

Ontological Security and the Limits of Realism

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Abstract

Ontological Security as an International Relations theory is not yet able to carry the same weight within the discipline as established theories, such as realism and neo-realism. This is due to the limited number of papers written which apply ontological security in comparison to mainstream theories. However, the theory is relevant in contemporary international relations scholarship and addresses some of the challenges which arise in existing mainstream theories. Ontological security in International Relations is focused on the idea that the identity of the state, which has been developed by routine behaviours throughout the state's history, should be secured to the same extent as physical security. This can be directly contrasted to realism which considers that it is only physical security which should be considered.

This paper is theoretical in nature. It seeks to review existing academic contributions with the aim of providing justification for the continued application of ontological security to contemporary challenges in international relations. The theory is especially adept at addressing challenges within interstate relations in the context of the Asia-Pacific region. The paper will begin with a discussion of realism, neo-realism and critiques of these theories. This will be followed by an exploration of ontological security and how it addresses some of the key challenges of pre-existing theories as well as noting potential criticisms that could be levelled against ontological security. The paper will then provide examples of how ontological security is applicable to Asia-Pacific international relations.

Keywords: ontological security, identity, International Relations, security, Asia-Pacific

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Introduction

The world is changing and as a consequence traditional International Relations (IR) theories are losing their relevance. The IR discipline has been dominated by Realism which focuses on physical security without adequate consideration of other forms of security (Wayman & Diehl, 1994), for example the security of identity. This focus has potential perverse outcomes, with Mitzen (2006) arguing that Realism, by suggesting that states ensure their own security regardless of the perceptions of others, is likely to create a world which is always at war (Mitzen, 2006). IR theory can be improved through the consideration of other forms of security, include the securing of identities as occurs in Ontological Security theory. Ontological Security is an emerging IR theory with the capacity to address the state-centric, physical security focus of Realism (Mitzen, 2006). Ontological Security addresses the importance of preserving a sense of self as much as physical safety (Mitzen, 2006). Ontological Security focuses on the maintenance and protection of the state identity which is created by a combination of the system of basic trust, routine and internal narratives (Steele, 2008). This paper provides a theoretical critique of Ontological Security and how it can respond to the limits of Realism. The paper begins with a critique of Realism as perceived within IR, followed by a critical review of Ontological Security. The paper will then suggest ways in which Ontological Security can address the limitations of Realism, and the theory of Ontological Security can be enhanced through the inclusion of issues of pride, shame, hope and dread. The final section of this paper will discuss how the theory is applicable to the study of the international affairs and security of the Asia-Pacific region.

Realism

Realism is the dominant theory in IR due to its focus on power and interest which are taken to be consistent across the centuries (Grieco, 1988; Walker & Morton, 2005). Realism focuses on the relations between states and the importance of ensuring physical security. The key concepts of Realism are (Dunne & Schmidt, 2014, pp.107-110):

- i) An anarchic system of international affairs organised by states for states
- ii) Decisions are made through a rational process that benefits the State
- iii) A focus on states as the key actors in IR
- iv) Prioritisation of physical security
- v) The reliance of a state on its self rather than others to ensure their own security.

Anarchic System

According to Realists there are no actors or influence within the international system which has more power or authority than the states (Wendt, 1992). As such, there is nothing that the international community can do to compel a state to act.

Rationality

Realism applies rationality to the state (Mearsheimer, 2009), claiming that states will act in a way which is commensurate with their interests. Influenced by the concepts of self-help and survival, the interests of a state are understood to be consistent through time (Grieco, 1988). Additionally, rationality implies that the state acts as a unitary actor in the creation and execution of decisions at the international level (Slaughter, 1995).

Statism

Statism is a state-centric theory (Gilpin, 1984) in which, for Realism, the only actor of interest is the state. The statist nature of Realism means that the theory is unable to consider any group within a state or individuals acting on the world stage (Ataman, 2003). As such, the state is both the smallest unit of measurement and primary actor in IR.

Survival

For Realist scholars, survival is assumed to be the primary motivation of states (Mearsheimer, 2009). Survival is focused on ensuring the territorial integrity of the state. The survival of the state as an independent sovereign state allows for freedom of action on both the domestic and international stages. This is the reason why the United States of America is currently perceived as the most powerful state in international relations. It has the greatest capability which in turn leads to having the most power. America's economic and military power ensures its survival and continued freedom of action.

Self-help

The final concept within Realism is self-help. Self-help is directly related to survival as it is the way in which survival is achieved. Realism suggests that states can only rely on themselves to ensure their survival (Waltz, 2000). While states may form alliances, each state will only act if they believe that the action is within their own interests (Snyder, 1984). Furthermore, self-help implies that the forces one uses to defend itself must come from its own citizens as espoused by Machiavelli who advised that military forces of the state should be comprised of its citizens rather than mercenaries (Machiavelli, 2007, p.95). The aim of states is self-preservation which is traditionally achieved through the development of military capabilities (Slaughter, 2011).

Neo-Realism

There are many variations of Realism with the major one being Neo-Realism. Neo-Realism has bearing on the current paper as it is the most dominant of the variations created to improve on Realism. This theory was designed to bring some scientific rigour to Realism (Korab-Karpowicz, 2013) with the theory containing many of the same elements as Classical Realism. Specifically, the international system is still considered to be anarchic in nature with a state-centric view with states still being described as unitary actors only being able to rely on themselves as they seek survival (Waltz, 2010). There are two major changes between Classical Realism and Neo-realism. Firstly, Neo-realism has extended the research agenda to include organised groups such as in interethnic conflict (Polansky, 2016), enabling Neo-realism to expand its influence beyond that of its classical counterpart. In these cases the groups under consideration are in specific circumstances considered to be "functionally indeterminable" from states (Polansky, 2016). The second point of divergence between the theories is that Neo-realism does not have the rationality requirements for states (Polansky, 2016). This means that there is a greater acceptance of state behaviours which are considered irrational by classical realists (Polansky, 2016). It has been noted that within the Neo-realist tradition there is no explicit theory of states (Ashley, 1984; Waltz, 1986).

Critiques of Realism

While Realism remains the dominant IR theory it is not without significant fault. The literature describes three major critiques of Realism (for example Mitzen, 2006; Morgan, 2013; Wayman & Diehl, 1994), each of these are described further below:

- i) It is too state-centric
- ii) It prioritises competition rather than cooperation
- iii) That it perceives states as rational unitary actors.

Being developed in a Western European post-Westphalian tradition (Zarakol, 2016), Realism primarily focuses on the nature of interactions between sovereign states (Dunne & Schmidt, 2014). However, the theory is unable to address contemporary developments in world affairs (Wayman & Diehl, 1994), including the rising influence of non-state organisations and individuals on world politics (Menashy, 2016). As a description of international affairs, the lack of consideration of the role of non-state actors suggests that there is less intellectual utility Realism today than in the past.

Realism considers competition to be the default mode of interaction between states (Dunne & Schmidt, 2014), whereas other theories do not share this focus on competition. Liberalism, for example, perceives cooperation to be the major mode of interaction (Morgan, 2013, pp.30-31) while Constructivism sees each state as making its own decision relating to how it will interact with the international system (Agius, 2013). Realism's focus on competition is likely to lead to security dilemmas due to increased anxieties within and between states (Jervis, 1978). Though competition between states does happen, there are many more cases in contemporary world affairs where states seek to cooperate with each other (Brewster, 2015; Fravel, 2005).

The third critique of Realism is the perceived requirement for the rationality of states. The theory itself has to create new explanations of non-rational state behaviour. An example of an alternate explanation is greedy states (Dunne & Schmidt, 2014) when states seek to accrue more power regardless of the impact on international affairs (Jervis, 1976; Mitzen, 2006). However in her discussions of greedy states, Mitzen (2006) notes that there are times when a greedy state may seek to appease their neighbours which Realist accounts are unable to consider.

These three critiques highlight the fact that Realism is unable to explain many of the challenges which emerge as part of contemporary IR. As Realism is unable to address these issues other theories need to be considered, such as Ontological Security.

Ontological Security

Ontological Security was introduced in 1960 within the discipline of psychology by Ronald Laing (Laing, 2010). The theory was further developed when adopted into the field of sociology through the work of Anthony Giddens, particularly in the 1991 book *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Giddens, 1991). In these two disciplines, Ontological Security was solely focused on the individual. Through early works by Huysmans (1998), Kinnvall (2004), Mitzen (2006) and others the theory was integrated into IR scholarship. As such it began to emerge as an IR theory with early

applications focusing on elements of state identity such as nationalism (Kinnvall, 2004). Although emerging, Ontological Security has been applied to a range of circumstances, including the feeling of insecurity by British Muslims (Croft, 2012), peace-building in Northern Ireland (Kay, 2012), and the Non-Aligned Movement (Vieira, 2016). Despite this increasing body of work, Ontological Security remains a developing theory. Ontological Security is multi-faceted but exists around a core that is “fundamentally focused on attempts to articulate the relationship between identity and security, and between identity and important political outcomes in world politics” (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2016, p.3). In this paper, the understanding of Ontological Security draws heavily from the works of Kinnvall (2004), Mitzen (2006) and Steele (2008), enabling it to be applied to states, individuals and other organisations.

Ontological Security claims that the defence of national identity is a national priority (Mitzen, 2006). It relies on state identities which are developed with reference to a state’s history and other powers in a region (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2016). Within this thesis identity is understood to be the way in which a state understands itself and its interactions with the rest of the world. Hagström and Gustafsson (2015) claim that identity is “constructed through the forging of an emotion allegiance that makes us feel like we belong”. This identity affects how states are perceived by others and the range of policy options which are available to them (Steele, 2008).

Identities of states change across time. The means by which identities are continuous or change represents a key question within Ontological Security scholarship (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2015). Some scholars suggest that states are able to consciously alter their identities (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2015; Subotić, 2016) while others believe that it is less possible (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008). Ontological Security scholars view this debate, around who, or what, has the power to change the state identity, as being a variation of the agency-structure debate within the wider IR literature (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2015). If agency has more impact than structure it is possible to alter a state’s identity at will. If, on the other hand structure has more strength, then there is more consistency within the identity of a state. Giddens’ (1979) “duality of structure” represents a compromise between agency and structure which suggests that agents do have the power to make some changes however the existing structures play a key role in constraining the actions that can be taken (Klotz, Lynch, Checkel, & Dunn, 2006; Steele, 2008, p. 29).

The key elements of Ontological Security include basic trust, routinized behaviour and narrated self, each of which influences the creation of identity. The system of basic trust is vital to conceptualisations of Ontological Security at both the individual and international levels. Basic trust allows individuals and states to respond to unfamiliar circumstances. Basic trusts systems, if healthy, allow new experiences and behaviours to be integrated into the individual’s understanding of the world (Giddens, 1991). States have a similar system of basic trust which allows states to consider and implement novel policy approaches (Mitzen, 2006). It also provides the state with the capacity to adapt to situations where international affairs change. This may be due to internal or external changes in position or response.

Routinized behaviour is necessary for the development of an identity by both states and individuals. It is through routine that behaviours and beliefs become accepted as part of the self (Mitzen, 2006). States tend to reinforce relationships with which they

are familiar rather than developing new relationships, and these relationships may be maintained even if they habitually lead to conflict (Chernobrov, 2016; Mitzen, 2006). It is through these predictable, routinized behaviours that states attempt to navigate and respond to crises (Chernobrov, 2016). The benefits of routine to Ontological Security are a stable identity and sense of self which can in turn allow the state to approach new international circumstances with a sense of consistency (Wæver, Buzan, Kelstrup, & Lemaitre, 1993, p.23). One important link between routinized behaviour and the system of basic trust can be seen when the actor encounters unfamiliar situations. If the actor has a maladaptive basic trust system, they are likely to hold onto familiar routines too tightly. This strict adherence to one's routines means that an actor is unable to learn from new experiences (Mitzen, 2006). Furthermore, if past routines are applied to new situations the meaning of events and behaviours of other actors may be misinterpreted (Chernobrov, 2016). On the other hand, if the system of basic trust is healthy the state or individual is open to exploring new experiences and willing to alter their behaviours (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2016).

While routine behaviour deals with the regular or routine actions of individuals or states, there is a need to place these routine behaviours within the context of the individual's or state's perceived identities. Societies, as well as states, need to have a sense of continuity which leads to a feeling of belonging to a united group and can be achieved by creating or adopting shared symbols (e.g. such as the cross in Christianity or the crescent in Islam) (Chernobrov, 2016). Through shared symbols and 'chosen' histories (Kinnvall, 2007) a society or state develops an identity focused around a coherent 'narrated self' (Subotić, 2016), which defines the identity of the state and determines the policies needed to support and reinforce that narrative (Chernobrov, 2016).

These key elements of Ontological Security, a healthy system of basic trust, routine actions and a narrated self each help to address the limitations of Realism. This is achieved by providing the capacity to include more than a focus on physical security, self-help and a state centric approach and also allows each entity to decide whether it will prioritise competition or cooperation. As such, the utility of Ontological Security is important in addressing contemporary security challenges, however, there are perceived weaknesses in all theories which needs to be considered.

Critique of Ontological Security

Like Realism, Ontological Security is heavily critiqued in the literature (Croft & Vaughan-Williams, 2016; Rossdale, 2015; Zarakol, 2016), with the predominant issues including:

- i) The risk of overextending what is included in the field of IR
- ii) The question of whether states can be seen to have a sense of ontological security.

As a theory Ontological Security is challenged due to issues of securitisation. The concern implies that if the definition of security is expanded beyond its traditional domain then there is a risk that the concept becomes so general that it does not provide any analytical utility (Paris, 2001). Scholars argue that by including the sense

of self and identity in IR theory it has taken an approach to security which is both broad and wide, although may not have added much to the debate (Loader & Walker, 2007). This paper considers that while there is validity in the claim that the concept of security has become over-utilised, Ontological Security addresses a theoretical niche which has otherwise remained unaddressed by other theories. Ontological Security specifically considers the development of identities within a state, through the combination of routines and narratives which moves beyond the scope of other theories within IR. In addition, Ontological Security helps to address issues of state-centric IR approaches, examining the beliefs and actions of individuals in relation to the state, due to its origins as a theory regarding individuals. As such the perceived stretch in IR is beneficial to the discipline overall.

Ontological Security as an IR theory, as described by Mitzen (2006), considers that states can have a sense of self which they seek to protect. Other theorists have suggested alternative entities which may have a sense of Ontological Security. Chernobrov (2016) suggests that it is the society which seeks a sense of identity which is to be protected. Kinnvall (2004) on the other hand expresses the view that individuals within a state seek Ontological Security. While Croft and Vaughan-Williams (2016) prefer an approach which does not see states as the seekers of ontological security, as the other fields which apply Ontological Security continue to use it in relation to individuals, they note that the benefit of using a state-centric approach is that it can be used to interact with mainstream IR theory. This does represent an area of division within the theory however by considering Ontological Security within IR as being able to account for multiple levels of analysis simultaneously this critique can be mitigated.

These critiques, the risk of overextending the field of security, a rejection of competing voices and whether or not a state can have a sense of self, have been levelled against Ontological Security. However, it is possible to move beyond these claims and work to develop a stronger version of the theory.

Enhancing Ontological Security

Ontological Security, as applied to IR, can explain many contemporary security challenges however there is the potential for the improvement of the theory. The four concepts which will be considered as being important for the development of Ontological Security theory are; pride, shame, hope and dread. In relation to Ontological Security pride and shame are two potential emotional responses from states, with both relating to the concept of the narrated self. There has been some work on both of these concepts in IR in general and Ontological Security in particular (Creighton, 1990; Kinnvall, 2004; Steele, 2008; Zarakol, 2010). However, this paper brings these two emotions together with hope and dread to further enhance the intellectual utility of Ontological Security by capturing perspectives on the future.

The origins of both pride and shame in Ontological Security are linked to the relationship between the auto-biographical narrative and the actions of either the state or the individual. The construction of this narrative occurs over time and is reliant on the intent of the agents of that state (Hagström and Gustafsson 2015). The agents select events in the state's history to celebrate or revile. The events then become central to the narrative of that state (Steele 2008). These events may be construed as

being either positive or negative depending on the purpose they serve in the narrative. In addition to the state narratives pride and shame are felt based on the actions of the state in question.

It is the combination of the stories and associated actions which create feelings of pride or shame. If the stories and actions align then a feeling of pride emerges (Steele, 2008). In contrast Steele (2008) notes that a sense of shame emerges when a state's actions are not in alignment with their auto-biographical narrative. Either moments of pride or shame then become written into the story or narrative of the state. Moments of pride are part of the story which may lead to an increase in national unity or alternatively may be responsible for nationalism (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2016, Kinnvall 2004). Examples of stories which are designed to inspire pride include Gallipoli for Australia and the Battle of Waterloo for the United Kingdom. This contrasts with the portrayal of some events as moments of intense shame for the state where these moments live on in the national psyche with the intention that they are never repeated (Zarakol, 2010). An example of this particular narrative purpose is Pearl Harbour in the mind of Americans.

While pride and shame are linked to the nexus between narrative and actions, hope and dread are connected with the state's relationship with the future. Just as pride and shame link to the narrated self, hope and dread are related to the system of routine trust and routine behaviour. The outlook on the future is connected to whether or not a healthy basic trust system exists and how willing a state is to move beyond the routines. Hope is often described as being vital for people to live their lives (Benzein, Norberg, & Saveman, 1998). The personification of states (Kay 2012, Mitzen 2006, 2004) therefore means that the quality of hope can be ascribed to states. The same argument can be applied to the emotion of dread. Dread is a feeling of hopelessness that has a negative impact on the individual (Ganguly & Tasoff, 2016; Griffiths, 2015). The term dread provides for the acknowledgement of a negative emotion but allows for an opportunity to become hopeful. Most of the work on dread emerges from the discipline of psychology and psychoanalysis (Ganguly & Tasoff, 2016; Griffiths, 2015; Kierkegaard & Lowrie, 1957; Mitchell, 1995). An inability to conceive of another positive future can be linked to the routines which are held regardless of whether or not it has a positive effect on the state (e.g. conflict-seeking behaviours as described by (Mitzen, 2006)).

As Ontological Security was initially a theory about individuals, who are often motivated by emotions, it is possible to draw on additional elements of psychology to improve the intellectual utility of the theory within IR. These four emotions further enhance Ontological security by developing an additional frame of reference when attempting to determine why a state or individual is taking specific actions. This means that the limitations of Realism can be addressed. As it focuses on individuals or societies as well as states it does not necessitate competition and it does not have a requirement for rational thought as there may be purely emotional responses. The applicability to individuals and state through their agents also counteracts concerns regarding the personification of states.

Applicability to the Asia-Pacific

Ontological Security is relevant to all regions globally however this paper focuses on the application of the theory to the Asia-Pacific region. Ontological Security provides a useful IR theory within the Asia-Pacific region due to the presence of many cultures which have ancient roots that remain relevant to the national identity; three of the most prominent examples are Japan, China and India. Japan is not only the oldest continuous monarchy in the world but the continued belief in the *Shinto* religion in contemporary life indicates a continuation of elements of an ancient culture (Nguyen, 2016) In China the influence of Confucianism continues into the modern era and many of the actions which are being taken in relation to the South China Sea and other border conflicts have been justified through appeals to historical facts (Schirokauer & Brown, 2012). India maintains the caste system and many of the religious rituals have continued through history (Wood, 2015). The existence and continuation of these cultures influences the development of the national identity in contemporary IR.

Related to the above point of the continuing effects of ancient civilisations is nationalism. Nationalism is the point where pride in one's state and a belief in the narratives which are told about the state and its relations with other states has led to a sense of superiority for one national group in relation to another (Kinnvall, 2004). As nationalism relies heavily on a national identity it is linked to the theory of Ontological Security through the shared focus on the development and protection of identity. Realism however is not able to consider this issue as it is related to identity and not physical security. Nationalism has been growing in many states within the Asia-Pacific Region especially in East and South Asia (Che, Du, Lu, & Tao, 2015; Kinnvall, 2007). This can lead to the development or maintenance of international conflicts. Examples of this are the Sino-Indian border dispute and the conflict between India and Pakistan.

Many of the states within the Asia-Pacific Region have at some point in their history been colonised by another power. This may have been in either the ancient past, as was the case with Vietnam and Cambodia, or in more recent eras as in the case of Indonesia, India and Papua New Guinea. As such this affects their identity and the decisions which are made by policy-makers today (Vieira, 2016). For many of these states the colonial experience was seen as a source of shame which was not to be repeated. A clear example of the importance of the colonial history on the development of the contemporary identity can be seen in relation to India and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). It has been noted that India was a key, founding member of the NAM because it had just emerged from colonial rule and did not want to encounter a similar situation through alignment (Vieira, 2016). The policy of non-alignment has continued to be important into the modern era (Narang & Staniland, 2012).

It is from these historical identities that contemporary identities and policy preferences emerge. By drawing on the importance of internal narratives and routine behaviours, Ontological Security is able to provide significant explanatory power when exploring interstate relations within the region.

Conclusion

As discussed through this paper the world is changing. The role of individuals and non-state actors on the international stage is increasing. IR, as an academic discipline needs to keep pace with these developments. Theories such as Realism no longer have the same explanatory value as they once did. As such new theories need to be developed. One such theory is Ontological Security which draws on work in the fields of psychology relating to the identity creation of individuals. In IR, Ontological Security uses systems of basic trust, routine behaviours and the narrated self to develop identities which are then protected to the same extent as physical security. However, there are still areas which can be improved upon. One major concern for Ontological Security is the personification of states. By transferring the focus from the state to the agents of the state this claim can be counteracted. This paper has also discussed the potential for the inclusion of a greater focus on pride, shame, hope and dread to further enhance the potential for Ontological Security to be an explanation of state and non-state behaviour in contemporary IR. This addition is beneficial to Ontological Security as it allows the theory to move further beyond the rationalist requirement of Realism by considering the emotional responses of individuals, societies and states. This paper has also sought to highlight the applicability of Ontological Security to the Asia-Pacific Region as one place where historical circumstance and contemporary trends combine to create strong identities which can be further explored through the use of Ontological Security.

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