' than 'carrots.' He is not likely to embrace policy risks or be optimistic. He is likely to use a high mix of conflictual and cooperative tactics. In other words, we would expect some flexibility (or inconsistency) toward international actors.

Leadership Trait Analysis of Trump

Leadership trait analysis is another well-accepted approach to leaders' personalities in foreign policy research. This composite framework includes beliefs (belief in the ability to control events), traits (conceptual complexity, distrust, ingroup bias, self-confidence), and motives (need for power and task focus). Leadership trait research has examined personalities of many world leaders and demonstrated that its specific personality characteristics affect leaders' decision making and foreign policy outcomes (Kaarbo 2018). Leadership trait analysis is also an 'at-a-distance' content analysis technique, with computerised coding based on the frequency of certain words used by leaders (Hermann 2003). Coding generates quantitative scores for leaders for its seven personality characteristics. Like operational code, this method is highly systematic and reliable and several studies support the validity of using leaders' words to profile personalities (Schafer 2014).

Walker, Schafer, and Smith (2018) assess Trump's leadership traits by examining his speech acts during the 2016 US presidential primary debates. Using campaign material is useful for this article's purpose, for the same reasons discussed above. Two personality characteristics stand out in their analysis: very high distrust and very high need for power.[4] Trump's score on distrust is indeed extreme (more than four standard deviations higher than the mean for other US presidents). What can we expect, based on Trump's high scores for distrust and need for power? Leaders high in distrust are 'suspicious about the motives and actions of other,' some even paranoid (Hermann 2003: 203). For leaders high in distrust 'loyalty becomes a sine qua non of working with the leader' and they are 'hypersensitive to criticism…, always on the lookout for a challenge to their authority or self' (Hermann 2003: 203). Distrustful leaders also 'see the world as more

[3] as a Z-score.

[4] Walker, Schafer and Smith (2018) also found that Trump's score for task focus was lower than the mean for other US presidents. This characteristic concerns what motivates a leader – problems solving or relationship building. For space reasons, Trump's motives are discussed in the next section on motive theory, although it should be noted that Walker, Schafer, and Smith's finding for Trump's motives in terms of task focus is inconsistent with the motive analysis by Winter discussed in the next section.

threatening….[D]istrust implies a Hobbesian view of the political universe…and…[an] unrelenting vigilance toward external threats' (Foster and Keller 2014: 209). Distrustful leaders tend to exaggerate threats and use military instruments (Foster and Keller 2014). Leaders with high levels of distrust are much more likely to engage in diversionary use of force (Foster and Keller 2014).

Walker, Schafer, and Smith's (2018) finding that Trump also has strong power motives generates additional expectations. According to Hermann, leaders high in the need for power are '…are highly Machiavellian, often working behind the scenes to ensure that their positions prevail…[and] are generally daring and charming…. But they have little real regard for those around them or for people in general…These leaders are more skilful in…negotiations when they can interact directly with those involved; without face-to-face interaction, such leaders can misjudge the assumptions the other party is making and how far they are willing to go' (Hermann 2003: 191). Power-motivated leaders prefer 'relatively hierarchical governing structures involving the centralization of authority and the suppression of dissent' (Keller 2005: 211). Keller (2005) finds that leaders, like Trump, who are high in distrust *and* need for power adopt even more aggressive foreign policies in times of crises.

Trump's Psychological Motives

Foreign policy analysts studying leader personality have also used motive theory based on work by McClelland (1985). Motive theory suggests three motives -- power, achievement, and affiliation -- drive individuals' behaviours and affect how they interact with others and their environment. Winter has pioneered the study of leaders' motives, analysing those of all US presidents and some other leaders (for review, see Winter 2013). Motive profiles are generated through hand-coding of speeches to assess if leaders are high or low on the three motives. According to Winter (2018: 158), 'motive scores derived from…speeches…have a clear demonstrated empirical and predictive utility.'

Winter (2018) analysed Trump's inaugural presidential address for motives. He argues that even when inaugural addresses are written by speechwriters, 'leaders select their speechwriters and review drafts' and that inaugural addresses 'offer new presidents a tabula rasa for their major concerns' (Winter 2018, 156-157). For this article, motive analysis of the inaugural address provides an indication of Trump's personality independent of his later policies and rhetoric. Winter compares Trump's motives to all other 20th and 21st century US presidents and finds that Trump was extreme in achievement and power motives – he scores more than two standard deviations above the mean and higher than all other nineteen presidents in the study. Trump's high scores in both of these motives is unique, as they are not correlated in other leaders. Trump's score for the affiliation motive is not significantly different from other presidents.

Trump's strong achievement and power motives lead to specific expectations. Achievement-motived leaders are prone to change behaviours to fit the situation. 'In search for 'whatever works,' achievement-motivated people readily ignore 'established procedures,' sometimes even to the extent of cheating and employing illegal means….' (Winter 2018, 161). Achievement motivated political leaders also 'tend to end up frustrated and angry at their lack of control – blaming the opposition, the media, or even internal sabotage for their failures' (Winter 2018, 163). Leaders

scoring high in power motivation tend to work around the bureaucracy and prefer strong, forceful actions, including war. These leaders can be polarising figures – charismatic to followers but aggressive to others (Winter 2018). Trump's unique mix of high power and achievement motives led Winter to predict that, over time:

> 'if his achievement motive is ascendant, we would expect his frustration, policy changes and reversals, and renewed attempts to grasp control. On the other hand, if his power motivation predominates, we might expect some mix of charismatic appeal and effective performance, on the one hand, and an upsurge of aggressive words and deeds directed toward perceived enemies—with the ratio between these alternative effects depending on fluctuations in his temperament, his advisors, and the external situation' (Winter 2018, 166).

Trump's Big Five and Dark Triad Traits

Psychological research on personality has identified five traits that are fundamental, comprehensive, and generalizable across cultures, time, gender and ethnicity. Known as the 'Big Five', these are: extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience (for overview see McCraie and Allik 2002). According to Caprara and Vecchione (2013, 6), the Big Five 'represent the most widely accepted model to address major individual differences in behavioral tendencies.' Related to the Big Five indices are three traits, known as the 'Dark Triad': narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism.

Nai and Toros (2020) examined the Big Five and Dark Triad traits of political leaders using a new dataset constructed from expert judgments of 157 leaders (see Nai 2019a). Experts evaluated the personality traits of leaders, including Trump, during electoral campaigns between June 2016 and July 2019. According to Nai and Toros, 'evidence suggests that cross-observer agreement on personality assessments are likely' (2020: 6) and that reliability and validity tests demonstrate this method is 'able to capture the broad personality of political figures' (2020, 8).

Nai and Toros (2020) find that Trump is extreme on most traits. For the Big Five, Trump scores lower on conscientiousness, emotional stability, and agreeableness and higher in extraversion than all other 156 leaders. On the Dark Triad traits, Trump is second highest for psychopathy. Trump also scores very high in narcissism and Machiavellianism. Trump's scores are the most consistent across expert assessors. Nai and Maier (2019, 3) argue that, 'across different academic studies, a consensus seems to emerge regarding the "off the charts" personality of Donald Trump, which is often characterized by very high extroversion, very low agreeableness and conscientiousness, emotional instability, and sky-high narcissism.'

What can we expect from these assessments? With low conscientiousness, we would expect Trump to be ill-disciplined and irresponsible. With low emotional stability, Trump is likely to be anxious and show high emotional distress. With low agreeableness, Trump is expected to be uncooperative, intolerant, and not prone to avoid conflict. With high extraversion, Trump is likely to be sociable, energetic, and charismatic (Nai and Toros 2020). We would expect Trump to lack remorse and be insensitive and impulsive (with high psychopathy) and manipulate and act strategically (with high Machiavellianism) (Nai and Toros 2020). With high narcissism, we would

expect Trump to exhibit grandiosity, seek attention and admiration, argue, swear and use sexual language, show inability to empathise with others, be highly sensitive to criticism, show righteous indignation in judging others, and engage in ego-reinforcement behaviours and scapegoating (Nai and Toros 2020; Post 2014). Narcissistic personalities can be very inconsistent in their behaviours as they change their interpretations when their self-esteem is threatened (Hermann 2003: Post 2014).

Trump's Personality and Expectations for Rhetorical Unpredictability

Table 1 summarises what we know about Trump's personality from these four approaches. Each approach uses different methods – Trump's operational code and leadership traits are generated from his primary campaign verbal material (using different coding procedures), his motives from his inaugural speech using motive imagery techniques, and his Big 5 and Dark Triad traits from expert surveys on candidate Trump. All four approaches provide assessments of Trump's public personality before, and independent of, his rhetoric and policies toward China while president. Using these distinct approaches yields a very comprehensive view of Trump as each approach focuses on different aspects of his traits, beliefs, motives, and style. Together, they reinforce the picture of Trump's personality as extreme, in comparison to other US presidents and political candidates.

Table 1: Assessments of Trump's personality

Approach	Source & Method	Comparison Group	Trump's Extreme Personality Elements[a]
Operational Code Analysis	Walker, Schafer & Smith (2018) content analysis of speeches	U.S. presidents	belief that political universe is less cooperative pessimistic view of realisation of political values belief in less cooperative approach to pursuit of goals risk averse high variability in cooperative vs. conflictual tactics strong belief in oppose, resist, threaten and punish means weak belief in appeals and support means
Leadership Trait Analysis	Walker, Schafer & Smith (2018) content analysis of speeches	U.S. presidents	high distrust high need for power
Motive Analysis	Winter (2018) content analysis of inaugural address	U.S. presidents	highest achievement motive highest power motive
Big 5 Personality & Dark Triad Traits	Nai & Toros (2020) expert survey	157 political candidates	highest extraversion lowest agreeableness lowest conscientiousness lowest emotional stability 2nd highest psychopathy very high narcissism very high Machiavellianism

[a]Extreme elements in the Walker, Schafer, and Smith (2018) and Winter (2018) study are those more than two standard deviations from the mean; for the Nai and Toros (2020) study, Trump scores are either the highest, lowest, second highest, or at least one standard deviation above means.

These four approaches collectively highlight the following expectations for Trump: conflict-oriented rhetoric and policy; a proclivity for forceful actions that may challenge established procedures; variable, ill-disciplined and irresponsible approaches; exaggerated threats and suspicions; charisma, grandiosity and attention-seeking; lack of empathy; and emotions of frustration and anger. What does this psychological profile tell us about Trump's unpredictable approach towards China during his time in office? We suggest that Trump's operational code, his high achievement motive, and his high Machiavellianism and narcissism generate a tendency to frequently change tactics and behave inconsistently. In essence, the psychological perspective makes, to some degree, the most unpredictable elements of Trump's approach to China predictable.

Impulsivity, emotion, and provocation: Trump's predictably unpredictable China rhetoric

In this section, we map Trump's personality profile onto his unpredictable approach toward China as president, between 2017 and 2020. Most often, we find this unpredictability in Trump's day-to-day rhetoric towards China and typically – though not exclusively - via his favoured communications medium of Twitter. Trump brought to the White House what Ott and Dickinson (2019) describe as a 'Twitter presidency', the significance of which should not be underplayed. Twitter allowed President Trump to speak at moments of his choosing directly to a vast global audience, with the general public gaining insight into Trump's current worldview at the same time as diplomats and world leaders.

Rhetoric is a form of communication designed to be persuasive (Charteris-Black 2005, 8-9). According to Condor, Tileagă and Billig (2013, 262), 'political rhetoric concerns the strategies used to construct persuasive arguments in formal public debates and in everyday political disputes'. We argue that, while president, Trump's rhetoric on China was strongly underpinned by three characteristics: impulsivity, emotion, and provocation. To illustrate this, and how these core characteristics generated rhetorical unpredictability towards China, we examine some key moments of US foreign policy under his administration.

Trump's reactions, for example, to tensions between the US and North Korea in early-mid 2017 reveal instances of Trump's impulsive, emotive, and provocative rhetoric. This rhetoric generated unpredictability, as seen in inconsistent and contradictory statements. In March, shortly before Pyongyang's controversial missile tests, Trump (2017a) asserted that 'North Korea…[has] been "playing" the United States for years. China has done little to help!' Following the first tests, Trump (2017b) conversely argued that he had 'great confidence that China will properly deal with North Korea' and that 'China is trying hard!' (Trump 2017c). In early June, Trump (2017d) lamented that 'it has not worked out. At least I know China tried!'. In July he noted that 'Trade between China and North Korea grew almost 40% in the first quarter. So much for China working with us' (Trump 2017e), before shortly reverting again to a more positive tone: 'Just left China's President Xi where we had an excellent meeting on North Korea' (Trump 2017f). At the end of July, however, he stated that China does 'NOTHING for us with North Korea, just talk…China could easily solve this problem!' (Trump 2017g, capitals in original). On the same day, Trump (2017h) tweeted 'I am very disappointed in China. Our foolish past leaders have allowed them to make hundreds of billions of dollars a year in trade'.

Here we see that Trump's stated position on China shifted numerous times within a short period, notably on whether Beijing was helping or hindering US efforts to resolve the challenges Pyongyang presented. These types of rhetorical impulsivities generated inconsistency, with Trump changing his mind after previously speaking definitively (e.g. 'it has not worked out'; 'we had an excellent meeting on North Korea'). Such displays of impulsivity can be expected from Trump's low conscientiousness, agreeableness, and high level of psychopathy, which are related to a lack of discipline, irresponsibility, and erratic (or inconsistent) behaviour. Dawn F. Colley (2019, 38) argues that Trump has an 'uncontrolled, hasty approach' to communication, especially on Twitter. Importantly, this style can increase the impact and effectiveness of his rhetoric among his audience by appearing more genuine and less politically engineered. In short, 'his words are believable for the very fact that they are not well considered'.

Throughout his presidency Trump made numerous unexpected, impulsive claims towards China characterised by a lack of substance and/or feasibility. In 2019 for example Trump (2019a) 'ordered' US companies to withdraw from China because of intellectual property theft from the United States, a command that could not be enforced. In May 2020, in the midst of the global coronavirus pandemic which originated in China, Trump stated that 'We could cut off the whole relationship' and that doing so would 'save $500 billion' (Lemon 5 May 2020). Trump's impulsivities have also produced contradiction. For instance, Trump has frequently blamed China for problems faced by the United States, while also suggesting that those problems are the fault of the Washington Establishment (in particular the Federal Reserve, or the 'Fed'). In 2019, for example, Trump (2019b) declared, 'I will solve the China problem'. The day before, however, he (2019c) stated that 'China is not our problem. Our problem is with the Fed'.

Another feature of President Trump's China rhetoric was high levels of emotion, which can be expected from his low scores on emotional stability, and high scores on extraversion, need for power, and narcissism. With these traits, Trump tended to show anxiety and emotional distress, and to be argumentative and highly sensitive to slight and criticism. Trump's rhetoric towards China was, indeed, unusually emotive for a sitting US president. A defining feature of Trump's populist political language in the broadest sense has been emotional expressions of anger, defiance, and aggression (Bucy, Foley, Lukito, et al. 2020). Bartolucci (2018) notes that Trump's Twitter language is often emotionally charged, displaying anger and excitement. 'This emotional language deeply resonates with his base by creating an in-group and blaming outsiders for any problems' (Bartolucci 2018, 143).

Trump's 2017 rhetoric regarding North Korea's missile tests communicated anger at China for not collaborating with Washington and for apparent duplicity and betrayal. He also conveyed excitement, notably through exclamation and capital letters. On the issue of trade for example, Trump (2019d, capitals in original) stated 'We have lost 500 Billion Dollars [sic] a year, for many years, on Crazy Trade with China. NO MORE!' Also in 2019 he Tweeted: 'China…has been taking advantage of the United States…Our Country has been losing HUNDREDS OF BILLIONS OF DOLLARS a year to China…' (Trump 2019e). Such emotional expressions -- particularly of anger, defiance or aggression – are highly unusual for a sitting president but were common in Trump's approach to China.

Trump's emotional expressions towards China extended to his views of President Xi Jinping, which were consistently framed instead by personal praise and admiration. Trump described Xi as a 'good friend' (Trump 2018a) and explained that they enjoy a 'very strong and personal relationship' (Trump 2018b). This can be explained at least in part by the expectation that leaders like Trump, who are highly motivated by power, typically exhibit preferences 'for hierarchical governing structures defined by centralised authority and the suppression of dissent' (Keller 2005, 211). Such apparent inconsistencies between Trump's rhetoric towards China on the one hand, and President Xi Jinping on the other, then, both stemmed from his general tendency toward unpredictability and specific personality characteristics that push him toward negative emotion reactions in some contexts and positive emotions in others.

Finally, Trump's rhetoric and approach toward China was often highly provocative. Indeed, Ott (2016) identifies 'incivility' as a defining feature of Trump's Twitter discourse, and Cornfield (2017) argues that the president frequently engages in feuds, confrontations, and blunt vernacular. This can be expected given his operational code beliefs that the world is conflictual and threats and punishments are effective, his low agreeableness, high levels of power motivation and narcissism, and his exceptionally high levels of distrust. With this psychological makeup, Trump's uncooperative, intolerant, and insensitive style was again predictable.

Illustrations of Trump's provocative rhetoric on China are numerous, including during the North Korean missile crisis when he deployed hostile and accusatory language towards China of an intensity which separates him from past presidents ('So much for China working with us'; China does 'NOTHING for us'). Trump accused Beijing of stealing intellectual property from the United States (e.g. Trump 2019e), along with 'vast amounts of money' (Trump 2019a). So too did he revel in perceived problems faced by China, including when he asserted that it had 'lost 5 million jobs' while 'the United States is doing great' (Trump 2019f). During the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, Trump for a time used the term 'Chinese virus' to describe COVID-19, a designation which caused controversy over accusations that it incited racial discrimination (Serwer 2020). Trump also argued that COVID-19 originated in a laboratory in China, a claim which contradicted conclusions of the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI 2020).

Indeed, another prominent feature of Trump's approach towards China worth noting is his scapegoating and blaming of Beijing, including trade deficits and the impacts of COVID-19. Scapegoating external 'enemies' is a diversionary tactic used by many leaders, but there is strong evidence that leaders with certain personality traits , such as narcissism and distrust which Trump exhibits, are more likely to engage in diversion than are other leaders. Foster and Keller (2014) show that while many leaders engage in diversionary use of force when their countries' 'misery index' (capturing unemployment and inflation) is high, this is especially true for leaders high in distrust, like Trump. As the US economy worsened as a result of the pandemic, Trump's scapegoating rhetoric towards China was expected.

Ultimately, Trump's personality is prone to inconsistency and contradiction, both with himself and others in positions of US authority. Defined by the core characteristics of impulsivity,

emotion, and provocation, Trump's China rhetoric during his time as president typically reflected his personal mood and spoke to the moment, rather than to institutionally-crafted, long-term policy positions of his administration. This could make the tone and content of his day-to-day rhetoric towards China, especially through Twitter, confounding and difficult to anticipate. Equally, we find clear connections between Trump's psychological profile and the behaviours that profile would lead us to expect, and Trump's rhetoric towards China between 2017 and 2020. From a personality perspective, this makes the rhetorical unpredictability he displayed unsurprising and, to some degree, predictable.

The Significance of Trump's China Rhetoric

Trump's impulsive, emotive, and provocative China rhetoric had implications for Washington's relations with Beijing, with the potential to immediately and directly impact the relationship. In May 2019, for example, Trump unexpectedly announced on Twitter that he would raise tariffs on Chinese goods entering the United States, triggering a fall in stock prices across Asia (Farrer and Partington, 2019). The Chinese government also reacted to Trump's rhetoric. In March 2020, China's foreign ministry responded to a tweet by Trump which controversially referred to COVID-19 as a 'Chinese virus'. This, the foreign ministry argued, created a 'stigmatisation of China' and suggested that Washington should cease its 'groundless accusations' (Reuters 2020).

The following month, still during the COVID-19 pandemic, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied Trump's suggestion that Beijing was attempting to prevent him from being re-elected, stating that 'certain US politicians…have attempted to shift their own responsibility for their poor handling of the epidemic to others' (Bloomberg 30 April 2020). Thereafter, Trump maintained verbal attacks on the Chinese government: 'Spokesman speaks stupidly on behalf of China', he said, 'trying desperately to deflect the pain and carnage that their country spread throughout the world. Its disinformation and propaganda attack…is a disgrace' (Trump 21 May 2020). Washington's partners, including China, were often publicly restrained in their responses to President Trump's diplomatically-unorthodox statements. Nevertheless, as Chi Wang (2020) argues, the president 'damag[ed] bridges that took decades to build'. Important for our argument is that it was often Trump's impulsive and emotive provocations which characterise his rhetoric, and which elicited direct responses from Beijing.

The nature of Trump's rhetoric had additional, indirect international impacts, notably on alliances with key partners on which the US relies for support in its China strategies. Indeed, the US' historically unprecedented network of global alliances is arguably that which has most enabled it to sustain its regional authority (Ikenberry, 2016). Dittmer (2017, 680) notes that US allies were left 'flummoxed by Trump's unpredictability'. Oliva (2019, 229) similarly argues that they have been left 'confused' by Trump, under whom the US abdicated power in the Asian region. Beeson (2020, 19 and 17) notes that Trump's attitude to Asia Pacific alliances "changes on a day-to-day basis", leaving partners "uncertain about the basis of, and rationale for, American policy". Public opinion across the Asia Pacific – particularly in key allied nations such as South Korea, Japan, and Australia - show that confidence in the US president fell markedly from 2017 (Cha 2020).

For the US-China relationship Trump's rhetoric also mattered domestically, not least of course because its intended audience is American voters. Past research confirms the importance of presidential rhetoric on state politics and foreign policy, not least for the purpose of agenda setting. Explains Cohen (1995, 87):

> Increases in presidential attention to economic, foreign, and civil rights policy lead to increases in public concern with those policies….Mere presidential mentions of a policy area seem to elicit a public response, thus, *presidents do not have to resort to substantive arguments to sway public opinion* (italics added).

Trump's unusually sustained focus on China after 2017 - especially via Twitter and often without clear policy positions - ensured that Americans remained unusually exposed to that country as an issue of apparent criticality. Moreover, '…popular presidents seem no more influential than unpopular ones and these presidential leadership effects decay within a year, except for foreign policy, which shows effects lasting across the year' (Cohen 1995, 87).

Trump's rhetoric, then, could be consequential irrespective of his historically-low approval ratings; unfavourable views of China increased markedly among the US public during the Trump presidency (Gallup n.d.), at least mirroring a significant increase in provocative, impulsive, and emotional presidential rhetoric. With effects of rhetoric on matters of foreign policy more long-lasting, Trump's views on China can also endure within US politics and steer future political debate. For instance, presidential election challengers have traditionally sought to identify the incumbent as insufficiently assertive on China. For new US President Joe Biden, this means pressure to pitch himself as comparably 'tougher' on China, thereby pushing the political discourse to even further extremes. Indeed, in mid-2020, Biden's election campaign team released an election advert which criticised Trump for being soft on Beijing, and which attracted accusations of Anti-Chinese racism (Haasch 2020). In December 2020, Biden confirmed that US tariffs on China – introduced by Trump and unprecedented in recent times – would not be immediately removed in his presidency (Friedman, 2020).

Importantly, we do not argue that Trump steered the US-China relationship in a radically new direction. In 2016, Trump's Democratic challenger for the presidency and long-time China critic, Hillary Clinton, argued that Beijing had 'gamed the system for too long' and that 'targeted tariffs' should be applied to countries which 'break the rules' (Gorman 11 August, 2016). Throughout the latter years of his administration, Barack Obama adopted a firmer position and tone towards China, notably over such concerns as cyber espionage and forced technology transfers on US companies in China. While favourability ratings of China among US citizens deteriorated sharply after 2017, they followed years of hardening national sentiment.

Trump's China policies, then, including the trade war beginning in July 2018 and his Executive Order banning US companies from using equipment from Chinese corporations like Huawei, were notable and impactful, but also broadly commensurate with longer-term political and societal trends of increasing bilateral tension. The National Security Strategy of 2017 utilised newly aggressive language, that a 'revisionist' China 'steals' US intellectual property and technology (White House 2017). Yet the Trump administration's rhetoric and policies, were also

fundamentally constitutive of powerful and historically-recurring discourses about China, particularly of a 'China threat' to US security, which shape the parameters of political possibility in Washington today (see Turner 2013). Indeed, 'Individuals and their administrations matter, but so do underlying knowledges and truths about the world which endure, sometimes for centuries, to be inherited by new presidents and their advisors' (Turner 2020).

To this extent, Trump's China policies were in important ways consistent, stable, and arguably predictable. This should not seem surprising. Trump's extreme personality traits and the erraticism of his rhetoric were not the only factors driving Washington's China policy of his administration, representing extreme articulations of those which came before to lend them meaning and logic. Equally, Trump's 'predictably unpredictable' approach towards China - characterised by rhetorical impulsivity, emotion, and provocation, and aggressive (especially economic) policy - impacted the relationship in ways primarily detrimental to long-term security and diplomacy.

Ultimately, China held unusual significance in US foreign policy under Trump, for several reasons. First, Trump held a strong personal interest in China policy; his election campaign emphasised his business credentials and ability to become the 'deal-maker in Chief', and China was always the biggest bilateral deal to be done. Second, the manner in which Trump engaged so frequently and directly on China in White House communication, especially via his personal Twitter account, amplifies the importance of his personality. Third, the bilateral relationship Washington shares with Beijing is its most materially consequential. This means that China was uniquely equipped to take advantage of Trump as the first US president to challenge the structures and alliance systems of post-WWII global governance, to expand its own global influence. The unpredictability which defined Trump's day-to-day China rhetoric, then, should not be written off as inconsequential, even if it created (at least for a time) a 'new normal'.

Conclusion

In December 2016, Donald Trump accepted a telephone call from Taiwanese leader Tsai-ing Wen who congratulated him on his victory in the US presidential election. The move was highly unorthodox and the first time since 1979 that a US president or president-elect had communicated directly with a Taiwanese leader, challenging the One China Policy that the government in Beijing is the sole representative of China. The episode may have been a purposeful demonstration that the new US president was keen to reassert authority towards the country he perceived as the United States' key strategic rival, or a diplomatic gaffe (Dyer 2016). Either way, it was an early indication that US-China policy (and even US foreign policy more broadly) may have been entering a newly unconventional, and perhaps less predictable, era.

The primary aim of this article was to re-examine conventional wisdom that from 2017 President Donald Trump introduced newfound unpredictability to the US-China relationship. By connecting Trump's tendency for inconsistent and contradictory statements to key characteristics of his personality, we have shown that as president he was in many ways predisposed to language and behaviour which was unpredictable, to the extent that it could be highly difficult to anticipate. As noted at the outset, this provides an assessment of Trumpian unpredictability which better explains its significance, as more than an accidental outcome or a policy tool. Indeed, as a feature of Trump's foreign policy approach (including but not limited to China), Trump's 'unpredictable'

rhetoric from a personality perspective was in fact relatively less surprising and more predictable than it could first appear.

This study also contributes to research on leaders' personality and foreign policy. First, by combining personality approaches we present a more holistic view of leader personality than do most studies that only focus on, for example, leadership trait analysis *or* operational code analysis. In the case of Trump, these different approaches reinforce each other, giving us more confidence that we have a robust and unbiased personality profile. Second, our study links personality traits to inconsistent rhetoric. While researchers have noted that some personality traits may relate to inconsistent behaviour, and Hermann (2003) has argued that inconsistency itself is an important personality characteristic that varies across leaders, few studies have examined it as something to be explained through a personality approach. Indeed, most studies of personality in foreign policy focus on leader's consistent behaviours and rigidity despite changing circumstances. By linking Trump's personality profile to the impulsivity, emotion, and provocation of his rhetoric, we demonstrate how personality characteristics generated a pattern of instability and inconsistency in his approach to China.

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