



When the Hegemon Seeks Ontological Security: US Narratives on Rising Threats and the Future of the International Order

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Abstract

This article examines strategic narratives in the United States' 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) through the lens of ontological security theory. The analysis suggests that the US is challenged in its ontological security by the current state of the international order and the rapid evolution of the global economy into an unfamiliar entity, largely as a result of the destabilising actions of geopolitical rivals. The NSS proposes substantial changes to routinised relationships and economic restructuring to alleviate ontological insecurity and maintain a sense of stability. This includes the global relocation of production activities, new mechanisms for regulating technological progress, investment, and trade, and increased state activism and interventionism. Strategic narratives legitimise change by emphasising the US' role as a system builder dedicated to preserving and enhancing the resilience of the international order and ensuring that proposed transformations align with neoliberal economic governance and operate through indirect interventions. The NSS is engaged in reshuffling and shifting the focus of some of the biographical narratives that define the US' self-identity, emphasising different aspects of its nature and history. Strategic narratives play upon emotions such as feelings of grandeur, entitlement, responsibility, and nostalgia to facilitate change and address ontological insecurity.

Introduction

On 12 October 2022, the White House released the United States' 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS), an official presidential document outlining the administration's security vision, goals, and priorities.¹ Even a cursory glance at this document suggests that the Biden administration is prioritising non-traditional security issues and is more preoccupied with addressing a sense of unease about the current state of the international order and the US' role within it than with maintaining physical security. The NSS presents an agenda

¹ The White House, "National Security Strategy," October, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

to alleviate this unease and maintain a coherent sense of identity, primarily consisting of significant policy changes and economic restructuring both at home and globally.

Drawing on ontological security theory, a growing area of research in International Relations, this article explores how ontological anxieties and insecurities shape and drive change in US foreign and national security policy. How does the US narrate itself, its allies, rivals, and main security challengers? Which narratives are strategically deployed to justify transformative change? What are the scope and limits of the proposed transformation? How does the US navigate the tension between maintaining a coherent sense of identity and biographical continuity while radically responding to changing circumstances, evolving foreign policy, and security imperatives? In an attempt to answer these interrelated questions, this study adopts an ontological security perspective and systematically examines narratives deployed for strategic purposes in the NSS.

The article makes a threefold argument. First, it argues that the US expresses heightened concerns about its ontological status and the current state of the international order and proposes significant changes by assuming agency where the liberal international order lacks it. The NSS reflects significant anxieties about a “Polanyian moment” in which the market, under pressure from authoritarian states and in the face of various crises, is undergoing uncontrolled evolution into an amorphous, unfamiliar, and unseen structure, creating uncertainty about the place of the self.² The analysis shows how these ontological anxieties about its identity, nature of being, and status influence US national security policy.

Second, the article argues that in an attempt to maintain a sense of stability and establish ontological security, the US is contemplating changes in its established relationships with key entities in the international system and proposing substantial policy changes, particularly in the economic realm. The US administration formally explains and details its strategic competition with China, including how it will be conducted, by what means, and to what ends, for the first time in such detail within its national security strategy.³ The analysis reveals that the US envisages the establishment of an international economic system better suited to current realities in cooperation with a coalition of “willing,” “like-minded democracies.” The envisioned transformation includes the global relocation of production activities, the introduction of new mechanisms to regulate technological progress, investment, and trade in order to build an allied techno-industrial base, and increased state activism and interventionism. The analysis shows how these measures serve as mechanisms to assuage specific ontological insecurities.

Third, the article contends that some proposed policies sharply conflict with the established autobiographical narratives of the US. The NSS employs strategic narratives to legitimise the proposed transformative change and to mitigate this mismatch, ensuring consistency and coherence by aligning identity, narrative, and policy. The article presents a wealth of empirical evidence showing how security narratives precisely serve to legitimise the proposed agenda as indispensable to appeasing ontological insecurities about the pace of capitalism and safeguarding the “state of being” of the US. It finds that legitimation works along three main axes: first, by emphasising the exceptional role of the US as a liberal, benevolent hegemon and a system builder committed to preserving the international order for the sake of everyone, even if this means change in its routinised relations. Second, by constructing the present as a decisive period, a time of great change and a significant turning point that requires bold action. Third, by sketching the contours of the proposed

² A Polanyian moment, or crisis in the world order, can be defined as “turmoil and instability resulting from the rapid mobilization and spread of global capitalism, market society, and complex interdependence”. See G. John Ikenberry, “The End of Liberal International Order,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 1 (2018), p. 10.

³ Since Trump’s 2017 NSS first defined China as a “strategic competitor,” the term “strategic competition” has been widely used to refer to US-China bilateral relationship. See Stephanie Christine Winkler, “Strategic Competition and US-China Relations: A Conceptual Analysis,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2023), pp. 333–56.

transformation and making it clear that it will remain within the bounds of neoliberal interventionism. The article also examines the emotional content of strategic narratives, showing how various emotions such as anxiety, pride, a sense of ideological superiority, responsibility, entitlement, and nostalgia enhance policy legitimization and play a role in the narrative constitution of US national security and identity.

The article is structured as follows: The next section presents the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the study, explaining the data sources and detailing the scope of the analysis. The third section examines recurrent strategic narratives in the NSS, focusing on the narrative construction of in-groups and out-groups, as well as representations of the self and various others. The fourth section examines the legitimization of current national security objectives, policies, and instruments, as well as the transformation in the international economic system aimed at controlling the destiny of global capitalism and countering China's influence. This section also assesses how policies aimed at alleviating ontological anxieties and insecurities might affect the post-1945 US-led international order and global market capitalism. Finally, the fifth section concludes the study.

Identity, Security, and Narratives: How Does Ontological Security Fit In?

Ontological security can be simply defined as the “security of being”⁴ or “security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is.”⁵ The concept refers to a “confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic existential parameters of self and social identity.”⁶ It is derived from psychoanalysis and was originally developed to understand human behaviour and existence.⁷

Ontological security theory argues that state behaviour is shaped by the desire to maintain a consistent biographical narrative about its identity, foreign policy, and security positions.⁸ Such narratives offer powerful explanations for why states behave as they do, choose certain policies and practices among existing alternatives, and adopt new ones.⁹ Autobiographical narratives provide a sense of predictability, control, and self-satisfaction, while serving to maintain the order within which the self feels secure, calm, and comfortable. This function becomes even more important in times of stress and crisis, whether perceived or real.¹⁰

States construct their biographical continuity mainly through self-reflexive narratives,¹¹ selective storytelling about their own defining characteristics, superior qualities, and values. This continuity gives way to states' routinised relations with other entities, including significant rivals¹² constitutive of their identities. These routinised relations maintain identity and serve a vital “emotional function” in immunising “against the paralytic, deep

⁴ Catarina Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2004), p. 746.

⁵ Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2006), p. 344.

⁶ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (California: University of California Press, 1984), p. 375.

⁷ See Ronald D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (London: Penguin, 1990/1969).

⁸ Brent J. Steele, “Ontological Security and the Power of Self-Identity: British Neutrality and the American Civil War,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (2005), pp. 519–40.

⁹ Jelena Subotić, “Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change,” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2016), pp. 610–27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 610, 614.

¹¹ Steele, “Ontological Security and the Power of Self-Identity,” pp. 519–40. See also Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (London: Routledge, 2008).

¹² Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics,” p. 344.

fear of chaos.”¹³ Alongside the intersubjective dynamics of routinised relations among international actors,¹⁴ ontological security also pertains to the reflexive dynamics of discourses about the self and the other.¹⁵ Ensuring biographical continuity thus necessarily involves constructions of the self and the other, as well as representations of the relationships between them.¹⁶ These constructions and representations often become scenes to mnemonic politics. Memories of past achievements or failures, glories and crises, as well as past enmities, rapprochements, and distancing with other significant entities, all feed and calibrate today’s security narratives.¹⁷

Recent research has shown that ontological security is strongly associated with distinct emotions such as pride, trust, hope, and nostalgia.¹⁸ Similarly, ontological insecurity has been shown to be closely linked to emotions such as anxiety, fear, frustration, shame, and humiliation, often arising from feelings of uncertainty.¹⁹ Emotions, as socially meaningful practices embodying reflexive awareness and practical manifestations of shared perceptions and expectations, construct a sense of ontological security or insecurity and become a means to guide future action.²⁰

Ontological security theory has been criticised for emphasising stability, prioritising continuity, and consequently lacking an adequate framework for studying change.²¹ Recent research, however, has provided evidence to counter this view and has offered successful accounts of how policy change can be integrated into this theoretical framework.²² Today, we know that selectively activated narratives serve as “a cognitive bridge between necessary policy change” and “uninterrupted state autobiography by preserving a well-established sense of self-identity.”²³ Changes and adjustments in narratives help states to emphasise biographical continuity at some levels, while empowering change at others, particularly when threatened by crisis.²⁴

¹³ Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics,” p. 347.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 357–58. See also Trine Flockhart, “Is This the End? Resilience, Ontological Security, and the Crisis of the Liberal International Order,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (2020), pp. 215–40.

¹⁵ Bahar Rumelili, “Identity and Desecuritisation: The Pitfalls of Conflating Ontological and Physical Security,” *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2015), pp. 52–74.

¹⁶ See Dmitry Chernobrov, “Ontological Security and Public (Mis)Recognition of International Crises: Uncertainty, Political Imagining, and the Self,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 37, No. 5 (2016), pp. 581–96.

¹⁷ See Karl Gustafsson, “Memory Politics and Ontological Security in Sino-Japanese Relations,” *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2014), pp. 71–86; Maria Mälksoo, “Memory Must Be Defended: Beyond the Politics of Mnemonic Security,” *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (2015), pp. 221–37.

¹⁸ See, for example, Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism,” pp. 741–67; Amir Lupovici, *The Power of Deterrence: Emotions, Identity and American and Israeli Wars of Resolve* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 90–1; Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics,” pp. 346–50; Bahar Rumelili, ed., *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

¹⁹ Amir Lupovici, “Ontological Security, Cyber Technology, and States’ Responses,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 29, No.1 (2023), pp. 153–78; Felix Berenskoetter, “Anxiety, Time, and Agency,” *International Theory*, Vol.12, No. 2 (2020), pp. 273–90; Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, pp. 54–55; Ayşe Zarakol, “Ontological (In) Security and State Denial of Historical Crimes: Turkey and Japan,” *International Relations*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2010), pp. 3–23; Nina C. Krickel-Choi, “The Concept of Anxiety in Ontological Security Studies,” *International Studies Review*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2022), pp. 1–21.

²⁰ Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism,” p. 756. See also Rumelili, *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security*, p. 14.

²¹ Chris Rossdale, “Enclosing Critique: The Limits of Ontological Security,” *International Political Sociology*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2015), pp. 369–86; Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, “Ontological Security, Self-Articulation and the Securitization of Identity,” *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (2017), pp. 31–47.

²² See Subotić, “Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change,” pp. 610–27; Jakub Eberle and Vladimir Handl, “Ontological Security, Civilian Power, and German Foreign Policy Toward Russia,” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2020), pp. 41–58.

²³ Subotić, “Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change,” p. 616.

²⁴ Eberle and Handl, “Ontological Security, Civilian Power, and German Foreign Policy,” p. 41. See also Felix Berenskoetter and Bastian Giegerich, “From NATO to ESDP: A Social Constructivist Analysis of German Strategic Adjustment After the End of the Cold War,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2010), pp. 407–52.

Ontological security has been widely used to explain state behaviour, including foreign and security policy choices and various aspects of international politics.²⁵ It has also been shown that ontological insecurity influences domestic politics, playing an important role in earning legitimacy and electoral mobilisation by appealing to emotions of anti-elite resentment, economic anxiety, cultural and nativist alienation, and xenophobia.²⁶ Yet the economic dimension remains somewhat understudied.²⁷ This study aims to shed light on this dimension by examining how US ontological security relates to free-market capitalism and how ontological security-seeking relates to the realm of economic policy-making.

Since the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act, each US administration must submit a national security strategy document every year to the Congress. These are collectively written papers, prepared with the involvement of several governmental departments, as well as people within the executive branch.²⁸ Announced with a cover letter by the President, the national security strategy is “the highest level national strategy document in the United States” and “the only complete whole-of-government national security document that the U.S. Government publishes.”²⁹ In the post-9/11 era, it has turned out to be “the most important reformulation of US grand strategy”.³⁰ These official documents have a wide international audience and have been closely watched, at least since the US invasion of Iraq, which was foreshadowed in President Bush’s 2002 NSS.³¹

In addition to the most recent document, we also draw on the previous national security strategies of the post-9/11 era, that is, those announced by Presidents George W. Bush Jr. (2002, 2006), Barack Obama (2010, 2015), and Donald Trump (2017) as additional sources of empirical material, primarily for comparative purposes.³² Since the national security strategy functions as an “umbrella strategy” that directs a wide range of national

²⁵ See for example, Jennifer Mitzen and Kyle Larson, “Ontological Security and Foreign Policy,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2017), pp. 1–26; Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*; Jef Huysmans, “Security! What Do You Mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1998), pp. 226–55; Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, “Anxiety, Fear, and Ontological Security in World Politics: Thinking with and Beyond Giddens,” *International Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2020), pp. 240–56; Zarakol, “Ontological (In) Security,” pp. 3–23.

²⁶ See Alexandra Homolar and Ronny Scholz, “The Power of Trump-Speak: Populist Crisis Narratives and Ontological Security,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2019), pp. 344–64; Christopher S. Browning, “Brexit, Existential Anxiety and Ontological (In)Security,” *European Security*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2018), pp. 336–55; Georg Löffmann, “Enemies of the People: Donald Trump and the Security Imaginary of America First,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2022), pp. 543–60.

²⁷ For notable exceptions, see Homolar and Scholz, “The Power of Trump-Speak,” pp. 344–64; Elke Krahnmann, “The Market for Ontological Security,” *European Security*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2018), pp. 356–73; Anna Nadibaidze, “Technology in the Quest for Status: The Russian Leadership’s Artificial Intelligence Narrative,” *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2024), pp. 117–42; Tanya Narozhna, “State-Society Complexes in Ontological Security-Seeking in IR,” *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 23 (2020), pp. 559–83.

²⁸ Don M. Snider, *The National Security Strategy: Documenting Strategic Vision* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 1995).

²⁹ Alan G. Stolberg, *How Nation-states Craft National Security Strategy Documents* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2012), pp. 71–73.

³⁰ John Lewis Gaddis, “A Grand Strategy of Transformation,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 133 (2002), p. 56.

³¹ See Felix Berenskoetter, “Mapping the Mind Gap: A Comparison of US and European Security Strategies,” *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2005), pp. 71–92; Michael J. Boyle, “The War on Terror in American Grand Strategy,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (2008), pp. 191–209; James Der Derian, “Decoding the National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” *Boundary 2*, Vol. 30, No. 3, (2003), pp. 19–27.

³² The White House, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” September, 2002, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/>; The White House, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” March, 2006, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2006/>; The White House, “National Security Strategy,” May, 2010, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf; The White House, “National Security Strategy,” February, 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf; The White House, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” December, 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

security-related strategy documents such as the National Defense Strategy,³³ we also include these documents in our textual data set. Our primary focus, however, remains on reporting the NSS as a standalone, whole-of-government statement of US national security strategy.

This article provides a computer-assisted qualitative analysis of narrative micro- and macro-structures to examine strategic narratives produced and disseminated in the NSS.³⁴ While we trace narrative-specific components such as plot, actor, and setting, our aim is to focus on studying the content of US security narratives.³⁵ We adopt a hybrid approach that combines inductive coding, where codes are derived from in vivo or open coding, and deductive coding, using a priori information and our existing knowledge of US national security narratives and contextual background. The coding units consist of words and terms, as well as narrative sequences of these individual units of meaning, such as sentences or combinations of sentences.³⁶ We avoid developing and adhering to a strict structural model for defining narratives, as this may lead to the loss of valuable insights and information.³⁷ Then, we examine connections among the narrative units of meaning or elements to identify recurrent themes.

Narratives construct social reality,³⁸ they are performative³⁹ and constitutive of identity.⁴⁰ They set the scene, organise events into a causal sequence, identify and characterise key actors, and depict the relationships between them, thereby ascribing meaning to the world.⁴¹ Identity emerges mainly as a result of nuanced characterisation in narratives, i.e. the attribution of certain qualities, roles, dispositions, and intentions to the self and a variety of others, either relationally or subjectively, within the setting of the story and in particular temporal and spatial contexts.⁴² We therefore examine the causal pathways revealed in the temporal and spatial employment of events and actions, together with the characterisation of actors in strategic narratives, in order to study the narrative constitution of identity and security.

Strategic narratives can be defined as purposefully deployed stories that relate to both states and the system as a whole.⁴³ They are not necessarily analytical and “may rely on appeals to emotion, or on suspect metaphors and dubious historical analogies.”⁴⁴ Political actors employ strategic narratives as a tool to extend influence, promote a particular agenda, and shape our perceptions of the world around us.⁴⁵ Strategic narratives are

³³ Catherine Dale, *National Security Strategy: Legislative Mandates, Execution to Date, and Considerations for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2008), p. 18; Stolberg, *How Nation-States Craft National Security Strategy Documents*, p. 71.

³⁴ We use MAXQDA to get a better overview of the codes and to organise the coded data more effectively. As coding requires substantial interpretation, all coding is done manually.

³⁵ For a similar approach, see Jack Holland and Xavier Mathieu, “Narratology and US Foreign Policy in Syria: Beyond Identity Binaries, Toward Narrative Power,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 4 (2023), pp. 5–6.

³⁶ See Appendix for our coding framework and further explanations.

³⁷ Christine Bold, *Using Narrative in Research* (London: Sage, 2012).

³⁸ Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 20.

³⁹ Linus Hagström and Karl Gustafsson, “Narrative Power: How Storytelling Shapes East Asian International Politics,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2019), pp. 387–406.

⁴⁰ Margaret Somers, “The Narrative Construction of Identity: A relational and Network Approach,” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (1994), pp. 605–49.

⁴¹ Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, pp. 11–12, 38–39; Erik Ringmar, “On the Ontological Status of the State,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1996), pp. 439–66.

⁴² Hagström and Gustafsson, “Narrative Power,” p. 395. See also Karl Gustafsson, “Routinised Recognition and Anxiety: Understanding the Deterioration in Sino-Japanese Relations,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (2016), pp. 613–33; Kai Oppermann and Alexander Spencer, “Narrating Success and Failure: Congressional Debates on the ‘Iran Nuclear Deal’,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2018), pp. 268–92.

⁴³ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 3.

⁴⁴ Lawrence Freedman, “Networks, Culture and Narratives,” *The Adelphi Papers*, Vol. 45, No. 379 (2006), p. 23.

⁴⁵ Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*, p. 3.

crucial in shaping perceptions of security threats and mobilising support for specific policy responses,⁴⁶ thus significantly influencing foreign policy processes and outcomes, from setting and legitimising policy agendas to enabling coalition building. By studying strategic narratives reproduced in official documents such as the NSS, one can gain insights into how states construct and communicate their identities, interests, and values, while legitimising particular policy responses to address ontological insecurities. This study places particular emphasis on the role of strategic security narratives in legitimising change, as they help us to understand how states enable a particular policy action or change in state routines that might otherwise be considered unacceptable or even unthinkable.

Strategic Narratives and the Politics of Representation in the NSS

The NSS opens with a letter by President Joe Biden, outlining the national security agenda, identifying key threats, and highlighting potential challenges to implementing the proposed strategy. Just as the 2002 NSS outlined US strategy in the war on terrorism and foreshadowed the invasion of Iraq, the NSS now outlines US intentions to reshape the global economy and outmanoeuvre China. It identifies the Indo-Pacific as its central regional priority, claiming that “[n]o region will be of more significance to the world and to everyday Americans than the Indo-Pacific.”⁴⁷ Among the headlines is an almost exhaustive list of global governance issues, prioritised as “shared challenges,” ranging from climate change and food security to mass migration and refugee movements, as well as global terrorism. Security is repeatedly defined as “competition” between the US and its rivals, encompassing both the liberal political understanding of the term as competition between major powers and the neoliberal economic meaning. The NSS repeatedly emphasises the US’ unrivalled power, attributing it to its “competitive advantages”⁴⁸ or “competitive edge,”⁴⁹ stemming from the fact that American workers “can out-compete anyone.”⁵⁰

The NSS is firmly wrapped in a strategic narrative about the growing need to build resilience in the face of crises of different natures, including the climate crisis and the COVID 19 pandemic and ensuing recession. National security is defined as being firmly linked to resilience, which is characterised as the ability to persistently deal with and adjust to change in order to overcome challenges.⁵¹ This narrative takes several forms, mainly used in relation to the resilience of the international system, or systemic resilience, which is not to be found in previous national security strategies we have studied but also to the resilience of the US society, the economy, the state, and supply chains, as well as partners and allies.⁵²

Narrative Construction of the In-group and Representations of the Self

The NSS describes security as an ongoing struggle between countries that follow democratic principles and those that are governed by authoritarian regimes. It is mainly through this strategic narrative of a “heightened competition between democracies and autocracies”⁵³

⁴⁶ Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*, p. 254. See Thomas Colley and Carolijn van Noort, *Strategic Narratives, Ontological Security and Global Policy: Responses to China’s Belt and Road Initiative* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); Carolijn van Noort and Thomas Colley, “How Do Strategic Narratives Shape Policy Adoption? Responses to China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” *Review of International Studies* Vol. 47, No.1 (2021), pp. 39–63.

⁴⁷ National Security Strategy 2022, p. 38.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁵¹ See Flockhart, “Is This the End?” p. 217.

⁵² The term resilience has steadily gained prominence in US national security discourse over the past two decades. See Sabine Selchow, “Resilience and Resilient in Obama’s National Security Strategy 2010: Enter Two ‘Political Keywords,’” *Politics*, Vol. 37, No.1 (2017), pp. 36–51.

⁵³ National Security Strategy 2022, p. 9.

that the world is divided into several layers; friend and foe, enemy and ally, and the in-between. The in-group, which includes the self and its allies, and the out-group are delineated through this strategic narrative.

Remarkably, the self is characterised as the bearer, and in most cases the originator, of a set of liberal democratic values, i.e. democracy, respect for human rights, and the rules and norms of the existing international order. The NSS reproduces the well-researched autobiographical narrative that the US is and always has been a free trader and a liberal hegemon, a promoter and defender of an open economic order.⁵⁴ The security priorities in the NSS resonate with the US' sense of agency, particularly its self-identity, which encompasses the rules-based liberal international order and global free-market capitalism as the source of peace, freedom, and prosperity. National security, then, is not just about protecting the US as a motherland, territory, or state but the US as an embodiment of values and hegemonic power or singular (ideational and material) leadership capacity.

Almost all nations have their own narratives of exceptionalism, which are strategically reproduced and transmitted in official discourses, with reference to the spatial, cultural, or historical roots of their uniqueness.⁵⁵ Narratives of unparalleled, exceptional stance in world politics necessarily involve some form of national self-glorification, combined with a careful search for balance between myth and a rational reading of material capacity. The NSS explicitly declares US exceptionalism, stating that “[t]here is no nation better positioned to lead with strength and purpose than the United States of America,”⁵⁶ and further details what makes it exceptional as follows:

Our inherent national strengths—the ingenuity, creativity, resilience, and determination of the American people; our values, diversity, and democratic institutions; our technological leadership and economic dynamism; and our diplomatic corps, development professionals, intelligence community, and our military—remain unparalleled. We are experienced in using and applying our power in combination with our allies and partners who add significantly to our own strengths.⁵⁷

While exceptionalism is a recurrent theme in all the national security strategies we have studied, the current document also acknowledges the limitations of US power. In the case of the US, as a declining hegemonic power facing a rising challenger,⁵⁸ exceptionalism borders on what can be termed as “great power narcissism,” which involves acknowledging both strengths and weaknesses.⁵⁹ As such, exceptionalism is intertwined not only with *grandeur* but also with feelings of pride, entitlement, responsibility, and inadequacy.

What makes the US unique is its commitment to upholding the open international order and the free-market, which are further narrated as the main sources of the US' exceptional power, economic dynamism, technological edge, and competitiveness. It is through this narrative that the US constructs itself as responsible for the health and continuity of the

⁵⁴ See Kristen Hopewell, “Strategic Narratives in Global Trade Politics: American Hegemony, Free Trade, and the Hidden Hand of the State,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 14, No.1 (2021), pp. 51–86.

⁵⁵ See Kalevi J. Holsti, “Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy: Is it Exceptional?” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2010), pp. 381–404.

⁵⁶ National Security Strategy 2022, p. 2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵⁸ Christopher Layne, “Preventing the China-US Cold War From Turning Hot,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2020), pp. 343–85; Arlo Poletti and Lorenzo Zambonardi, “Declining Hegemony and the Sources of Trump’s Disengagement From Multilateral Trade Governance: the Interaction Between Domestic Politics and The International Political Economy,” *International Politics*, Vol. 59, No. 6 (2022), pp. 1101–18.

⁵⁹ See Linus Hagström, “Great Power Narcissism and Ontological (In) Security: The Narrative Mediation of Greatness and Weakness in International Politics,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (2021), pp. 331–42.

international order and global market capitalism.⁶⁰ US responsibility extends beyond its own citizens and those of its allies to include the welfare of citizens of rival outsider entities such as China.⁶¹ The US' primary responsibility, which was explained as "ridding the world of evil" in Bush's 2002 NSS⁶² or "leading from a position of strength" in Obama's 2015 NSS, is now defined in an even broader manner (see Table 1).

The NSS also engages in the construction of an in-group through carefully chosen narratives about the self and its *entourage*. The in-group consists of a hard core, the self (the United States), and a layer around this core, a group of "like-minded" states, partners, and allies such as the European Union (EU) member states, Japan, India, and NATO members, with which the self is willing to act in pursuit of security and prosperity. Members of the in-group are narratively characterised as sharing the same liberal values, interests, behaviours or essential characteristics, and ideals with the US and a commitment to act together in defence of the liberal international order. It is with the members of this in-group that the self is engaged in safeguarding the international order and its hegemonic power therein. It intends to do so not only by strengthening the existing security architecture but also by changing the global networks of production and innovation. US superiority, technological or economic, thus depends crucially on the collaborative advantage that would result from "transformative cooperation"⁶³ with friends and allies.

However, remarkably, not all members of the in-group are inherently equal. The in-group called for cooperation to bring transformative change is thus not monolithic and devoid of power hierarchies. While some are characterised as a "foundational partner," a natural extension of the self, such as Europe, care must be taken to avoid alienation and dissonance for other members of the in-group, such as Türkiye.⁶⁴ US security narratives are thus involved in an ongoing construction of hierarchical power relations within the in-group through careful politics of representation. At the same time, they also serve to establish the distance and proximity of the members of the in-group to the self. What is noticeable is that more than 75 years after D-Day and the Marshall Plan, Europe is still narrated in US national security discourse in terms of its physical, existential security needs. Europe appears as a somewhat weaker self on another continent, which is currently under attack and in need of US support for its integrity, freedom, and security:

Europe has been, and will continue to be, our foundational partner in addressing the full range of global challenges. [...] America maintains our fundamental commitment to the pursuit of a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace. Russia's further invasion of Ukraine poses a grave threat to this vision [...].⁶⁵

Remarkably, the in-group in US national security narratives includes not only states, sovereign members of the international community, but also non-state actors. These non-state actors include security organisations such as NATO and the Indo-Pacific Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Narratives in the NSS characterise these as members

⁶⁰ In this respect, there is a significant departure from Trump's 2017 NSS, which did not assert any hegemonic responsibility, even in a limited sense, to promote democracy and human rights globally. See Aaron Ettinger, "Trump's National Security Strategy: 'America First' Meets the Establishment," *International Journal*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (2018), p. 479.

⁶¹ The NSS makes a concerted effort to carefully distinguish between the Chinese people, who deserve US support, and China as a state, emphasising family and friendship ties while seeking cooperation between the two peoples to address issues that matter most to both nations. See National Security Strategy 2022, p. 25.

⁶² See Berenskoetter, "Mapping the Mind Gap," pp. 75–6.

⁶³ National Security Strategy 2022, pp. 16–8.

⁶⁴ Türkiye is mentioned only once in the document as follows: "We will continue to engage with Turkey to reinforce its strategic, political, economic, and institutional ties to the West" (National Security Strategy 2022, p. 39). No other member of the NATO is attributed such a liminal position.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 38–9.

Table 1. Comparison of US National Security Strategies in the Post-9/11 Era

	George Bush's 2002 NSS and 2006 NSS	Barrack Obama's 2010 NSS and 2015 NSS	Donald Trump's 2017 NSS	Joe Biden's 2022 NSS
Strategic priorities and main objectives	<p>“Pre-emptive war” (2002)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fight against terrorism <p>—</p> <p>“America is at war” (2006)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Defend liberty and justice - End tyranny - Advance human dignity 	<p>“Strategic Approach” (2010)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Renew American leadership - Promote a sustainable international order <p>—</p> <p>“Leading from a position of strength” (2015)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Durable peace and new prosperity 	<p>“America First”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Protect the American way of life - End unfair trade practices - Establish a reciprocal international system 	<p>“Strategic Competition”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Outcompete China and constrain Russia - Gain resilience - Establish an allied techno-industrial base - Build a better international economic system
Main narrative contexts	<p>9/11 attacks</p> <p>Saddam Hussein’s “Weapons of mass destruction” and the invasion of Iraq (2002)</p> <p>—</p> <p>The War on Terror and the invasion of Afghanistan (2006)</p>	<p>No specific narrative context</p> <p>Some focus on the 2008 economic crisis, the climate change, and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq</p>	<p>Jihadist terrorism</p> <p>Unfair trade practices harming American economy</p> <p>Illegal migration and border security</p>	<p>The climate crisis</p> <p>Non-market abuses by authoritarian powers</p> <p>Russia’s invasion of Ukraine</p> <p>The pandemic and subsequent supply chain crisis</p>
Responsibility	<p>Universal/Hegemonic</p> <p>“We have a responsibility to promote human freedom” (2006, p. 5)</p>	<p>Universal/Hegemonic</p> <p>“Our obligations do not end at our borders” (2015, p. 7)</p>	<p>Limited to the American people only</p> <p>“Our fundamental responsibility is to protect the American people, the homeland, and the American way of life” (p. 4)</p>	<p>Universal/Hegemonic</p> <p>“We will not leave our future vulnerable to the whims of those who do not share our vision for a world that is free, open, prosperous, and secure. [...] We can do this—for our future and for the world (p. 2-3)</p>

(continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

	George Bush's 2002 NSS and 2006 NSS	Barrack Obama's 2010 NSS and 2015 NSS	Donald Trump's 2017 NSS	Joe Biden's 2022 NSS
Threats	Terrorism and rogue states	Terrorism and rogue states Non-traditional security threats	Terrorism and rogue states China's and Russia's challenge to American power Illegal migration	Non-traditional security threats China's challenge to American power and non-market abuses Russia's immediate threat to the free and open international system
Means	Military - Preventive strike - War on terrorism	Military and Ideational - American leadership and liberal values	Military and Economic - Trade protectionism and sanctions - Industrial and technology policy measures to support national defence industry - Tightening of visa procedures and border security	Economic, Military, and Ideational - Industrial, trade, and technology policies - System building experience and exceptional leadership capacity
Cooperation and alliance-building	Security-related To build alliances to defeat global terrorism	Within the UN and other multilateral institutions To meet global challenges	"Cooperation with reciprocity" Intergovernmental cooperation to promote prosperity, stability and a balance of power that favours US interests	"Transformative cooperation" Economic and security-related, based on a "dual-track" approach: - cooperate with any country including geopolitical rivals - deeper cooperation with like-minded states the Indo-Pacific Major theme
Regional priority	Middle East Major theme	Middle East Major theme	None Major theme	None
Democracy-Autocracy divide	Major theme	None	Major theme	None
Free and civilised vs. violent and uncivilised divide	Major theme	None	Major theme	None

(continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

	George Bush's 2002 NSS and 2006 NSS	Barrack Obama's 2010 NSS and 2015 NSS	Donald Trump's 2017 NSS	Joe Biden's 2022 NSS
International order	Not a main focus	Main focus "Sustainable" international order, advanced by US leadership	Not a main focus (instead, the focus is on "a fair and reciprocal economic order")	Main focus "A free and open rules-based international order"
Economic, trade, technology, and industrial policy measures	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Main focus To counter unfair trade practices and establish reciprocal economic relations	Main focus To safeguard the fair and open trade system and global market capitalism.
China	Would be partner "The United States seeks a constructive relationship with a changing China" (2002, p. 27)	Valuable partner "We welcome a China that takes on a responsible leadership role" (2010, p. 43)	Main adversary and a threat for America	Major threat for the liberal international order, and America's most consequential geopolitical challenge
Russia	Regional partner "Russia is in the midst of a hopeful transition, reaching for its democratic future and a partner in the war on terror" (2002, p. 4)	Would be partner "We will seek greater partnership with Russia" (2010, p. 44)	Aggressive, revisionist power "Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity" (p. 2)	"Profoundly dangerous" entity with aggressive behaviour "An immediate threat to the free and open international system" (p. 8)
Multilateral organisations and international financial institutions	Discussed in relation to the US' historical role in their establishment and the need for their reform	Some ambiguity in their significance Discussed mainly in the context of the need for their reform	Sceptical approach Characterised as entities that need to be controlled, or disciplined, and are under the influence of authoritarian countries	Valuable partners as members of the in-group and "force multipliers" for US values

of the in-group and assign specific roles and functions to each of these non-state entities, particularly in the pursuit of technological leadership, crisis resilience, and transforming the global economy.⁶⁶

Narrative Construction of the Out-group and Representations of the Others

Identity often emerges from the binary opposition between the self and the other. Building on seminal contributions by Campbell (1992), Connolly (1991), Hansen (2013), and Neumann (1996), among others,⁶⁷ we recognise that the politics of representation plays a crucial role in identity construction. We also acknowledge the existence of multiple constitutive others with varying degrees of proximity and difference to the self⁶⁸ and argue that the portrayal of characters and events in narratives influences how states seek to maintain their stable sense of identity and ontological security.

The NSS identifies China as the main threat to the liberal international order and to US hegemonic power. It declares China to be “America’s most consequential geopolitical challenge”⁶⁹ and “the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it.”⁷⁰ Russia is then identified as “an immediate and persistent threat to international peace and stability,”⁷¹ while the list of authoritarian challengers, the ultimate others to the US self, also includes Iran.

While it is noteworthy that China represents the antithesis of liberal democracy, both politically and passively, given its authoritarian single-party regime, what makes it the most consequential challenge to the liberal international order, and a threat to US values and interests, is its actions directed at free-market capitalism and the open multilateral trading system. Here, we see another recurrent narrative that frames the market as vulnerable and currently under coordinated attack by China and other authoritarian members of the out-group. This narrative is strategically deployed to perform various discursive functions, including, most importantly, the legitimization of the proposed transformative change. The climate crisis and the supply chain crises experienced by developed countries including the US during the coronavirus pandemic and its aftermath both provide rich “narrative contexts” here (see Table 1). The narrative of the free-market as vulnerable and incapable of responding to growing challenges on its own is embedded throughout the text and can be summed up in the following quote:

The private sector and open markets have been, and continue to be, a vital source of our national strength and a key driver of innovation. However, markets alone cannot respond to the rapid pace of technological change, global supply disruptions, nonmarket abuses by the PRC and other actors, or the deepening climate crisis. Strategic public investment is the backbone of a strong industrial and innovation base in the 21st century global economy. That is why the United States is pursuing a modern industrial and innovation strategy.⁷²

⁶⁶ Remarkably, the World Trade Organization (WTO) is not mentioned.

⁶⁷ David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London: Routledge, 2006); Iver B. Neumann, “Self and Other in International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1996), pp. 139–74; William E. Connolly, *Identity /Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁶⁸ Beyza Ç. Tekin, *Representations and Othering in Discourse: The Construction of Turkey in the EU Context* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2010), p. 167. See Chernobrov, “Ontological Security and Public (Mis) Recognition,” pp. 581–96.

⁶⁹ National Security Strategy 2022, p. 11.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Through the use of this recurrent narrative, China and Russia are strategically constructed not only as inherently different, non-democratic entities but also as “defectors” and wilful abusers of the liberal international order. This is mainly because they exploit it, circumventing the rules and established global norms to advance their own agenda and interests, despite having “benefited greatly” from the system. Unlike the Soviet Union, which represented an Other *par excellence*—an ideological rival totally incompatible with the American-led international order and free-market capitalism during the Cold War⁷³—China and Russia represent cases of defection:

Just as the United States and countries around the world benefited greatly from the post-Cold War international order, so too did the PRC and Russia. The PRC’s economy and geopolitical influence grew rapidly. Russia joined the G8 and G20 and recovered economically in the 2000s. And yet, they concluded that the success of a free and open rules-based international order posed a threat to their regimes and stifled their ambitions.⁷⁴

Just as the politics of representation in narrative characterisations serve to promote feelings of sameness or togetherness in the construction of an in-group, they also evoke feelings of difference, antagonism, and inherent incompatibility while constructing an out-group. The self-other dichotomy is thus inscribed in nuanced characterisations in narratives that portray Russia and China as threatening, deceitful, manipulative, and abusive actors in an open international order populated by rule- and norm-abiding, peaceful actors. Temporal emplotment is notable in such narrative constructions, with the NSS often portraying them as states that were once welcomed into the international community but have gone rogue to advance their own interests and political agendas that are incompatible with the liberal order. Spatial elements are also crucial in these narratives, often depicting China as threatening stability and peace in the Indo-Pacific and Russia as threatening regional security in Europe.

The NSS describes non-market abuses of autocratic governments as consisting of a wide range of malign policies. It accuses autocratic governments of limiting access to their domestic market, moulding global technology and digital infrastructure, arbitrarily raising costs by withholding the movement of key goods, and using economic power to coerce countries, in short, “weaponising” the global economy’s interconnectivity and strengths.⁷⁵ The document further details these abuses, which are most of the time implicitly assigned to China, as “currency manipulation,” “illicit financing,” “forced labour,” “supply chain manipulation,” “technology theft,” and “discriminatory regulation,” among others (see Table 2). These allegations and negative representations of China are, to a certain extent, reminiscent of the “Japan-bashing” of the 1970s and 1980s.⁷⁶ But China’s case is different from Japan’s, mainly because the challenge now comes from a member of the out-group.⁷⁷

The strategic narrative portraying the market as a vulnerable entity under attack and in need of protection, both domestically and globally, is significantly more pronounced than in the previous national security strategies we have studied. While President Bush and Obama’s strategies also emphasise economic liberalism and depict the open, free-market as the

⁷³ See Joseph S. Jr Nye, “How Not to Deal with a Rising China: A US Perspective,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 5 (2022), p. 1640.

⁷⁴ National Security Strategy 2022, p. 8.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷⁶ See Zhengqing Yuan and Qiang Fu, “Narrative Framing and the United States’ Threat Construction of Rivals,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2020), pp. 419–53.

⁷⁷ Although “to American eyes” Japan presented a major threat to the liberal economic order, it was still a principal security ally. See Michael Mastanduno, “System Maker and Privilege Taker: US Power and the International Political Economy,” *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (2009), p. 137.

Table 2. Core Elements of US 2022 National Security Strategy

Security challenges and priorities	Proposed solutions and means	US self-images	Strategic narratives with legitimization function
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Traditional security concerns - Non-traditional security concerns - Climate change - Industrial, resource, energy, and food security - Pandemics preparedness - Supply chain security - Resilience - Sustainability - Development - Non-market abuses of China and other authoritarian states - Currency manipulation - Corruption and illicit financing - Pressure on capital and entrepreneurs - Denial of the right to organise and other forms of labour repression - Forced labour - Forced technology transfer and espionage - Supply chain manipulation - Technology and intellectual property theft - Discriminatory regulation - Withholding the movement of key goods 	<p>Building an international economic system that goes beyond trade and is better suited to contemporary realities</p> <p>A dual track approach to cooperation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Transformative cooperation among allies and the willing - Cooperation with all parties, including rivals, on shared challenges <p>Delocation of industrial production</p> <p>Building an allied techno-industrial base in strategic industries</p> <p>Economic, trade, investment, technology and industrial policy measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Measures to stimulate demand for durable and inclusive growth - Active state support for businesses and competitiveness of American companies - Trade protectionism - Export controls - Controlling technology spillovers - Investment-screening - Strategic public investment - Investment planning. - Public-Private-Partnerships, Public procurement - Supporting the resilience of the middle class, promoting union organising and collective bargaining, and improving job quality. 	<p>Defender of liberal international order and multilateralism</p> <p>Promoter of free-market, free-enterprise capitalism, and an open international trading system</p> <p>Originator of liberal values, such as democracy and human rights</p> <p>System-Maker</p> <p>Responsible hegemon with exceptional power, interested in providing benign leadership</p>	<p>Resilience narrative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resilience in the face of multiple crises - Systemic resilience - Resilience of the American society and economy - Supply chain resilience <p>The present as a “decisive decade,” a critical juncture in world history</p> <p>Risks of inaction, indispensability of change</p> <p>The market is under attack, and unable to defend itself and has to be protected.</p> <p>US exceptionalism narrative</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negative impacts of unchecked globalisation - Asymmetric interconnectivities weaponised by autocracies - Widening inequalities - Job insecurities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Investment planning. - Public-Private-Partnerships, Public procurement - Supporting the resilience of the middle class, promoting union organising and collective bargaining, and improving job quality. 		

catalyst for universal prosperity that should be promoted globally, they do not advocate for the use of state power to actively safeguard the market against emerging threats. Although Trump's 2017 NSS contains a similar theme, it identifies China's threat primarily to the American economy, rather than to the open trading system and global market capitalism. Moreover, the 2017 NSS focuses mainly on the US bilateral trade deficit, not only with China but also with allied countries, attributing the problem to "bad trade deals" such as NAFTA.⁷⁸ The main concern in relation to the economy in the 2017 NSS is explained as the inability to maintain "reciprocal international economic relations." Accordingly, protectionist measures and government intervention are justified with "beggar-thy-neighbour" and "zero-sum trade" neomercantilist arguments.

What is equally remarkable about the NSS is the abstinence from explicit, unmitigated cultural essentialism. Just as selectively told stories, untold stories and strategic omissions also play a role in shaping security perceptions. In contrast to President Trump's national security discourse, the current strategy refrains from overtly prioritising culture and civilisation as the primary focal points of analysis. In fact, the NSS makes no explicit reference to insurmountable essential, cultural, or civilisational differences and incompatibilities between the West and the East, Islam and other religions, or China, Russia, and the US. Unlike the 2017 NSS, the world is no longer defined by the dichotomy of "free and civilised states" versus the violent and uncivilised.⁷⁹ Allegations of "ideological threats that emanate from radical Islamist groups and competitor nations"⁸⁰ or threats to the "American way of life" from "porous borders and unenforced immigration laws"⁸¹ no longer dominate US national security narratives.⁸² Just like Obama strategically removed expressions such as Islamic extremism, terrorism, or fundamentalism from the US national security strategy after replacing Bush, the Biden administration does the same and does not employ such unmitigated expressions of cultural essentialism.

"China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests,"⁸³ and China is the main "strategic competitor" narrative themes, and characterisations, however, still prevail as a form of latent cultural essentialism, providing a certain case of narrative continuity between the two most recent national security strategy documents. In other words, civilisational differences remain at the core of the NSS but are kept at a more latent level, rooted in the politics of representation that characterises China's investment controls, state interventions, and activism in the economy as threats to the values of the self. Strategic narratives accordingly define the US' main security concern in terms of a binary opposition between two "varieties of capitalism"⁸⁴ or "types of capitalist governance."⁸⁵ In this dichotomic view of the world, the antagonism is not between two incompatible civilisations or two competing alternative ideologies but between different ways of understanding and practising capitalism. These are open, rules-based free-market capitalism and authoritarian (competitive or state bureaucratic) capitalism, which are portrayed as in conflict with each other and associated with the self and the others, respectively.

⁷⁸ See Jean Cristophe Boucher and Cameron G. Thies, "I Am a Tariff Man': The Power of Populist Foreign Policy Rhetoric Under President Trump," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 81, No. 2 (2019), pp. 712–22; Thomas Furse, "Forward to the 1980s: US Strategic Trade in the World Order," *International Politics*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (2022), pp. 597–615.

⁷⁹ National Security Strategy 2017, p. 26.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁸² Similarly, the faith-based "good vs. evil" or "the righteous vs. evildoers" dichotomy employed in the "Bush doctrine" is absent.

⁸³ National Security Strategy 2017, p. 25.

⁸⁴ Peter A. Hall and David Soskice, eds., *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁸⁵ See Barry Buzan and George Lawson, "Capitalism and the Emergent World Order," *International Affairs*, Vol. 90, No.1 (2014), p. 76.

The US' Pursuit of Ontological Security and Legitimation of Transformative Change

The NSS reflects distinct ontological security concerns and anxieties about (1) the resilience of the international order and US hegemonic power within it; (2) the loss of control over the dynamics and pace of free-market capitalism; (3) the negative effects of globalisation, which feed anti-establishment sentiments and opposition to open multilateralism and the liberal order; and (4) uncertainties about the future of US exceptional power and status, particularly in relation to the ability to maintain technological and economic superiority and manage technological development.

States address ontological insecurities and anxieties in a variety of ways. These include re-establishing routines and reinforcing biographical narratives,⁸⁶ deliberately avoiding or rejecting negative aspects of their past,⁸⁷ seeking external recognition of their great power status and desirable self-identity preferences,⁸⁸ redefining borders and designating home,⁸⁹ or changing identities.⁹⁰ Strategic narratives in the NSS reveal that the US aims to address ontological insecurity and reduce the uncomfortable disconnect with its self-identity mainly in two ways. First, by recalibrating or changing some of its routinized relationships—i.e., adjusting its relations with other major powers like China and Russia, adopting a more exclusionary, containment approach, reconsidering its stance on multilateralism and the openness of the international trading system, and reshaping state-market relations. Second, by reshuffling, rearranging, or shifting the emphasis of some of the biographical narratives that define its self-identity, emphasising different aspects of its nature, history, and goals to better align with current strategic imperatives. The NSS also plays upon emotions embedded in strategic narratives such as feelings of grandeur, entitlement, responsibility, and nostalgia as a way of addressing ontological insecurity.

Narratives in the NSS suggest that the US is being challenged in its ontological security first by the rapid evolution of global capitalism into an unknown entity, a stranger,⁹¹ largely as a result of the rise of and destabilising actions by non-Western actors such as China. Fears and insecurities about the unchecked rapid change in global capitalism and the current state of the international economic system moving in a direction that potentially threatens the US' state of being are influencing national security priorities and giving way to the transformative changes proposed in the NSS. To address these overarching ontological security concerns, appease related anxieties, and maintain a sense of self rooted in distinctiveness and exceptionalism, the NSS proposes a rapid economic restructuring and substantial change in American capitalism, which also corresponds to a rethinking of the global capitalist order.

The Biden administration has not only maintained the protectionist measures and sanctions introduced by President Trump⁹² but has also introduced a broader range of economic policy tools centred on “strategic public investment,” assuming a more expansive and

⁸⁶ Jennifer Mitzen, “Anxious Community: EU as (In)Security Community,” *European Security*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2018), pp. 393–413; See also Trine Flockhart, “The Problem of Change in Constructivist Theory: Ontological Security Seeking and Agent Motivation,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 5 (2016), pp. 799–820.

⁸⁷ Zarakol, “Ontological (In) security,” pp. 3–23.

⁸⁸ Tanya Narozhna, “Misrecognition, Ontological Security and State Foreign Policy: The Case of Post-Soviet Russia,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (2022), pp. 76–97; Nadibaidze, “Technology in the Quest for Status,” p. 132.

⁸⁹ Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism,” p. 747; Lupovici, “Ontological Security, Cyber Technology,” pp. 153–78.

⁹⁰ Browning, “Brexit, Existential Anxiety and Ontological (In)Security,” p. 340; Gustafsson, “Routinised Recognition and Anxiety,” pp. 619–20; Linus Hagström and Karl Gustafsson, “Japan and Identity Change: Why it Matters in International Relations,” *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2015), pp. 1–22; Lupovici, “Ontological Security, Cyber Technology,” p. 167.

⁹¹ See Felix Berenskötter and Nicola Nymalm, “States of Ambivalence: Recovering the Concept of ‘The Stranger’ in International Relations,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (2021), pp. 19–38.

⁹² See Furse, “Forward to the 1980s,” p. 611.

diverse role in security policy. These are envisioned as a mechanism to alleviate anxieties about the US' ontological status. This approach is justified as a means to address non-market abuses by significant others, counteract the perceived negative effects of unchecked globalisation on US interests, and steer the world economy onto a new, orderly, and manageable trajectory. In doing so, the NSS also emphasises the US' historical role and achievements in establishing existing global norms and mechanisms that have either become outdated or actively detrimental:

Since 1945, the United States has led the creation of institutions, norms, and standards to govern international trade and investment, economic policy, and technology. [...] These mechanisms have not kept pace with economic or technological changes, and today risk being irrelevant, or in certain cases, actively harmful to solving the challenges we now face—from insecure supply chains to widening inequality to the abuses of the PRC's non-market economic actions. We are endeavoring to strengthen and update the UN system and multilateral institutions generally. Nowhere is this need more acute than in updating the rules of the road for technology, cyberspace, trade, and economics.⁹³

The latest NSS acknowledges the shortcomings of the current international economic system and, unlike the 2017 NSS and previous documents, explicitly advocates for its replacement with a framework suited to contemporary realities. Emphasising the US' role as a system builder, it states that one of its ultimate goals is to go beyond trade in global economic restructuring and build a better international economic system:

Beyond trade, we are working to build an international economic system fit for contemporary realities. We will tackle the harms caused to U.S. workers, consumers, and businesses by currency manipulation; counter corruption and illicit finance [...].⁹⁴

The NSS envisions an active state role and great-power activism to change avenues of production, accumulation, and distribution globally as a means to address ontological insecurity related to systemic resilience. The new, stronger role of the state is primarily justified by the strategic narrative of the need to build systemic resilience amid multiple crises, including climate change and the dwindling of the international economic order. Government involvement and interventions in the economy are explained as essential measures to “push back on abuses by non-market economies, and enforce rules against unfair trade and labor practices.”⁹⁵ These narratives overtly exhibit traits of anxiety, underscored by explicit references to the harms, dangers, and risks inherent in the current deficient system, compounded by manipulation and abuses perpetrated by authoritarian regimes. The following excerpt illustrates how narratives in the NSS intricately connect security with the re-establishment of state routines:

First, we have broken down the dividing line between foreign policy and domestic policy. We understand that if the United States is to succeed abroad, we must invest in our innovation and industrial strength, and build our resilience, at home. Likewise, to advance shared prosperity domestically and to uphold the rights of all Americans, we must proactively shape the international order in line with our interests and values. In a competitive world, where other powers engage in coercive or unfair practices to gain an edge over the United States and our allies, this takes on a special importance. We must complement the

⁹³ National Security Strategy 2022, p. 32.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

innovative power of the private sector with a modern industrial strategy that makes strategic public investments in America's workforce, and in strategic sectors and supply chains [...].⁹⁶

The NSS thus advocates a "benign" use of state power to repair the capitalist system, both domestically and internationally, in order to safeguard market capitalism, while seeking to "proactively shape" the international order and reduce uncertainty about the US status. The multiple objectives are explained in detail as "securing supply chains," "supporting the competitiveness of American companies," "maintaining industrial and food security," and "stimulating technological change," as well as "supporting resilience of the allied countries."

The NSS identifies the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the CHIPS and Science Act, and the Inflation Reduction Act as key domestic policy frameworks to achieve these goals through measures such as "export controls," "public procurement," and "investment screening" (see Table 2). These bills commonly introduce the vaguely defined concept of "a foreign entity of concern" to monitor and expel firms owned or controlled by China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran, marking a significant departure from established routines. However, this transformation is essentially presented as a foreign policy issue, to be addressed through a "latticework" of relationships among a coalition of like-minded countries, aiming to counterbalance and exert pressure on China. The projected international economic system relies primarily on "an allied techno-industrial base" in selected strategic industries such as "microelectronics, advanced computing and quantum technologies, artificial intelligence, biotechnology and biomanufacturing, advanced telecommunications, and clean energy technologies."⁹⁷ What is remarkable here is that economic policy measures are not solely framed as aimed at making the US more prosperous and wealthier but, equally and more importantly, at reducing uncertainty and gaining a sense of control, retaining elements of its self-identity such as its exceptional power and status and maintaining ontological security.

Paradoxically, the proposed transformation that aims to enhance ontological security challenges some of the US' autobiographical narratives. This is primarily because the plan involves significant government intervention and state activism in the economy, which openly contradicts the narrative that the free-market capitalism and economic liberalism is integral to the self-identity of the US. This is also because aggressive trade protectionism and investment-screening and controls contradict the narrative that the US' exceptional power derives primarily from openness to trade and capital flows. The proposed interventions and restructuring also violate the US' self-image as promoter of an open, essentially benevolent and progressive, multilateral international system.

This actually is nothing new. There has long been such a mismatch between the US' autobiographical narrative as a free trader and a liberal hegemon and its real policy stance, particularly in global trade politics.⁹⁸ The US has consistently included elements of trade protectionism and industrial policy in its security strategy to safeguard the domestic economy and counter emerging security threats, particularly during crisis episodes such as the oil crisis and deindustrialisation of 1970s or the 2008 global financial crisis.⁹⁹ The US has diffused its image as a promoter of a progressive, open international system while behaving in the exact same way any sovereign member of the international community would. In a

⁹⁶ National Security Strategy 2022, p. 11.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁹⁸ Hopewell, "Strategic Narratives in Global Trade Politics," p. 57.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 64–71. See also Kristen Hopewell, "When the Hegemon Goes Rogue: Leadership Amid the US Assault on the Liberal Trading Order," *International Affairs*, Vol. 97, No. 4 (2021), pp. 1025–43; Michael Mastanduno, "Economics and Security in Statecraft and Scholarship," *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (1998), pp. 825–54.

“collective amnesia,” however, the “hidden hand of the state” that promotes and protects industries is a facet that is strategically omitted from the US autobiographical narratives.¹⁰⁰

Now the NSS is adopting a similar strategy of omission or forgetting, while at the same time strategically deploying elaborate narratives for legitimisation purposes to mitigate the mismatch. It narrates the present as an emergency, a crisis episode, and an exceptional period, repetitively, from beginning to end, evoking a sense of urgency and anxiety. The narrative of a “decisive decade,” which defines the present as a critical juncture in world history, also plays an important role in legitimising the calls for change in state routines and quick, determined action to appease ontological insecurities. This narrative permeates the entire text and is tied to “there is no time to waste”¹⁰¹ and “risks of inaction”¹⁰² arguments. By strategically framing the present as an exceptional crisis or emergency, the NSS constructs a compelling narrative that resonates with the broader public and legitimises calls for radical policy change while tapping into underlying ontological anxieties.¹⁰³

Measures that go beyond the appropriate scope of state intervention in American free-market capitalism are primarily legitimised by the exceptionalism and resilience narratives that underpin the new security objectives and policy instruments aimed at gaining control and fostering a sense of stability. Within these narratives, it is the responsibility of the US to overcome the adversities facing the world today and to assuage fears of an unravelling liberal order, even if this entails radical, if not unprecedented measures. The NSS declares the US’ willingness and readiness to enhance its adaptability and responsiveness and to engage in reforms to effectively serve the interests of all. It portrays the US as aiming to provide constructive leadership and acting as a “benevolent hegemon.”¹⁰⁴ This includes assuming agency where the liberal international order lacks it. For this purpose, the NSS carefully constructs a narrative of how future events will unfold in the event of inaction and emphasises the material and ontological security gains that would result from the proposed transformation. In a reflection of great power narcissism, while doing so, the NSS acknowledges not only the US’ strengths, entitlements, and responsibilities but also its weaknesses and vulnerabilities.¹⁰⁵

To allay growing concerns about bloc-building and the emergence of a new economic Cold War, the NSS explicitly states that “conflict or a new Cold War” is not desired.¹⁰⁶ To avoid criticism that the US is seeking to limit multilateralism to a select group of allied countries, which could be seen as creating constrained multilateralism, the NSS openly states

¹⁰⁰ Hopewell, “Strategic Narratives in Global Trade Politics,” p. 58.

¹⁰¹ National Security Strategy 2022, p. 48.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁰³ For the role of narratives in discursive legitimisation, see Theo van Leeuwen, “Legitimation in Discourse and Communication,” *Discourse & Communication*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2007), pp. 91–112.

¹⁰⁴ For different perspectives on the concept, one from security studies and another from international political economy, see Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the United States’ Unipolar Moment,” *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2006), pp. 7–41 and Duncan Snidal, “The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory,” *International Organization*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (1985), pp. 579–614. The US no longer portrays itself as the “exploited benevolent hegemon” as it did during the Trump era but instead as a responsible hegemon demonstrating benign leadership. See Carla Norrlof, “Hegemony and Inequality: Trump and the Liberal Playbook,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 1 (2018), p. 71.

¹⁰⁵ Several international observers have noted that unlike previous documents, the NSS does not reflect the US’ confidence in its technological leadership. See, for example, Carl Bildt, *The New US National Security Strategy: Battling China for Technological Leadership* (London, Brussels, Berlin: Centre for European Reform, 2022), p. 3.

¹⁰⁶ National Security Strategy 2022, p. 9. There is growing concern among Chinese observers about such moves by the US administration, which have been criticised for undermining globalism and multilateralism and threatening Chinese interests. There are also fears that the US, along with allies such as the EU and Japan, is forging a new economic bloc capable of pressuring China into coordinated action. See Minghao Zhao, “Is a New Cold War Inevitable? Chinese Perspectives on US-China Strategic Competition,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2019), p. 382; Jue Zhang and Jin Xu, “China-US Strategic Competition and the Descent of a Porous Curtain,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2021), pp. 321–52; Jun Yan Chang, “Of Risk and Threat: How the United States Perceives China’s Rise,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2023), pp. 357–81.

that the US is ready to cooperate with all, including rivals, while maintaining a “dual track” approach to cooperation. The goal is further framed as an act of altruism, i.e. aiming at protecting the autonomy, rights, and freedom of less powerful nations to choose their own policies, as opposed to the alternative vision offered by China. With this grand strategy, in an attempt to reconcile the discrepancy between autobiographical narratives and proposed policies, the NSS once again portrays the US as a “system maker,” not only for the sake of its own security and that of its allies but also for the benefit of everyone in the system.

Equally remarkable and entirely new in the latest national security strategy document is the inclusion of domestic social peace and socio-economic cohesion among the stated objectives and priorities. Restructuring the American economic system is framed in the NSS as essential not only to counter the China threat, or “defection from above,”¹⁰⁷ using Philip Cerny’s terminology but also to mitigate the risk of “defection from below,”¹⁰⁸ by addressing popular anger in the US against the political establishment, the open trading system, and the existing economic order. To tackle this particular ontological insecurity associated with the failures of global market capitalism and the internal risks they generate, the NSS proposes a detailed agenda. It envisions new mechanisms that prioritise diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility to assuage related anxieties arising from rising discontent with economic hardships, inequalities, and the decline of manufacturing jobs. Highlighting wage and employment stagnation, as well as persistently high and “widening inequality within and among countries,”¹⁰⁹ the NSS underscores these issues as major problems of the current phase of capitalist globalisation. The NSS also advocates for “supporting workers by promoting union organizing and collective bargaining, and improving workers’ job quality,”¹¹⁰ “bringing worker voices to the decision-making table,”¹¹¹ and ensuring “durable and inclusive economic growth that delivers for [our] working people”¹¹² to enhance the resilience of the middle class as a means to address ontological insecurities stemming from globalisation’s failures.

What Comes after Post-Fordism?

On the one hand, the latest national security strategy of the US reflects the recent resurgence of state interventionism and activism in the economy, a visible trend in developed countries.¹¹³ It also aligns with a broader global trend towards the revitalisation of industrial policy in advanced capitalist economies. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008, there have been renewed calls in the US, the EU, and elsewhere in the global North for a return to state activism in support of the economy.¹¹⁴ However, these efforts remained within the confines of a neoliberal mode of economic governance, operating mostly through indirect interventions in the economy, such as public-private partnerships, low-interest loans, and public guarantees to private companies, as opposed to more direct industrial policy instruments such as state ownership and control.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁷ Philip G. Cerny, “The New Security Dilemma: Divisibility, Defection and Disorder in the Global Era,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2000), pp. 623–46.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 625.

¹⁰⁹ National Security Strategy 2022, p. 12.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹¹³ See Ilias Alami, et al., “Geopolitics and the ‘New’ State Capitalism,” *Geopolitics*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2022), pp. 995–1023.

¹¹⁴ See Ken Warwick, “Beyond Industrial Policy: Emerging Issues and New Trends,” *OECD Science, Technology and Industry Policy Papers 2* (2013), OECD Publishing. Indeed, in an unexpected move that shocked many, the US bailed out private corporations that were facing bankruptcy during the 2008 global financial crisis.

¹¹⁵ See Fabio Bulfone, “Industrial Policy and Comparative Political Economy: A literature Review and Research Agenda,” *Competition & Change*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2023), p. 27.

The NSS now strategically emphasises that the modern industrial and innovation strategy it proposes will remain within these boundaries, operating through relatively familiar forms of “public-private collaboration” and “public procurement in critical markets.”¹¹⁶ Similarly, there are overt signs throughout the text that state intervention will remain primarily aimed at supporting the interests of capital and prioritising corporate welfare. This helps to legitimise state activism and interventionism and mitigate the mismatch between the proposed policies and the US’ autobiographical narrative as promoter of the free-market, free-enterprise open capitalism. Moreover, the wording is extremely careful to avoid any potential controversy or backlash, lest the proposed measures be misconstrued as an inclination towards statist economic policy as opposed to liberal political economy. For example, there is not a single direct mention of subsidies in the text, despite the fact that they constitute the backbone of the recent domestic legislations underpinning strategic public investment.

In several respects, the proposed political economy model still goes beyond “regulatory capitalism”¹¹⁷ or “competition state,”¹¹⁸ which would normally imply a more limited role for government intervention, foreign policy activism, and, in the case of the US, great power activism and no direct link to the national security policy. Unlike genuine state capitalism, where the state aims to control capital, the proposed model is a wide-ranging economic and political strategy incorporating elements of neo-statism, neoliberal interventionism, and techno-nationalism.¹¹⁹ Whatever we call it, the anticipated restructuring of the American economic system encompasses a wider range of neoliberal forms of state intervention aimed at enhancing ontological security amid rising challenges, legitimised by reference to the climate crisis and recent supply chain disruptions.

While the 2017 NSS also emphasised techno-industrial policies, these were primarily focused on the military base, aimed at strengthening the resilience of the US economy and national defence apparatus. The 2017 NSS did not envisage cooperation with established multilateral bodies such as international financial institutions, nor did it include measures to engage allies in the construction of a new international economic system. Despite these differences, however, there is a clear continuity in how identity, security, and the economy are interrelated, with rebuilding economic strength seen as crucial to reducing uncertainty, restoring confidence, and reasserting US power:

To outcompete our rivals and tackle shared challenges, America will need to maintain and refine its competitive edge by making critical domestic investments. In an interconnected world, there is no bright line between foreign and domestic policy. The future of America’s success in the world depends upon our strength and resilience at home—and especially the strength of our middle class, which is critical to our national security as an engine of economic growth [...]¹²⁰

Much like the 2017 NSS, which reflected a disillusionment with open, inclusive multilateralism and a longing for a brighter past—echoed in Donald Trump’s promise to make America not just great but “great again” in its opening sentences—the NSS also carries this emotional resonance. A sense of nostalgia prevails in the strategic narratives in the NSS, as the

¹¹⁶ See National Security Strategy 2022, p. 14.

¹¹⁷ See David Levi-Faur, “The Global Diffusion of Regulatory Capitalism,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 598, No. 1 (2005), pp. 12–32.

¹¹⁸ See Philip G. Cerny, “Paradoxes of the Competition State: The Dynamics of Political Globalization,” *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (1997), pp. 251–74.

¹¹⁹ See Craig Berry, “The Substitutive State? Neoliberal State Interventionism Across Industrial, Housing and Private Pensions Policy in the UK,” *Competition & Change*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2022), pp. 242–65; Ilias Alami and Adam D. Dixon, “State Capitalism(s) Redux? Theories, Tensions, Controversies,” *Competition & Change*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2022), pp. 70–94; Torben Iversen and David Soskice, *Democracy and Prosperity: Reinventing Capitalism Through a Turbulent Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

¹²⁰ National Security Strategy 2022, p. 14.

strategy seeks to address ontological insecurity by revitalising the domestic economy and bringing manufacturing “back” home to demonstrate to the rest of the world “once again” the enduring and unyielding power of the US:

Manufacturing jobs have come racing back to the United States. We’re rebuilding our economy from the bottom up and the middle out. We’ve made a generational investment to upgrade our Nation’s infrastructure and historic investments in innovation to sharpen our competitive edge for the future. Around the world, nations are seeing once again why it’s never a good bet to bet against the United States of America.¹²¹

The proposed restructuring, aimed at allaying ontological anxieties about the current state of economic globalisation, goes beyond a simple desire to return to the long-lost prosperity of the Fordist heyday of the 1950s, when the US had a large and diversified industrial base, its global leadership was relatively unchallenged, and there was greater income equality and relatively less economic insecurity in the country. As a welfare system and as a mode of production, accumulation, and distribution of value-added, Fordism had lost its appeal years before the gradual shift to post-Fordism in the late 1970s and 1980s. With stagnation in the developed economies and falling rates of profit worldwide, industrial production has been organised globally, across national borders, and flexible employment has become the norm under the guidance of international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF.¹²² Throughout the 1990s, the relocation of industrial production to developing countries accelerated, encompassing most high-tech stages of production as well. The cross-border organisation of production has given rise to several emerging economies, including, but not limited to, China, and has led to the growing influence of these members of the global South in world politics.

The strategic narratives in the NSS reveal that the post-Fordist accumulation regime and international division of labour have recently come to be seen as threatening, leading to ontological anxieties. This is not just because of recent supply chain crises or the perception that existing global production networks empower China. It is also due to concerns about relinquishing control over the development of the market economy and the negative effects of globalisation, such as rising inequalities and precarious job security.

The envisaged restructuring of the US domestic and international economic system aims to assuage anxieties about the current post-Fordist global circuits of production, accumulation, and technological innovation mainly in two ways. The promotion of labour unions and the pursuit of more secure and stable job opportunities for American workers reflect a decision to move away, to some extent, from the highly flexible employment that characterises post-Fordism. Second, in order to gain greater control over key industries, compete with rivals in the technological race, and ensure security of supply, the NSS proposes bringing manufacturing back to the US and its allies rather than dispersing it globally. This involves a recalibration of global supply chains, albeit limited to a select range of high-tech, high-value-added industries, with increased industrial production activities in the global North to counter fears of vulnerability at the whims of unreliable foreign entities.¹²³

However, it is not just or simply about going back in time and reestablishing a Fordist mode of production; it is about instituting a new one, a new global political economy, but

¹²¹ National Security Strategy 2022, p. 2.

¹²² See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents* (New York-London: W. W. Norton, 2002).

¹²³ Affective appeals to ontological security identified in our analysis, particularly fears of threatening others, feelings of vulnerability, nostalgia, anxiety about loss of status, relative deprivation, and alienation, have long been instrumentalised to mobilise voter support and earn legitimacy in American politics. See, among others, Alexandra Homolar and Georg Löffmann, “Populism and the Affective Politics of Humiliation Narratives,” *Global Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2021), pp. 1–11; Löffmann, “Enemies of the People,” pp. 555–6.

better, curing the deficiencies, again under the leadership of the US. This objective is stated as “to co-develop and deploy technologies in a way that benefits all, not only the powerful, and build robust and durable supply chains so that countries cannot use economic warfare to coerce others.”¹²⁴ What is totally new in the NSS is that it openly expresses its strategic intention to leverage established international institutional structures and frameworks to accomplish this objective. By specifically mentioning the World Bank and the IMF as “a force multiplier for our values and interests,”¹²⁵ it aims to gain legitimacy and also affirms the limits of the anticipated transformation. A similar strategy can be seen in the alignment of development goals and objectives with those of national security throughout the NSS. The NSS draws heavily on the development discourses of organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank, incorporating their terminology, concepts, and priorities, such as sustainability and inclusiveness. Consistent with this approach, the NSS highlights reducing income and gender inequality, poverty alleviation, and sustainable and inclusive development at home and around the world as new security objectives for the United States. The US presents itself as a promoter of human rights and development at the global level, taking a more positive stance on migration and refugee issues. In doing so, the NSS establishes a new discursive framework for policy change that is more defensible and easier to justify than the neo-mercantilist and nativist arguments of the Trump era for legitimising protectionism and interventionism.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to contribute to scholarship on ontological security by showing how states extend the limited capacity to shift their autobiographical narratives and routine practices, thereby enabling radical changes that might otherwise be deemed impossible or unthinkable. By focusing on the economic dimension of the US’ pursuit of ontological security, it has also attempted to link security studies and international political economy in a way that minimises the artificial, false divide between these two fields of international studies.¹²⁶

This article shows how non-traditional issues, ranging from the effects of climate change to pandemics and economic inequality, are intricately intertwined with physical security in US national security narratives, reinforcing a conflation of political economy and security rationalities that prioritises ontological security. It provides an analysis of how the US strategic competition with China is evolving, crystallising, from Trump to Biden, reflecting continuity as well as change. The analysis shows how active state intervention and the reframing, reorientation, and repoliticisation of economic policies as instruments of national security are legitimised. It further explores how strategic narratives interpret security priorities through appeals to emotions, particularly anxiety, which not only hinders action but also empowers mechanisms that facilitate change to achieve a sense of stability and ontological security.

This article also finds that in its latest national security strategy, the US is proposing several economic policies that are increasingly similar to those of China. Remarkably, the same strategy document uses these as the main source of China’s threatening otherness, the starting point of the current strategy. There is thus a bad use of industrial, investment, and trade policy and state activism associated with China and a good use by a benign actor that is entitled of protecting an essentially progressive open international system.

¹²⁴ National Security Strategy 2022, p. 33.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹²⁶ Jonathan Kirshner, “Political Economy in Security Studies after the Cold War,” *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1998), p. 64; Ethan B. Kapstein, “Two Dismal Sciences Are Better Than One—Economics and the Study of National Security: A Review Essay,” *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2003), pp. 158–87.

Do the proposed measures in the latest NSS signal a broader shift away from multilateralism? The dual-track cooperation proposed in the NSS can be understood as aiming to preserve multilateral cooperation, even if it means narrowing it down to a group of willing liberal democracies and like-minded states, and even if it entails difficult, substantive changes to the US' autobiographical narratives and state routines. The proposed transformation, however, could also bring about a new form of regionalism replacing multilateralism, giving birth to a neo-medieval international system, where leading powers gravitate towards their own associates.

The US 2022 National Security Strategy causes two different types of ontological security dilemmas. First, the pursuit of ontological security through strategic competition by the US may induce ontological insecurity in other states, potentially prompting further "defection," unilateral actions, and ontological security-seeking behaviour by countries like China. Second, the pursuit of ontological security through economic restructuring, protectionist and interventionist tendencies, and the enhancement of state capacity in controlling the flow of capital, technology, and ideas across borders could exacerbate ontological insecurity, leading to discrepancies between narratives and practices. The stretching of US narratives of self-identity cannot continue indefinitely, and strategic omission and forgetting have their limits.

Does this herald the beginning of the end of the global post-Fordist mode of production and accumulation? What are the implications of the proposed transformation for the global South, many of whom are already deeply involved in the existing transnational organisation of production, with strong ties not only to the US but also to China and other emerging powers? Despite its weaknesses and problems, today's world economy relies on a complex global network of production, distribution, and accumulation that underpins economic development and has shown resilience through successive crises. Many members of the international system, including the US' friends and allies, have vested interests in the existing global supply chains. The final outcome will depend crucially on how the international community, comprising not only like-minded countries but also others, responds to the call to build an allied techno-industrial base and a new global production network that could change the dynamics of the existing global development regime.

Conflict of interest statement None declared.

Appendix: Coding Framework and Further Notes on Coding Approach

Security Challenges and Threats

What are the main security concerns? _____

- Traditional security concerns (war, conventional weapons, nuclear proliferation, deterrence, terrorism and insurgencies, border disputes, cyber warfare)
- Non-traditional security concerns (climate change, pandemics, cybersecurity threats, transnational organised crime, mass migration and refugee movements, food security, economic crises, social inequality, development, way of life)

What is at stake? What is the primary entity or actor at risk or under threat?

- The US and its allies (their values, interests, sovereignty, economy, stability of domestic economic/political systems).
- The International Order (its future and stability)
- The Market (future, stability, or functioning of the global/American free-market, or of the international/reciprocal, or open trade system)

Which actors are the main security challengers? _____

- Russia, China, Iran, rogue states/autocracies/non-democracies
- Fundamentalist/radical terrorist organisations

US Representations, Role, and Responsibilities

What are the role and responsibilities of the US? _____

- Universal/Hegemonic
- Limited, to the American people only

How is the US portrayed? What are the salient characteristics of the US? _____

What makes the US exceptional? _____

- Unmatched advantages and economic superiority
- Unmatched military capacity
- Previous experience as system-maker
- Ideological/Ideational capacity
- Leadership capacity
- Technological superiority

Representations of US Allies and Partners

Which states and non-state organisations (the United Nations, the WTO, the World Bank, the IMF, etc.) are US allies and partners? _____

How are the US' allies and partners portrayed? _____

- Like-minded, sharing US/liberal values such as respect for human rights, the rule of law, universal rights and freedoms, etc.
 - o Reliable and willing to cooperate, rule-abiding, responsible
 - o Unreliable, uninterested or wary of cooperation, or irresponsible
- 4 In need of US support and leadership
- Force multipliers for US values and interests
- Ambiguous characteristics

Representations of Rivals and Challengers

Which states and non-state actors are rivals, challenges, or threats? _____

How rivals are portrayed? _____

- Already a partner, assuming a responsible role in the open international order
- Would be partner, entity in transition, seeking to conform to and abide by the rules of the international order
- Entity with ambiguous characteristics or ambitions
- Aggressive or threatening actor endangering the values/interests of the US, its allies, or the international order
 - o Military threat (militarily aggressive or expansionist)
 - o Economic threat (aggressive by non-military means)
 - o Systemic threat (wilfully threatening the open international order)
 - o Ideological/Ideational threat (seeking to export an illiberal model)

Cooperation and Alliances

Why and what type of cooperation is needed, and on what grounds? _____

- Multilateral, with all actors and as part of the existing multilateral bodies
- Intergovernmental
- Dual track, deeper cooperation among allies, limited cooperation with all actors including rivals
- In security/military and defence
- In economy-related issues
- In climate change-related matters
- In managing irregular/mass migration
- In other global governance issues

Globalisation and Global Economic Interconnectedness

How is globalisation or global economic interconnectedness/interdependencies framed?

- Positive, beneficial
- Negative, harmful
- Both negative and positive
- Dominated, manipulated, or exploited by China and other autocracies/non-democracies

Solutions and Policy Instruments

What are the key national security policy instruments? _____

What are the solutions to prime security challenges? _____

- Solutions require the use of material capacity
 - a) Military resources and deterrence
 - b) Diplomacy and alliances
 - c) Economic/Trade/Technological and Industrial policy measures
 - State activism and interventions
- Solutions require the use of ideational capacity
 - o Global influence and leadership
 - o Political/moral authority/legitimacy
 - o System-maker role/experience
 - o Commitment/capacity to act responsibly, a sense of duty, or the capacity to act on behalf of all actors
- Solutions require significant changes in
 - Domestic policy realm
 - o Foreign policy attitudes towards challengers
 - o International order
 - o International economic system

Further notes on coding approach

Studying narrative characterisations of the US, its allies, and its rivals, we also code explicit identity-signifiers, including terms like Christianity, the West, Islam, Jihadism, fundamentalism, (us/them- our/their-) civilisation, culture, way of life, and binaries like the democratic vs. autocratic, peaceful vs. aggressive/coercive, civilised vs. violent/uncivilised, etc. Additionally, we track statements on the morality/immorality and legitimacy/illegitimacy of actions, focusing on statements on moral consistency/inconsistency, violations of legal standards, rules and norms.

We analyse the emotional content of narratives and code expressions of emotions such as disillusionment, pride, nostalgia, and sentiments of responsibility and entitlement. We place particular emphasis on expressions of anxiety that indicate challenges to the ontological status of the US. Key terms that underlie the coding processes are expressions of heightened concern, fear, danger, threat, risk, uncertainty, humiliation, abuse, manipulation, domination, exploitation, and loss of control.

Key terms or notions that underpin coding processes for economic or economy-related narrative themes and categories include economic/trade/technology and industrial policy measures, businesses/corporations, workers, industries, technologies, economic interests, costs, prices, prosperity, profit, income, sustainability, development, growth, tariffs, sanctions, subsidies, innovation, markets, competition, competitiveness, competitive advantages, public-private cooperation, global supply chains, labour unions, jobs, and inflation.

Temporal elements include expressions of events as unique or unprecedented, as part of a series, as continuity or rupture, and as related to the past, present, future, or urgency. Specific years and events such as the Second World War, 1945, the (post-)Cold War, financial crises, the Iraq/Syria/Afghanistan War, 9/11, 2000s, the invasion of Ukraine, the 2015 migration crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and others are also coded.

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