

Perpetual ontological crisis: national division, enduring anxieties and South Korea's discursive relationship with Japan

European Journal of
International Relations
2023, Vol. 29(4) 1041–1065
© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/13540661221143925
journals.sagepub.com/home/ejir



Chris Deacon 

London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), UK

Abstract

The broad agenda of ontological security scholarship in International Relations is to examine states' (in)security of Self-identity and the implications for their international conduct. While ontological security may be an illusory goal, states vary in their levels of ontological *in*security, with more extreme levels producing acute defence mechanisms. Such ontological crises are therefore an important area of focus gaining increasing attention. Thus far, however, they have generally been conceptualised as 'critical situations': unpredictable, transient and practically resolvable ruptures of routinised practices. I argue that such a conceptualisation neglects the possibility of a more fundamental, long-term crisis of Self-identity, which I term *perpetual ontological crisis*. Such crises stem from inherent contradictions within dominant constructions of identity that may have always existed – rather than exogenous shocks to a hitherto secure Self – and are therefore irresolvable within the bounds of those constructions. I develop the example of nation/state incongruence: when a state's territorial boundaries do not accord with the national spatial imaginary dominant in that state, resulting in an inherent and enduring contradiction. I then illustrate these contentions with a case study of South Korea, whose borders have never matched the imagined spatial bounds of the Korean nation. To demonstrate the implications of this crisis, I conduct a discourse analysis evidencing a nexus between enduring ontological anxieties concerning Korean division and South Korea's persistently antagonistic relationship with Japan. In doing so, this article has important implications for how we understand ontological crisis and offers a novel account of its empirical case.

Corresponding author:

Chris Deacon, Department of International Relations, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK.

Email: c.j.deacon@lse.ac.uk

Keywords

Ontological security, crisis, spatial imaginary, anxiety, South Korea, Japan

Introduction

At the April 2018 inter-Korean summit, held on the Southern side of the demilitarised zone (DMZ), of all the North-South reconciliation efforts that might have provoked protest from neighbouring Japan, it was the food on the banquet menu that did it. Having already served prawns caught from the waters around Dokdo/Takeshima – islands administered by Seoul but claimed by Tokyo, and a frequent flashpoint of the bitter history-related disputes between them – the South Koreans now unveiled dessert. In an improbable scene, South Korean president Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un stood side-by-side holding a mallet above a large chocolate egg with ‘*minjok-e pom*’ written by it – the springtime of the Korean people. Cracking the egg, they revealed a cake inside, upon which was a map of a united Korea with no border, and a clearly identifiable dot to the east: Dokdo/Takeshima. This double culinary provocation – asserting the fundamental ‘Koreanness’ of the disputed territory – resulted, inevitably, in a livid response from Tokyo (Reuters, 2018). While this incident may appear trivial to those less familiar with the relationship, such antagonistic practices are emblematic of the enduring animosity between Seoul and Tokyo that has maligned the relationship for decades and frequently results in serious consequences for regional politics. But, these theatrics were also indicative of a broader story about the (South) Korean Self: in their rhetoric and cartography, they sought to emphasise the unity of a *single* Korean nation, while positioning Japan as ‘common enemy’ for all members of that nation (Bremer, 2019). In doing so, they suggest a connection between South Korea’s persistent and acute Othering of Japan and its profound anxieties concerning national division – an almost eight-decade-long crisis of Self-identity in which the South Korean state’s borders have never been congruent with the imagined spatial bounds of the Korean nation.

Theoretical explication of such a perpetual crisis of the state/national Self – ostensibly motivating acute and enduring defence mechanisms – should be well catered for by the burgeoning ontological security scholarship in International Relations (IR), with its broad aim being to address the nature and implications of (in)security of Self-identity for the transnational conduct of states and other collectives. A small but growing portion of this literature has indeed recognised the importance of extreme levels of ontological insecurity – crises that generate especially profound ontological anxieties and acute defence mechanisms, our understanding of which matters a great deal because they may have particularly grave consequences for international politics. However, such ontological crises have thus far generally been conceptualised as ‘critical situations’: unpredictable, transient and practically resolvable ruptures of routinised practices. The implication of such existing conceptualisations appears to be that ontological crises result from exogenous shocks to otherwise secure Selves – even if that security is only achieved by ‘bracketing out’ underlying anxieties concerning the Self – who may then return to security once the shock abates or is resolved. While such a conceptualisation will be useful in some circumstances, I argue that attention should also be paid to the possibility of a more

fundamental, long-term crisis of Self-identity, such as that of the South Korean case described above. Such a *perpetual ontological crisis*, as I term it in this article, stems from inherent contradictions and incongruences within dominant constructions of identity and is, therefore, very difficult – if not impossible – to resolve within the bounds of those existing constructions. Moreover, the defence mechanisms resulting from such a crisis are not only acute but also endure in a compulsive manner over the long term, along with the perpetual crisis. In this article, therefore, I seek to re-assess and broaden understandings of ontological crisis through advancing the notion of perpetual ontological crisis and drawing on the South Korean case in particular to illustrate my contentions.

To do this, I begin by exploring existing theorisation of ontological (in)security in international politics – emphasising the impossibility of ontological *security* and proposing, instead, a spectrum of *insecurity* – as well as outlining existing conceptualisations of ontological crises as critical situations. I then go on to critique these conceptualisations, drawing on original ontological security and existential anxiety literature to associate ontological crisis with a profound existential anxiety that is enduring in nature, and calling attention to the possibility of intrinsic contradictions and incongruences within identity constructions that may be the source of an ontological crisis. In particular, I develop the example of nation/state incongruence: a scenario in which a state's territorial boundaries do not accord with the national spatial imaginary dominant in that state, resulting in an inherent and enduring contradiction between the imagined spatial bounds of the collective and those that it experiences. With this framework established, I then make use of an illustrative case study in South Korea to demonstrate the utility of my propositions. I initially explicate South Korea's perpetual ontological crisis, where the state's borders have never matched the imagined spatial bounds of the nation. Then, to investigate the implications of this perpetual crisis, I pose a connection between it and South Korea's persistently bitter relationship with Japan – a clash that is frequently cited in the existing literature as warranting further theoretical explanation due to its inordinately protracted and vitriolic character. I evidence this nexus through a discourse analysis of the speeches and discursive practices of two South Korean presidents, showing that Othering of Japan often occurs in the context of ontological anxieties concerning Korean division. I argue that it is, at least in large part, through such acute and persistent Othering of Japan that South Koreans attempt to find some security in who they are as Koreans. In positing these contentions, the article makes important contributions to how we understand crises of ontological insecurity, and also offers a novel account of its case that draws connections between South Korea's difficult relationship with Japan and enduring Korean division.

Ontological insecurity, defence mechanisms and critical situations

Studies of ontological security have proliferated enormously within IR scholarship in recent years. While such theorising originated in psychological and sociological studies of individuals' cognitive senses of Self – associated in particular with R. D. Laing (1990 [1960]) and subsequently Anthony Giddens (1984, 1991) – it has now been transposed by

scholars of international politics onto state and national psyches at the collective level. Such literature has problematised a sole focus on security in the conventional sense of military defence, instead posing that a 'security of the Self' also matters for states. More precisely, ontological security in international politics relates to the goal of an unproblematic sense of identity for states, generally in the form of a national Self: a definition of who this state, this nation, these people *are*, and a sense of security in this Self-identity. By extension, in circumstances of ontological *insecurity*, states experience anxiety in relation to their Self-identity (Steele, 2008). Just as we might expect in the case of any other security concern, such anxieties impact the behaviour of states; they respond with defence mechanisms that attempt to 'bracket out' these ontological anxieties to be able to 'go on' in the world as the collective in question (Browning, 2019; Ejodus, 2018). While the precise nature of such practices will vary depending on the particular circumstances, given the relational nature of identity, they often involve Others as well as Selves, and may even include an attachment to persistent conflict and rivalry with other collectives (Mitzen, 2006). Indeed, perhaps counterintuitively, the prospect of conflict reconciliation may result in 'peace anxieties' (Rumelili, 2015), because it is through conflict that certain collectives may 'know who they are' (Mitzen, 2006: 361). Furthermore, it is frequently claimed that the stable and consistent routinisation of these practices best helps states in their goal to deal with ontological insecurities and the resultant anxiety (Bayly, 2015; Ejodus, 2018, 2020; Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2005, 2008; Zarakol, 2010).

Practising such defence mechanisms to bracket out anxieties enough to be able to 'go on' is the best states can do; they cannot expunge their ontological anxieties entirely because ontological security is ultimately an illusory goal due to the (lack of) foundations of the Self-identity upon which it is based. States and nations have no natural essence or existence; they constitute an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2006), socially constructed and reconstructed through a continual process of nation-building. The identities that constitute them are, thus, contingent, fragile and often contested, requiring constant rearticulation to maintain themselves due to their underlying emptiness (Campbell, 1998). This (re)articulation occurs through discursive practices such as stories told of the nation and its people as a collective, referred to by Jelena Subotić (2016) as 'ontological narratives' (p. 612). Such narratives are often rooted in representations of the past, illustrating the important role that collective memory plays in national identity construction and ontological security. Narratives of national past can provide a sense of collective belonging through which individuals are connected to a history greater than themselves, thereby seeking a secure sense of national Self in the present. In fact, narratives of the past themselves frequently become the subject of a securitisation process to prevent them from fading away and to sustain this sense of Self (Gustafsson, 2014, 2020; Mälksoo, 2015). By extension, memory of the past is also frequently used 'in an effort to resolve . . . contemporary ontological insecurities' (Subotić, 2018: 297). The contingent and unending nature of such processes is revealing of the fact that states can never fully achieve the goal of an unproblematic sense of Self, try as they might. Ontological security should therefore be understood as something always in the becom-

ing – ‘a process that is constantly in progress’ (Kinnvall, 2018: 530) – rather than something of which it is possible to achieve ultimate possession.

Crucially, however, this impossibility of achieving ontological security does not mean that states are all equally ontologically insecure all the time. On the contrary, their level of ontological insecurity may vary both between cases and within each case over time. We can distinguish between, on the one hand, the everyday ontological insecurities discussed above that may be bracketed out with relatively unexceptional routines, and, on the other hand, a more extreme ontological insecurity that results in more acute defence mechanisms. Indeed, the latter should be of particular interest given that they may constitute especially striking or exceptional state conduct. In this regard, a small number of IR scholars have drawn on the work of Anthony Giddens to propose that so-called critical situations may trigger such extreme levels of ontological insecurity (Ejdus, 2018, 2020; Steele, 2005, 2008; Subotić, 2018). Critical situations, given their severity, are posed as leading to exaggerated impulses to secure the Self, even if this might compromise other factors considered to be in the ‘national interest’. Subotić (2018), for example, argues that critical situations ‘produce questioning of one’s self-identity, one’s view of self and most importantly, one’s autobiography and biographical narrative’ (p. 298), and draws on Bahar Rumelili (2015) to suggest that, to ‘resolve this incredibly destabilising sense of ontological insecurity, actors “act out”, often defensively, as “anxieties can no longer be controlled”’ (p. 11).

Conceptualisation of what constitutes a critical situation in the IR context continues to develop but has been explored in most detail by two scholars. Initially, Brent Steele (2008) argued that a critical situation must: affect a large number of individuals; disrupt their Self-identities; and be unpredictable, as ‘if an agent could foresee a critical situation it would be able to adapt, presumably, to its effects a priori’ (p. 12). Steele (2008: 71) also emphasises the discursive ability of state agents to construct a situation as a crisis, link it to the national Self and identify policies that may terminate the crisis. Later, Filip Ejdus (2018) critiqued these criteria as being ‘so wide and elastic that most crises, if not every crisis, in world politics can easily fit into this definition’ (p. 886). Instead, he focuses on ‘four fundamental questions that all polities . . . need to address’, relating to existence, finitude, relations and autobiography. He draws on Giddens to pose critical situations as ‘remov[ing] the protective cocoon created by routines’ such that ‘shame and guilt from the unconscious mind’ increase anxiety ‘expressed in regressive modes of behaviour’ until routines are re-established (Ejdus, 2018: 884–887). Ejdus’s focus, therefore, appears to be on ruptures of the routinised practices that are frequently claimed to provide ontological security, as discussed above. However, there is a lack of clarity as to whether ruptures to routines cause critical situations, or critical situations cause ruptures to routines. For example, Ejdus states both that ‘critical situations are generated by radical (real or perceived) ruptures in the established routines of international society’ (Ejdus, 2018: 888) and that ‘collective actors become ontologically insecure when critical situations rupture their routines’ (Ejdus, 2018: 884). Nevertheless, across this developing scholarship, it appears that critical situations have broadly been conceptualised in the IR context as unpredictable, transient and practically resolvable ruptures to routinised practices.

Perpetual ontological crisis

While such conceptualisations of ontological crisis may provide useful insights regarding certain cases, I argue that attention should also be paid to other possibilities. In particular, a focus on unpredictable, transient and practically resolvable ruptures to routinised practices neglects the possibility of a more fundamental and long-term ontological crisis: a *perpetual ontological crisis*. Such a crisis is inherent to dominant constructions of Self-identity, is very difficult – if not impossible – to resolve within the bounds of such constructions, and thus results in defence mechanisms that are not only acute but also endure compulsively over the long term. Although ‘crisis’ is often understood as referring to relatively short-term phenomena, there is no particular reason why an acute state of affairs that continues for a lengthy period cannot still be understood as a crisis. Indeed, not to recognise it as such could see factors underlying important phenomena in international politics missed. Allusions to such a possibility have certainly been made in IR ontological security scholarship: Subotić (2018: 307) refers to a ‘permanent narrative crisis’ in Croatia; Kinnvall (2017: 93) refers to ‘more or less permanent feelings of ontological insecurity’ of gendered spaces; and Berenskoetter (2020: 279) alludes to states in general as ‘perpetual ontological security seeker[s]’. But the notion has generally not been explored in detail and appears to be absent from conceptualisations of ontological crises as critical situations. In this section, therefore, I explore in greater depth the theoretical critique that motivates the development of such a conceptualisation, before outlining it in further detail. I then provide an example in the form of nation/state incongruence, before introducing my case study of South Korea.

In the discussion of ontological (in)security above, I distinguished between everyday ontological insecurities on the one hand, and extreme ontological insecurity on the other. These are, to be clear, ideal-type heuristic devices; the reality is a spectrum rather than a strict binary. The key marker that distinguishes these levels of ontological insecurity is the anxiety felt by collectives in terms of their Self-identity. In the case of everyday ontological insecurities, this anxiety is minimal enough that it may be bracketed out through relatively unexceptional practices; but in the case of extreme ontological insecurity, the anxiety is much more severe. To assist further with this distinction, we can draw on Karl Gustafsson and Nina Krickel-Choi’s intervention seeking to reintroduce insights from the existential anxiety literature that they claim were lost in Giddens’s adoption of ontological security, from whom it then entered IR. In particular, Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi (2020: 882) remind us of the utility of distinguishing between ‘normal anxiety’ – an everyday experience that may be dealt with relatively straightforwardly – and ‘neurotic anxiety’ – a much more extreme and enduring condition that may result in acute and compulsive coping mechanisms. In subsequent work, Krickel-Choi (2022b) refers to the latter instead as ‘existential anxiety’, and this is the term I will also use. It follows that normal anxiety is what is produced by the everyday ontological insecurities that are inevitably experienced, while existential anxiety is a rarer condition that is produced by the more extreme ontological insecurity of a crisis.¹ It is here that the unsatisfactory nature of a sole focus on unpredictable, transient and practically resolvable ruptures to routines in conceptualising ontological crisis begins to become clear. The existential anxiety that results from extreme ontological insecurity is characterised as a highly

debilitating condition (Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020: 876) – in Rollo May’s (2015 [1950]): 289–300) account in *The Meaning of Anxiety*, for example, while normal anxiety is something confrontable and resolvable, existential anxiety strikes much deeper and persistently so as to be irresolvable and, instead, only repressible through extreme defence mechanisms. If we extend this line of reasoning to the original ontological security scholarship of R. D. Laing – himself influenced by this existential anxiety literature – there is a clear focus on the enduring and the perpetual. Laing’s (1990 [1960]) general understanding was that, while more ontologically secure individuals tend to experience anxiety temporarily, those most ontologically insecure experience it permanently and existentially (Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, 2020: 882). He asserts, for example, that ontological insecurity can be seen where ‘the ordinary circumstances of life [constitute] a perpetual threat to one’s own existence’ (Laing, 1990 [1960]: 42). In this way, when we return to the original ontological security and existential anxiety literature – as Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi have persuasively urged us to – we can see the potential for ontological crisis, and the resultant existential anxiety, to be something perpetual and irresolvable.

This stance is lent further credence when we consider ontological (in)security specifically in the context of IR and a resultant focus on states and nations. As discussed above, such collectives are contingent and arbitrary in their construction over time and space. There will, therefore, always be inherent contradictions, incoherence and vulnerabilities within or alongside their construction. While the resultant ‘precarity’ of ontological security has been recognised by many IR scholars (see Rossdale, 2015: 372), this does not appear to have been brought through to theorising of ontological crises as critical situations. For example, while both Steele and Ejdus appear to view the underlying state of ontological (in)security as stemming from an (in)ability to answer fundamental questions about the Self through an *internal* autobiography, Steele’s (2008: 12) assertion that critical situations must ‘catch state agents off guard’ and Ejdus’s (2020: 16) assertion that they ‘[bring] fundamental questions to the level of discursive consciousness’ suggest that it is always ‘something coming along’ – something exogenous to the otherwise secure Self, that the Self exists ontologically and temporally prior to – that *triggers* these autobiographical questions to come to the fore and be less easily answerable. This closes off the possibility of identifying ontological crisis in something that has been internal to or existed alongside constructions of the Self from the outset, rather than arriving exogenously later down the line. Given its intrinsic position, such a crisis would, therefore, be extremely difficult – if not impossible – to resolve within the bounds of existing constructions, and would instead continue to endure for lengthy periods. Existential anxieties as to who and what the collective in question are/is would perpetually sit at the surface of consciousness, rather than only being triggered later down the line and then bracketed out again.

Nevertheless, for the avoidance of doubt, the term ‘perpetual’ is not intended to indicate that such crises have existed, and will exist, *literally forever* in a fixed manner. If one analyses certain populations across history, clearly any ontological crisis would emerge at some point and, most likely, end at some point. But, just as the original ontological security literature related to individual persons over the course of their lives, our focus here is on the lifecycle of particular collectives constituted in particular ways. Such a collective – usually for contemporary IR, but not necessarily, a state – may possess in its

discursive constitution severe contradictions that amount to a perpetual ontological crisis from the outset of this constitution. From then on, given that identity discourses are fragile and vulnerable to contestation, should a fundamental transformation occur that removes or lessens the particularly severe contradiction, the ontological crisis may indeed abate (even if milder insecurities remain unavoidable). But such a foundational reimagining – perhaps even the creation of a new state – would mean constituting the collective in a very different way, or even creating a new collective. That is to say, perpetual ontological crises are perpetual in the context of a collective's particular way of being, constituted through particular identity discourses. They are inherent and deeply enduring within the existential make-up of collectives across their lives – especially in contrast with exogenous and transient critical situations – warranting their understanding as perpetual crises.

For as long as such a perpetual ontological crisis does endure, it will likely be met with acute defence mechanisms in response to the profound existential anxiety that results. While, as discussed above, we would expect to see acute defence mechanisms result from any ontological crisis – including critical situations – in the case of perpetual ontological crisis, these defence mechanisms will not only be *acute*, but also *compulsive* and *enduring* over the long term due to the perpetual nature of the crisis. The precise substance of such defence mechanisms may vary greatly depending on the particular context; but common practices observed in existing studies of ontological security-seeking – such as conflict and rivalry with significant Others, and securitisation of narratives of the past – would be just as relevant. In the case of perpetual ontological crisis, however, we would expect to see such practices endure in an especially compulsive and persistent manner – for example, observing the compulsive maintenance of acute Othering practices towards another state over a very lengthy period, overriding potential motivations for more cooperative relations. Such acute, compulsive and enduring defence mechanisms could thus have significant implications for the conduct of international politics over the long term, making their theoretical diagnosis of major importance. Yet, the above discussion has illustrated how existing conceptualisations of ontological crises as critical situations are not well positioned to do so. Particularly in cases where such defence mechanisms have endured for very lengthy periods, they may have become so taken-for-granted that they are not (or, within existing frameworks, cannot be) diagnosed as symptomatic of ontological crisis at all. To neglect to understand such a phenomenon as a crisis purely because it has endured for a lengthy period would, therefore, be detrimental to our understanding. Thus, perhaps, the most important practical contribution of the conceptualisation of perpetual ontological crisis is its ability to shine greater light on *enduring* acute practices that might otherwise not be associated with ontological crisis.

Nation/state incongruence as perpetual ontological crisis

With this general framework established, what specific phenomena might constitute the severe contradictions and incongruences that result in a perpetual ontological crisis? Given the contingent nature of identity construction, this could include a very wide range of scenarios. For the purposes of this article, I explore one example: nation/state incongruence. By this, I mean a scenario in which a state's territorial boundaries do not accord

with the national spatial imaginary dominant in that state, resulting in an inherent and enduring contradiction between the imagined spatial bounds of the collective and those that it experiences.

Nation/state congruence has long been recognised as a foundational element of nationalist ideology, with Ernest Gellner (1983) defining nationalism as ‘primarily a political principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent’ (p. 1). By extension, particularly in states where nationalist ideology is most intense, nation/state incongruence may be extremely troubling. Such a phenomenon has clear relevance for ontological security, with IR scholarship in this area increasingly recognising spatial parameters, and a more general reassessment of the physical, as fruitful areas for exploration (Della Sala, 2017; Ejodus, 2020; Krickel-Choi, 2022a; Mitzen, 2018; Purnell, 2021). Krickel-Choi, for example, has highlighted Laing’s position that ontological security depends on experiencing the Self as ‘whole’ and ‘spatially coextensive with the body’ (Krickel-Choi, 2022a: 8; Laing, 1990 [1960]: 41, 65). Ontological insecurity is thus associated with the ‘unembodied self’ – a condition in which ‘the individual experiences his (*sic.*) self as being more or less divorced or detached from his body’ (Laing, 1990 [1960]: 69). Indeed, the very title of Laing’s (1990 [1960]) monograph on the subject is *The Divided Self*. Transposing these ideas to the study of international politics, just as contemporary states have strict territorial borders, contemporary discourses of national identity also tend to possess a spatial imaginary that maps onto defined parameters – even if this is far from the only way that collective polities have been imagined. Thus, ontological security, in being concerned with security of such Self-identities, can also be understood as possessing a significant connection with spatial parameters (Berenskoetter, 2014; Della Sala, 2017; Krickel-Choi, 2022a). Marrying these insights, we can understand that incongruence between a state’s borders and the national spatial imaginary within it – that is, the *disembodiment* of the national collective in the form of a geopolitical dislocation – represents a fundamental contradiction that may constitute an ontological crisis.

Such an ontological crisis of nation/state incongruence will often be perpetual in the sense that it is generated by an inherent contradiction within or alongside dominant constructions of Self-identity, which will likely have existed since the founding of the state in question. The crisis will, therefore, be extremely difficult – if not impossible – to resolve within the bounds of such existing constructions and will endure for as long as the collective is constituted in this way. The latter point provides an illustration of the non-fixedness of perpetual ontological crises discussed above. As Vincent Della Sala (2017) notes, even while emphasising the importance of territory to ontological security, ‘[t]here are no “natural” borders or geographical features that necessarily define where a community starts or ends. Rather, this is the result of a social process that is not fixed and is highly contingent’ (p. 549). Thus, a complete reconfiguration of the national collective’s imagined spatial parameters that no longer involves a fundamental contradiction with state borders could result in a crisis of nation/state incongruence being ameliorated. Alternatively, there might be a reformulation of the state itself – even a new state being founded – to match the national spatial imaginary. Both would constitute major transformations that are consistent with viewing perpetual ontological crises as perpetual in the context of the lifecycle of a particular constitution of the collective. In any event, the

political contingencies that might produce such a dislocation – such as a partition – tend not to be transient and easily resolvable phenomena. Even if they might ultimately be overcome, as occurred in the German case, they tend to endure over long periods – for over a century, and continuing, in the Irish case, for example.

For as long as such a perpetual ontological crisis of nation/state incongruence endures, it is liable to produce profound existential anxieties. May (2015 [1950]) associated existential anxiety with the presence of a ‘fundamental contradiction between expectations and reality’ (pp. 336–338). As above, in my application this ‘reality’ of a state’s borders is still a discursively constructed social understanding; it is what the subject *experiences* – an emphasis also in Laing’s work – in fundamental contradiction with the expectations of its spatial imaginary. Such anxieties may manifest in terms of sentiment concerning the territory itself. In anthropological research, Franck Billé (2014: 163, 168) found that a ‘lack of fit . . . between the physical geographical extent of the nation [the state] and the mental map held by its inhabitants’ sees ‘lost’ territories continue to draw on and elicit nationalist sentiments and affect. Billé likens this sentiment to the ‘phantom pains’ felt by patients suffering from the phenomenon of ‘phantom limbs’ after amputation; but he also refers to this sentiment as ‘cartographic anxiety’, using conceptual language that is readily applicable to my framework (see also Billé, 2017). Such cartographic anxieties may relate to more than territory alone. National collectives are, ultimately, about people, and, while this will depend on the contingencies that produce such incongruences, widespread (ethno-)nationalist discourses may generate significant affective bonds between inhabitants divided by political borders. Anxieties here may manifest in a longing for union whereby the national collective can achieve congruence within a single political unit.

The most important aspect of these profound existential anxieties for international politics, however, will likely be the defence mechanisms with which they are met. What might the acute, compulsive and enduring defence mechanisms expected of a perpetual ontological crisis look like specifically in a case of nation/state incongruence? The best means of addressing this question in further depth is with a case study. South Korea is an excellent case for these purposes. Firstly, the fundamental contradiction between South Korea’s borders and dominant imaginaries of a single Korean nation stretching across the peninsula as a whole provides a clear case of nation/state incongruence. The division of an imagined single national collective, rather than multiple collectives engaging in conflict over a territory, makes the Korean case somewhat different from others such as Cyprus (Innes, 2017; Loizides, 2015) and Northern Ireland (Mitchell, 2015), as well as secessions such as Kosovo (Ejdus, 2018, 2020; Subotić, 2016), that have been studied using an ontological security lens, and thus a particularly interesting case. Secondly, South Korea also constitutes an apt case due to the potential for this theoretical lens to offer at least partial explanation for the acute and enduring difficulties of its relationship with Japan, which have been of major interest to policymakers and IR scholars focusing on the region. Finally, while attention is increasing, South Korea remains an understudied case in IR scholarship in general. In particular, as far as I am able to tell, it has not been utilised as a case in ontological security scholarship, despite the theory’s ostensible pertinence.

South Korea's perpetual ontological crisis and its discursive relationship with Japan

In exploring my theoretical contentions further and illustrating their utility through this case, I do three things: firstly, I establish this case as a perpetual ontological crisis by demonstrating the fundamental incongruence within dominant conceptions of Self-identity in South Korea. Secondly, I briefly draw on existing literature on Japan–South Korea relations to establish the acute and persistent Othering of Japan that takes place in South Korean politics and society. Finally, to evidence a nexus between these two phenomena, I set out the findings of a discourse analysis of the speeches and discursive practices of two South Korean presidents, before discussing the implications of these findings.

South Korea's perpetual ontological crisis

From the founding of the Republic of Korea (ROK, i.e. South Korea), despite the state's borders occupying only approximately half of the Korean peninsula, official and dominant constructions of national identity within the state have drawn on imaginaries of a single nation mapping onto the peninsula as a whole, with the entire Korean collective represented as a homogeneous *minjok*² of common bloodline and shared ancestry. The origins of this national identity have been debated by historians, with some asserting that a proto-version already existed in the pre-modern period, and others emphasising more recent, contingent social processes (Shin, 2006: 2–8). Carter Eckert (2014), for example, notes that 'before the late nineteenth century there was little, if any, feeling of loyalty towards the abstract concept of "Korea" as a nation-state, or toward fellow inhabitants of the peninsula as "Koreans"' (p. 226). As in many parts of the world, greater national consciousness developed at this time with increasing levels of encroachment by imperial powers and the resistance formed. Bruce Cumings (2005: 117–118) notes that 'suddenly wall writings appeared all over Seoul, calling for the expulsion of foreigners and the extirpation of Catholicism', with rebels fighting 'in the name of "our nation" (*uri nara*)'. Despite the subsequent period of often brutal Japanese colonial rule from 1910 to 1945 – in which Tokyo enacted assimilation policies seeking to greatly diminish or even eradicate Korean national identity (Caprio, 2009; Henry, 2014) – at the moment of liberation, dominant discourses imagined a single nation of ethnically homogeneous Koreans across the territorial space of the peninsula (Shin, 2006).

The partitioned Korean peninsula of August 1945 onwards – two Korean states, with the ROK covering approximately half of the peninsula and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, i.e. North Korea) covering the other half – stood in stark contrast with this construction. While in the post-liberation period a variety of political identities and imaginaries as to Korea's future existed – including, in its most violent manifestation, the Korean War itself – the idea that *two Korean collectives* existed was not one of them. Many historians and political scientists have, therefore, argued that the founding of two Korean states was an arbitrary imposition by foreign powers. Cumings (2005) argues that there was 'no historical justification. . . [and] no internal pretext for dividing Korea' (p. 186). Gregory Henderson (1973), meanwhile, emphasises that Korea,

as one of the ‘world’s earliest, most cohesive, and culturally consistent nation states . . . lacked convincing internal reasons for cleavage’ (p. 204–205). With great sympathy to this perspective, given that my framework sees all states as arbitrary constructions, what I want to emphasise instead is the fundamental incongruence between the South Korean state, from its very founding, and dominant constructions of the Korean nation – imagining a single nation stretching across the peninsula as a whole – that were, and remain, constitutive of it.

This understanding of the Korean nation has largely continued in dominant constructions in South Korea to the present day, resulting in a fundamental incongruence that has endured for all of the ROK’s history. We can witness this understanding of a single Korea in many venues. Official and popular national mythology that narrates the story of the Korean people, for example, does so in terms of a single ethno-nation. Representations of the origins of Korea are grounded in notions of an ethnically homogeneous culture descended, with a common bloodline, from the mythical progenitor *Tan’gun*, with his legendary founding of *Kojosŏn* in 2333 BC still commemorated. A path is traced from this mythical foundation up to this day, as one nation of Koreans occupying the peninsula. Across that history are many other prominent narratives of collective national past, often memorialised prominently in both South and North Korea today. The existence of two Korean states, however, is generally represented as an aberration in the context of centuries of a single Korea before it. Andre Schmid (2002) argues that ‘after 1945, the concept [of *minjok*] privileged unity as a historical norm, undermining any attempt to view the division as permanent. . . Two states, one *minjok*, describes the current condition of the peninsula. But the *minjok* united as a single state remains the ideal’ (p. 227). Administrative functions and terminologies in South Korea also illustrate the extent to which Korea is still perceived as a single nation. Article 3 of the ROK’s constitution defines its territory as the whole of the peninsula and its islands – that is, including DPRK territory. Consecutive ROK governments have even appointed governors for the provinces in the North. Moreover, the official name of the ROK in Korean is *Taehan Min’guk* (‘The Great Korean Republic’), often abbreviated to *Han’guk*. This name, however, is used to refer to the *whole* of Korea. When South Koreans refer to North Korea, they use the term *Puk’han* – literally, ‘North *Han*’ (i.e. northern *Han’guk*). Especially during periods of inter-Korean reconciliation initiatives, such notions of a single Korea also frequently appear across broad swathes of social and political life, such as in unified Korean teams competing at sporting events and in joint cultural events and cooperation, as well as in the mobilisation of the Korean Unification Flag, for example, on the inter-Korean summit dessert discussed in the introduction.

It is important to note, however, that the extent of these representations can depend on the governing administration and sensitivities regarding the North Korean regime. Despite the official and popular dominance of such conceptions of the Korean nation and my argument concerning them in general, I do not intend to homogenise the various forms of national identity that exist in South Korea. At the risk of still oversimplifying a complicated picture, a split is generally seen between progressives and conservatives (Chae and Kim, 2008; Shin and Burke, 2008). Progressives are particularly committed to a sense of fraternity with (the state of) North Korea, seeking reconciliation and cooperation with Pyongyang and prizing eventual reunification through cooperative

means; conservatives tend to be less sympathetic towards the North and more sceptical of progressive reconciliation initiatives. Conservatives do still, however, greatly prize reunification; but they have tended to assume that this would occur via the South's absorption of the North after regime failure (Choo, 2019). In addition, when relations with the North have allowed it, ROK governments of all stripes have sought to pursue inter-Korean initiatives that reproduce the 'one nation' discourse, such as reunions for divided families. Thus, while the makeup of national identities in South Korea certainly varies, one thing that tends to unite various political camps is that the collective identity of 'Koreanness' maps onto the spatial bounds of the peninsula as a whole, with the Korean Self grounded in an ancient unitary history.

Thus, applying the terminology of my general framework, the fundamental contradiction between the ROK state and dominant constructions of the Korean nation can be understood as a perpetual ontological crisis of nation/state incongruence. Within such constructions of national identity in the ROK, the discourse of a single Korean nation transposed onto the boundaries of the peninsula as a whole simply cannot be reconciled with the borders experienced. This is a crisis that is much more profound than everyday ontological insecurities, the anxieties of which may be bracketed out relatively straightforwardly. Rather, this is a fundamental dislocation that produces profound existential anxieties which sit stubbornly at the level of discursive consciousness. We can witness this anxiety – this deep unease with regard to the question of what (South) Korea is and who (South) Koreans are – in the range of discursive mobilisations of Korea as one nation discussed above, and countless more besides. Gi-Wook Shin characterises this sentiment as follows:

The territorial division violated the 'nationalist principle of congruence of state and nation' . . . Koreans still strongly identified with the Korean ethnic community, but territorial partition created an additional political identity incongruent with their primary source of identification. . . [T]erritorial partition, on top of a strong sense of ethnic homogeneity, *produced irresistible pressure to recover lost national unity*. . . (Shin, 2006: 152, emphasis added)

Moreover, this ontological crisis has existed *ever since the founding of the ROK*; Self-identity in the ROK has *always* been in crisis. It did not proceed in a state of ontological security until a particular routine was disrupted. Rather, its constitutive discursive constructions have always contained this fundamental contradiction – this disembodiment from the Korean national Self's discursively constructed spatial parameters – which has endured for almost eight decades. South Korea's ontological crisis, thus, would not fit well into existing conceptualisations of critical situations and illustrates the need for and utility of a notion of perpetual ontological crisis.

South Korea's antagonistic relationship with Japan

With South Korea's perpetual ontological crisis explicated, what is its relevance for international politics? Does the ROK respond to these profound existential anxieties with defence mechanisms, and, if so, what are they? A *prima facie* candidate is its relationship with Japan, the imperial power that colonised Korea, ultimately leading to its division.

Othering representations of Japan are extremely prominent in South Korean social and political discourse and the sustained reproduction of conflict with Tokyo, particularly in relation to memory of colonial and wartime past, has dominated the bilateral relationship. As these Othering practices themselves are already well documented, I introduce them here only briefly, before moving on to my analysis.

The difficult relationship between South Korea and Japan has been the subject of significant academic attention and represents a major preoccupation in particular for US and allied policymakers perturbed by the lack of cooperation between their East Asian democratic allies. The relationship has variously been described as ‘marred persistently by friction’ with ‘deeply ingrained enmity’ (Cha, 1999: 1, 2000: 109), dominated by ‘lingering animosities’ (Glosserman and Snyder, 2015: ix), and simply ‘toxic’ (Akita, 2019). As well as near-constant disputes regarding issues relating to Japan’s colonial and wartime conduct, there are frequent bilateral spats which, at least on their surface, have no direct connection to this difficult past. Recent years have seen a heated dispute regarding a South Korean navy destroyer locking its missile radar onto a Japanese surveillance aircraft (Panda, 2018), battles before the World Trade Organisation regarding the safety of Japanese seafood (Reuters, 2019), and a South Korean public boycott of Japanese goods and services with over 70 percent participation that saw the sales of Japanese brands fall by up to 97 percent (Kang, 2019; Yonhap, 2019, 2020). Academic analyses have found this inordinately antagonistic and protracted clash intriguing, particularly due to the two states being mutual allies of the US and, it is suggested, sharing regional security interests as well as commonalities of political system and culture (see Cha, 1999: 1–2 and Jackson, 2018: 128–129, respectively, for the realist and liberal ‘puzzles’). Such mainstream perspectives have struggled to offer answers, with their theoretical assumptions suggesting that ‘rational’ actors would engage in significantly more cooperation in such circumstances. Many scholars have, therefore, turned to constructivist themes of identity and memory to provide better insights (Bukh, 2015; Deacon, 2022; Jo, 2022; Kim, 2015; Tamaki, 2010). On the South Korean side of the relationship especially, it has become well established that anti-Japanese sentiment is an overwhelmingly significant component of national identity and that this persistently takes the form of acute Othering, especially in relation to the past (Cha, 1999, 2000; Deacon, 2022; Glosserman and Snyder, 2015). Indeed, a 2013 survey showed that a staggering 98 percent of South Koreans believed Japan had not yet sufficiently apologised for this past (Pew Research Centre, 2013). In this way, theories of nationalism, identity politics, memory politics and other such related factors have offered fruitful perspectives on the dynamics of this difficult relationship and the processes that underlie its characteristic animosity. Yet, notwithstanding the pertinence of such factors, there has been much less theoretical exploration of the particularly acute and enduring nature of Japan’s position in the (South) Korean consciousness – relative to other post-war and post-colonial relationships – and even less analysis of the role that Korean division might play in this.

Utilising ontological security theory, and in particular my notion of perpetual ontological crisis, can assist here. These South Korean behaviours appear, on their surface, to accord well with the defence mechanisms we would expect from a perpetual ontological

crisis: they represent an *acute* attachment to conflict with an Other and a *compulsive* deployment of memory of the past, and they are *enduring* over many decades. To be more convinced that these anti-Japanese Othering practices constitute defence mechanisms stemming from the perpetual ontological crisis of Korean division, however, a nexus between the two should be established. To do this, I conducted a discourse analysis of the speeches and discursive practices of two South Korean presidents: Moon Jae-in (2017–2022) and Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013). Selecting these presidents allowed for an analysis that was contemporary but not overly short-term, and one that included both a progressive and conservative president. In the analysis, I focussed on the textual mechanisms of predication and subject positioning (Doty, 1993; Dunn and Neumann, 2016; Milliken, 1999), to examine the positioning of Japan(ese) in relation to (South) Korea(ns) and the representations that construct those positioned identities. In particular, for a nexus between the two phenomena established above to be evident, we would expect to see Othering representations of Japan that are explicitly or implicitly connected to anxious sentiment regarding Korean division or nationalist sentiment seeking unity among Koreans. The texts were analysed in their original Korean, but for accessibility I present English translations below.³

Othering Japan as an enduring ontological defence mechanism: analysing the discourses of South Korean presidents

During his time as ROK president (2017–2022), Moon Jae-in's discursive practices included significant amounts of rhetoric overtly Othering Japan, particularly drawing on memory of the latter's wartime and colonial conduct. A close reading of these discourses, however, also reveals the extent to which their mobilisation frequently came in the context of anxieties concerning Korean division. In his first Liberation Day speech on 15 August 2017,⁴ for example, Moon told stories of everyday resistance against the 'Japanese imperialists', arguing that such independence activists must be honoured rather than forgotten as 'forgetting one's history is tantamount to losing one's roots'. In addressing the 'forced labour issue' – Japan's coerced mobilisation of Koreans as part of its war effort – he suggested that North and South should conduct a joint investigation into 'the damage of forced mobilisation', thereby seeking Korean unity through remembering Japan's colonial conduct. Such framing was even more explicit in Moon's discussion of national division:

The division of the nation is the unfortunate legacy of the colonial era that made it impossible for us to determine our destiny on our own. . . . However, our national power has now been enhanced to the extent that we can decide our fate on our own volition. . . . The overcoming of the division through the settlement of peace on the Korean peninsula is the path to truly completing national liberation.

With these words, Moon does not only explicitly tie the enduring division of Korea to Japan's colonisation but also positions the 'overcoming of division' as 'the path to truly completing national liberation'. In this framing, Korea's liberation from Japan is not complete until national division is overcome; the coloniser Japan still continues its

domination to the extent that its legacy is the continued division of the nation. In this discourse, therefore, we can see the positioning of Japan as an enemy Other that will endure in that status for as long as the crisis of national division persists.

Similar rhetoric continued prominently throughout Moon's term. In his 2019 speech commemorating the 100th anniversary of the March First Independence Movement,⁵ for example, he began by noting that 'one hundred years ago today, there was no South and North Korea' and that the protests for independence from Japan took place across the peninsula 'whether they belonged to what is now a part of South or North Korea'. Having mobilised these narratives of a unified national Self in resistance against the Japanese Other, Moon again explicitly linked Japan's conduct with the continued division of Korea. Having noted that 'hostility between the left and the right and ideological stigmas were tools used by Japanese imperialists to drive a wedge between us', Moon went on to assert that:

The 38th parallel drawn through our minds will disappear altogether once the ideological hostilities that caused internal rifts are removed. When we discard feelings of aversion and hatred towards others, our internal liberation will be completed. Only then will a new century be able to begin in a genuine sense.

Thus, when Moon blames imperial Japan for 'hostility between the left and right', he is not only speaking of hostilities *within South Korea*, but ideological hostilities that cross the inter-Korean border. Providing a mirror image to the previous assertion, Moon frames the crisis of national division as only surmountable once the legacies of Japanese colonialism are discarded, further illustrating the intimate nexus between these factors.

Such discourses were also prevalent in less directly relevant contexts than speeches commemorating independence movements and liberation. In a 2020 speech commemorating the founding of the provisional ROK government in 1919,⁶ for example, Moon stated that 'On 11 April 1919, the Provisional Republic of Korea Government established a democratic republic named the Republic of Korea by furthering our nation's several-thousand-year-long history that was taken away by imperial Japan', emphasising the 'historical norm' of a united Korean nation and Japan's guilt for the aberration of partition. Even on occasions entirely removed from the context of Japanese imperialism, such rhetoric emerged. In addition to the inter-Korean summit described in the introduction, where even the menu items were geared towards the Othering of Japan by a unified Korean Self, at the 2021 G7 summit meeting in Cornwall, for example, Moon remarked on his encounter with Japanese Prime Minister Suga, before *immediately* mobilising representations of the past linking Korea's colonisation by Japan with its subsequent and enduring division:

My first face-to-face encounter with Prime Minister Suga of Japan was a precious moment that could have marked a new beginning in bilateral relations, but I regret that it did not lead to an official meeting. While participating in the G7 Summit, two historical events lingered in my mind. One was the International Peace Conference held in The Hague in 1907. The patriotic martyr Yi Jun. . . arrived there. . . to call attention to imperial Japan's deprivation of Korea's diplomatic rights. . . The other was the Potsdam Conference, through which the Korean Peninsula's division was decided. We were not even able to speak up. . .⁷

Given the tangential relevance to this event, we can see in particular here the compulsive nature of this Othering of Japan, linked inextricably to profound ontological anxieties concerning the enduring division of the Korean nation, which appear to sit persistently at the surface of discursive consciousness.

In contrast with the progressive Moon Jae-in, Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) represents a conservative presidency. As discussed above, conservatives are generally understood to have fewer fraternalistic sympathies with the DPRK – and, relatedly, are sometimes posed as having less antagonistic relations with Japan⁸ – but still share ontological anxieties regarding the Korean nation. Thus, while Lee was less overtly antagonistic towards Japan at the outset of his presidency than Moon, there came to be a clear connection in his discursive practices between these anxieties and the Japanese Other. In his 2010 Liberation Day speech,⁹ for example, Lee's representations of the past concerning Japan's colonial and wartime conduct became more explicit: he 'reflect[ed] on Japan's forced annexation of Korea 100 years ago', stating that 'the two nations should never forget history' and that 'there still remain issues that have to be resolved'. His 2011 March First Independence Movement speech¹⁰ then even more clearly constructed a united Korean Self in opposition to the enemy Japanese Other:

The brutal guns and swords of the Japanese imperialists and ferocious hooves of their horses were confronted without fear. Every Korean of both genders and all ages, including students, farmers, *Ch'ōndogyo* believers, Christians, Buddhists and Confucianists, were united as one and stood shoulder to shoulder under the banner of the Korean nation.

This unity of *all* Koreans against Japanese imperialism was repeatedly articulated. Alluding to liberation itself, Lee stated that 'the whole Korean peninsula . . . ranging from Mount Paekdu [in the far north] to Mount Halla [in the far south] was ablaze with the torches of freedom . . . in defiance of the tyrannical oppression of aggressive imperialism'. Thus Lee, too, in the ontological narratives of his speeches drew on representations of the past that emphasised the unity of one Korean nation in the face of the coloniser Japan.

Lee became even more overt with these discursive moves by 2012. In his Liberation Day speech,¹¹ he castigated Japan's wartime mobilisation of so-called 'comfort women' as a 'violation of universal human rights and historic justice', before asserting – as Moon would go on to echo – that 'the ultimate consummation' of Korea's liberation from Japan 'consists in national unification', again positioning Japan as a perpetual enemy Other until the enduring division is overcome. These words came after several other anti-Japanese moves by Lee in the days before. On 10 August, he landed on the disputed territory of Dokdo/Takeshima, becoming the first-ever ROK president to do so. As indicated in the introduction, this territory's fundamental 'Koreanness' is vehemently defended by the governments of both South and North Korea, and the islands also constitute a prominent image of united Korean identity – something that 'brings together all Koreans' (Park and Chubb, 2011) – with model replicas of the islands and imagery defending Korea's right to them found all over the country (Bukh, 2020; Lee and Lee, 2021). Lee's conduct, therefore, represented a clear attempt at galvanising a united

Korean national identity in antagonism against Japan, whose government forcefully lays claim to the islands itself. Indeed, within days Lee confirmed that his trip was intended to provoke a reaction from Japan, and Tokyo duly obliged with vigorous criticism (Kim, 2012). Then, on the eve of his Liberation Day speech, Lee also demanded an apology from the Japanese emperor for the victims of Tokyo's colonial practices – claiming that Korea could forgive but not forget Japan's past conduct – and stated that the emperor should not be allowed to visit South Korea until he complied (Hankyoreh, 2012).

While some have labelled Lee's increasingly tough rhetoric towards Japan – and the Dokdo/Takeshima incident in particular – as an attempt to 'play politics' and increase public support amid slipping poll ratings (Glosserman, 2020), one must ask why such conduct is considered effective with the South Korean public. Whether one takes an instrumentalist position that emphasises strategic decision-making by political agents, or a (post-)structuralist viewpoint that sees these identity discourses as constraining and shaping the behaviour of actors, there appears to be a demonstrable affective role played by discourses that acutely Other Japan in the context of securing a sense of united 'Koreanness'. The evidence from Lee's discursive practices shows that, even for conservative ROK leaders, there appears to be a compulsive pull towards acute Othering of Japan stemming from ontological anxieties concerning Korean division.

Discussion

Thus, it is evident that, in discourses reflecting existential anxiety concerning South Korea's perpetual ontological crisis, Japan is afforded the position of enduring enemy Other to the extent that the crisis persists. While anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea, particularly in the form of representations of the colonial and wartime period, is well established, the connection of this sentiment to enduring Korean division is seldom made. The continued partition of Korea, and the resultant fundamental contradictions within official and dominant constructions of Self-identity in the ROK, have led to especially profound and enduring anxieties about what (South) Korea is and who (South) Koreans are. In the discursive manifestation of these anxieties, it is through practices of Othering Japan – particularly in drawing on narratives from a time of Korean unity in struggle – that Koreans attempt to know who they are. Put in cruder terms: if there is one thing that might unite Koreans (including those in the DPRK) – that provides some sense of how the construction of 'Korea' might be manifested despite partition – it is antipathy towards Japan. We can thus understand this mnemonic conflict as a securitised practice that strives to construct the semblance of a united Korean Self through discourses of memory that represent a shared, enduring struggle against the coloniser Japan.

To be clear, this is not intended as a mono-causal explanation of the difficult relationship between South Korea and Japan. Without question, as in all international political phenomena, a great number of factors play a role here – not least Japan itself, whose responsibilities in relation to both historical and contemporary conduct are not intended to be minimised by not constituting my focus here. On the contrary, while a broader analysis of the relationship as a whole is outside the scope of this article, the propensity of prominent political figures in Japan – particularly revisionists within the dominant Liberal Democratic Party and other conservative organisations – to deny or minimise

historical atrocities, or contradict previously issued apologies, provides a vital counterpart in this relational discursive encounter. Nevertheless, we can understand South Korea's perpetual ontological crisis as having a strong underlying influence on the propensity towards continued acrimony *on the ROK side of the relationship*, even if it is not a sole causal factor.

These findings have some striking implications for regional and global politics. If we understand South Korea's acutely and persistently bitter relationship with Japan as stemming, at least in large part, from the perpetual ontological crisis of enduring Korean division and the discursive positioning afforded to Japan in dominant narratives concerning this, a unified Korea of the future might overcome this crisis (even if milder ontological insecurities remain), and therefore be in a more confident position to pursue a conciliatory relationship with Japan. In fact, some of the discourses analysed above suggest this implicitly in their claim that the legacy of Japan's colonial rule will only end once national division is overcome. It is also possible that a specifically *South Korean* identity – transposed only onto territory below the DMZ and discursively (re)produced through representations specifically of the *Republic of Korea's* history – becomes dominant, mitigating the crisis by those means instead.¹² This is all of significant importance for analyses of the region's relations, especially those that continue to presume a US-centric understanding of security interests over identity needs. But it is also important for policymaking that often simplistically presents either 'putting history aside' or 'reaching a shared understanding of history' as the solution to South Korea and Japan's toxic relationship. My findings go some way to explaining why such initiatives have failed thus far. At the time of writing, a new conservative president, Yoon Suk-yeol, has taken office in Seoul and promised better relations with Tokyo. Others have begun their terms with similar rhetoric, ultimately shifting course. It remains to be seen whether this time might be different, but my findings suggest a sustained shift will be difficult, at least for the time being.

Conclusion

The unrelenting rise of ontological security studies in IR has by now more than demonstrated the value of this research agenda for how we understand the conduct of international politics. Yet, there is still significant scope for debate, clarification and innovation in some vital areas. How we conceptualise more extreme cases of ontological insecurity is a particularly important one. If we understand ontological security as an unachievable goal due to the contingent and arbitrary nature of state and national identity construction – as I and many others do – a conceptualisation that allows for variation in levels of *insecurity* is vital. Within such a spectrum of insecurity, it is the more extreme cases that will be of particular importance for the conduct of international politics. Yet existing work on ontological crisis, in drawing on Giddens's notion of critical situations and focusing on exogenous shocks to otherwise ontologically secure Selves, neglects the possibility of more fundamental and enduring crises stemming from internal contradictions and incongruences. Such perpetual ontological crises are severe enough to cause profound existential anxieties, but may also have always existed within or alongside dominant discursive constructions of identity, and are thus largely irreconcilable within

the bounds of those constructions. Moreover, they produce defence mechanisms which are not just acute, but also compulsive and enduring, giving them significant explanatory value for long-term state conduct. While by no means limited to such a scenario, I have developed the particular example of nation/state incongruence, whereby a state's territorial boundaries do not accord with the national spatial imaginary dominant in that state. Such a scenario might stem from national partition, as in the case of Korea, but could also be associated with other incongruences, or even nations not afforded state territory at all (provided attachment to a certain space exists within imaginaries of the national Self). These most enduring crises of Self-identity may be so taken-for-granted that, without such a conceptualisation, the behaviour they produce is not properly investigated or theorised as stemming from ontological crisis at all. Yet, just because a phenomenon is long-term, does not mean that it cannot be recognised as a crisis. South Korea's perpetual ontological crisis – and the implications for its relationship with Japan – is a good example of this; but, while each case will be highly context-specific, there is significant scope to utilise this lens more broadly.

Yet, room for further conceptual clarification and normative dilemmas both remain. With regard to the former, if we theorise ontological crisis as stemming from contradictions or incongruences within discursive constructions of identity, a potential critique is that *all* such identities have contradictions and incongruences within them. That is the very reason why ontological security is unattainable. This requires a method of assessing the extremity of such contradictions, which is not an easy task within a largely anti-foundational framework. However, provided we are focusing on contradictions within or between discursive constructions, or contrasting discursive construction with perceived experience – rather than assessing such constructions against an essentialised 'true reality' – this should be entirely possible within an interpretive framework. The case study in this article provides a good example of a fundamental incongruence that demonstrably causes profound anxiety, but others may be less clear cut. Further theoretical work in this area could sharpen these criteria to develop a more specific conceptualisation of the severity of contradictions and incongruences that would constitute an ontological crisis. In terms of normative dilemmas, I have already alluded to the danger that this article's case study is read as somehow 'blaming' South Korea entirely for the poor state of relations with Japan. Even aside from Tokyo's own role, following the succession of Japanese colonisation, the Korean War, and national partition, would we not expect lingering trauma or, at the very least, unease? Is it problematic to be read as pathologising the resultant behaviour? Moreover, using this conceptual language could suggest that a 'healthier' option is whatever eliminates the pathology. But while, depending on the circumstances, Korean unification might be considered a happy eventuality, there are many other cases in which states seek to expand their borders with a purported justification in narratives of ethnic or national unity, the effecting of which would be disastrous. The actions of Putin's Russia in Ukraine at the time of writing are but one example. Thus, while posing insecurity of Self-identity as a motivational factor behind the conduct of states is valuable work, as ontological security theory becomes increasingly prominent, it may also become more important than ever to emphasise that such work does not necessarily constitute a normative claim as to the benefits of a particular way of being. This

may need to be addressed not just through caveats, such as my own above, but in the very conceptual language we use in this framework.

Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the European International Studies Association Pan-European Conference 2021, the LSE IR Department's Theory/Area/History cluster workshop, the Association for Asian Studies Conference 2022, and the International Studies Association Convention 2022. I am very grateful to participants at these events for their generous engagement and helpful feedback, in particular: Tarak Barkawi, Martin Bayly, Alex Bukh, Bill Callahan, Karl Gustafsson, Alex Homolar, Nadim Khoury, Kate Millar, Naosuke Mukoyama and John Sidel. I am also grateful to the two *EJIR* anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and supportive suggestions regarding the manuscript. Any errors or other shortcomings remain my own.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This article draws on research conducted as part of a PhD funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ref. 2299199).

ORCID iD

Chris Deacon  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1769-702X>

Notes

1. Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi (2020) differ from my approach in that they suggest an association between normal anxiety and ontological *security*, and between neurotic anxiety and ontological *insecurity*, arguing against observing ontological insecurity 'more or less everywhere' (p. 878).
2. *Minjok*, often translated as 'nation' or 'people', has strong racial or ethnic connotations and might best be translated as 'race nation'. Thus, it explicitly refers to Koreans as a single ethnonational grouping.
3. Official translations where available, or otherwise my own.
4. Moon Jae-in, *Kwangbokjöl kyōngch'uksa* (Liberation Day congratulatory speech), 15 August 2017.
5. Moon Jae-in, *Sam-il-jōl ki'nyōmsa* (March First commemorative speech), 1 March 2019.
6. Moon Jae-in, *Taehan min'guk imshijōngbu surip ki'nyōmshik ki'nyōmsa* (Foundation of the Republic of Korean provisional government commemoration day commemorative speech), 11 April 2020.
7. Moon Jae-in, *G7 chōsanghoeü-rül mach'igo* (Remarks on leaving the G7 summit meeting), 13 June 2021.
8. Indeed, the framework of this article could go some way to explaining this correlation.
9. Lee Myung-bak, *Kwangbokjöl kyōngch'uksa* (Liberation Day congratulatory speech), 15 August 2010.
10. Lee Myung-bak, *Sam-il-jōl ki'nyōmsa* (March First commemorative speech), 1 March 2011.

11. Lee Myung-bak, *Kwangbokjöl kyōngch'uksa* (Liberation Day congratulatory speech), 15 August 2012.
12. There is some initial evidence that such a discourse is already emerging among the younger generations of South Koreans (Campbell, 2016). If such a construction of national identity were to become dominant and officially espoused, it could offer an interesting test for my propositions.

References

- Akita H (2019) Three things Japan can do to mend ties with South Korea. *Nikkei Asia*, 13 August. Available at: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/Three-things-Japan-can-do-to-mend-ties-with-South-Korea>
- Anderson B (2006) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Revised Edition). London: Verso.
- Bayly MJ (2015) Imperial ontological (in)security: 'buffer states', international relations and the case of Anglo-Afghan relations, 1808–1878. *European Journal of International Relations* 21(4): 816–840.
- Berenskoetter F (2014) Parameters of a national biography. *European Journal of International Relations* 20(1): 262–288.
- Berenskoetter F (2020) Anxiety, time, and agency. *International Theory* 12(2): 273–290.
- Billé F (2014) Territorial phantom pains (and other cartographic anxieties). *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32(1): 163–178.
- Billé F (2017) Introduction to 'cartographic anxieties'. *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 6(1): 1–19.
- Bremer I (2019) The mango mousse incident: the flexible nature of the Dokdo/Takeshima conflict in inter-Korean engagements. *Sino-NK*, 19 February. Available at: <https://sinonk.com/2019/02/19/the-mango-mousse-incident-the-flexible-nature-of-the-dokdo-takeshima-conflict-in-inter-korean-engagements>
- Browning CS (2019) Brexit populism and fantasies of fulfilment. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32(2): 222–244.
- Bukh A (2015) Shimane prefecture, Tokyo and the territorial dispute over Dokdo/Takeshima: regional and national identities in Japan. *The Pacific Review* 28(1): 47–70.
- Bukh A (2020) *These Islands Are Ours: The Social Construction of Territorial Disputes in Northeast Asia*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Campbell D (1998) *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Revised Edition). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Campbell E (2016) *South Korea's New Nationalism: The End of 'One Korea'?* Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Caprio ME (2009) *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea 1910–1945*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Cha VD (1999) *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The US-Korea-Japan Security Triangle*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Cha VD (2000) Hate, power, and identity in Japan-Korea security: towards a synthetic material-ideational analytical framework. *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 54(3): 309–323.
- Chae H and Kim S (2008) Conservatives and progressives in South Korea. *Washington Quarterly* 31(4): 77–95.
- Choo J (2019) Conservatives and progressives' stance on China and impact on South Korea–China relations. In: Milani M, Fiori A and Dian M (eds) *The Korean Paradox: Domestic Political Divide and Foreign Policy in South Korea*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp.88–105.

- Cummings B (2005) *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (Updated Edition). New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Deacon C (2022) (Re)producing the 'history problem': memory, identity and the Japan-South Korea trade dispute. *The Pacific Review* 35(5): 789–820.
- Della Sala V (2017) Homeland security: territorial myths and ontological security in the European Union. *Journal of European Integration* 39(5): 545–558.
- Doty RL (1993) Foreign policy as social construction: a post-positivist analysis of U.S. counterinsurgency policy in the Philippines. *International Studies Quarterly* 37(3): 297–320.
- Dunn KC and Neumann IB (2016) *Undertaking Discourse Analysis for Social Research*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Eckert CJ (2014) *Offspring of Empire: The Koch'ang Kims and the Colonial Origins of Korean Capitalism, 1876–1945*. Seattle, WA: Washington University Press.
- Ejdus F (2018) Critical situations, fundamental questions and ontological security in world politics. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 21: 883–908.
- Ejdus F (2020) *Crisis and Ontological Insecurity: Serbia's Anxiety Over Kosovo's Secession*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gellner E (1983) *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Giddens A (1984) *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens A (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Glosserman B (2020) Japanese views of South Korea: enough is enough. In: Rozman G (ed.) *Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies*, Vol. 31. Available at: http://www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/kei_jointus-korea_2020_final_digital_0.pdf
- Glosserman B and Snyder SA (2015) *The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash: East Asian Security and the United States*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gustafsson K (2014) Memory politics and ontological security in Sino-Japanese relations. *Asian Studies Review* 38(1): 71–86.
- Gustafsson K (2020) International reconciliation on the Internet? Ontological security, attribution and the construction of war memory narratives in Wikipedia. *International Relations* 34(1): 3–24.
- Gustafsson K and Krickel-Choi NC (2020) Returning to the roots of ontological security: insights from the existentialist anxiety literature. *European Journal of International Relations* 26(3): 875–895.
- Hankyoreh (2012) President Lee asks for apology from Japanese Emperor. Available at: http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/547176.html
- Henderson G (1973) Korea: the preposterous division. *Journal of International Affairs* 27(2): 204–212.
- Henry TA (2014) *Assimilating Seoul: Japanese Rule and the Politics of Public Space in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Innes AJ (2017) Mobile diasporas, postcolonial identities: the green line in Cyprus. *Postcolonial Studies* 20(3): 353–369.
- Jackson V (2018) Buffers, not bridges: rethinking multilateralism and the resilience of Japan-South Korea friction. *International Studies Review* 20(1): 127–151.
- Jo EA (2022) Memory, institutions, and the domestic politics of South Korean-Japanese relations. *International Organization*. Epub ahead of print 17 August. DOI: 10.1017/S0020818322000194.
- Kang S (2019) South Koreans appear to have lost their taste for Japanese beer. *Bloomberg*, 3 September. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-09-03/s-korea-imports-of-japan-beer-plunge-97-amid-feud-report-says>

- Kim JY (2015) Rethinking the role of identity factors: the history problem and the Japan-South Korea security relationship in the post-Cold War period. *International Relations of the Asia Pacific* 15(3): 477–503.
- Kim KS (2012) Lee Myung Bak's stunt over disputed islands. *East Asia Forum*, 19 August. Available at: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/08/19/lee-myung-baks-stunt-over-disputed-islands>
- Kinnvall C (2017) Feeling ontologically (in)secure: states, traumas and the governing of gendered space. *Cooperation and Conflict* 52(1): 90–108.
- Kinnvall C (2018) Ontological insecurities and postcolonial imaginaries: the emotional appeal of populism. *Humanity & Society* 42(4): 523–543.
- Krickel-Choi NC (2022a) The embodied state: why and how physical security matters for ontological security. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 25: 159–181.
- Krickel-Choi NC (2022b) The concept of anxiety in ontological security studies. *International Studies Review* 24(3).
- Laing RD (1990 [1960]) *The Divided Self: A Study of Sanity and Madness*. London: Tavistock.
- Lee JY and Lee J (2021) Dokdo in South Korean education, media and culture. In: Huth P, Kim S and Roehrig T (eds) *The Dokdo/Takeshima Dispute: South Korea, Japan and the Search for a Peaceful Solution*. Leiden: Brill.
- Loizides NG (2015) Ethnic nationalism and the production of ontological security in Cyprus. In: Rumelili B (ed.) *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 71–95.
- Mälksoo M (2015) 'Memory must be defended': beyond the politics of mnemonical security. *Security Dialogue* 46(3): 221–237.
- May R (2015 [1950]) *The Meaning of Anxiety*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Milliken J (1999) The study of discourse in international relations: a critique of research and methods. *European Journal of International Relations* 5(2): 225–254.
- Mitchell A (2015) Ontological (in)security and violent peace in Northern Ireland. In: Rumelili B (ed.) *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 99–116.
- Mitzen J (2006) Ontological security in world politics: state identity and the security dilemma. *European Journal of International Relations* 12(3): 341–370.
- Mitzen J (2018) Feeling at home in Europe: migration, ontological security, and the political psychology of EU bordering. *Political Psychology* 39(6): 1373–1387.
- Panda A (2018) Japan, South Korea in row over alleged radar-lock incident. *The Diplomat*, 26 December. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/japan-south-korea-in-row-over-alleged-radar-lock-incident>
- Park DJ and Chubb D (2011) South Korea and Japan: disputes over the Dokdo/Takeshima islands. *East Asia Forum*. Available at: www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/08/17/south-korea-and-japan-disputes-over-the-dokdotakeshima-islands
- Pew Research Center (2013) Decades after war's end, some of Japan's neighbors still see need for atonement. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/08/15/decades-after-wars-end-some-of-japans-neighbors-still-see-need-for-atonement>
- Purnell K (2021) Bodies coming apart and bodies becoming parts: widening, deepening, and embodying ontological (in)security in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Global Studies Quarterly* 1(4): ksab037.
- Reuters (2018) Unjust dessert? Japan demands Koreans wipe map off summit dinner mousse. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-southkorea-japan-dessert-idUSKBN1HW0J2>
- Reuters (2019) South Korea WTO appeal succeeds in Japanese Fukushima food dispute. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-southkorea-wto-idUSKCN1RN24X>

- Rossdale C (2015) Enclosing critique: the limits of ontological security. *International Political Sociology* 9(4): 369–386.
- Rumelili B (ed.) (2015) *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Schmid A (2002) *Korea between Empires, 1895–1919*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Shin GW (2006) *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Shin GW and Burke KC (2008) North Korea and identity politics in South Korea. *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 15(1): 287–303.
- Steele BJ (2005) Ontological security and the power of self-identity: British neutrality and the American civil war. *Review of International Studies* 3: 519–540.
- Steele BJ (2008) *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Subotić J (2016) Narrative, ontological security and foreign policy change. *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12(4): 610–627.
- Subotić J (2018) Political memory, ontological security, and Holocaust remembrance in post-communist Europe. *European Security* 27(3): 296–313.
- Tamaki T (2010) *Deconstructing Japan's Image of South Korea: Identity in Foreign Policy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yonhap (2019) Aug. foreign car sales dip 5.6 pct on weak Japanese car demand. Available at: <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20190904003151320>
- Yonhap (2020) Over 70 pct of S. Koreans joined boycott of Japanese goods: survey. Available at: <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20201222007600315>
- Zarakol A (2010) Ontological (in)security and state denial of historical crimes: Turkey and Japan. *International Relations* 24(1): 3–23.

Author biography

Chris Deacon is an ESRC-funded PhD candidate in the Department of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), researching relational identity construction through mnemonic practices in the context of Japan–South Korea relations. He holds an undergraduate degree in Japanese Studies from the University of Cambridge, a master's degree in Korean Studies and East Asian Politics from SOAS University of London, and a master's degree in International Relations (Research) from the LSE.