ONTOLOGIES of a NATION
South Korea’s national biographies, Self and foreign policy behavior towards North Korea

Magnus Lundström

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Abstract

Ontological security scholars have thus far been unable to account for recurring variation in a state’s foreign policy behavior. The aim of this thesis is to explore and suggest an explanation to this phenomenon. The cause behind the puzzle is an inadequate understanding of the nation-state and national identity, which are widely accepted as something uniform and coherent within Westphalian borders. In this thesis, I adopt Berenskoetter’s (2014) approach of the nation-state’s ontology as a national biography, but I additionally argue, that more than one national biography can exist within the Westphalian borders of a state. This assumption allows us in turn to understand recurring variation in a state’s foreign policy behavior within the assumption of constant ontological security-seeking. In this thesis, I will explore the case of South Korea, which varying behavior towards North Korea is a result of its two national biographies and a constant pursuit of ontological security.

**Key words:** ontological security, national biography, nation-state, South Korea
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1. Introduction

1.1 Introducing the puzzle

Where traditional theories of international relations (IR) fail to provide satisfactory explanations to unexpected and contradictory phenomena, new theories and assumptions spring up – such as the ontological security theory, situated within the realm of constructivism. Ontological security was first introduced as an individual phenomenon by sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) and refers to the security of the *ontology*, i.e. the “Self” and self-identity of a person. People have a need to be secure in who they are and in their self-identity. This pursuit largely drives their behavior (Giddens 1991, 39–41). The concept has since been adopted by IR scholars, and been used to explain puzzling behavior in international politics. It has since been able to explain some inexplicable aspects of the international system – such as the persistence of conflict despite its detriment to physical security – by suggesting that actors use conflicts with a “significant Other” (i.e. an enemy) to entrench their self-identity – suggesting that they become “attached” to the conflict. However, the concept has also given rise to another, equally puzzling, phenomenon; when recurring variation in state behavior towards a significant Other occurs. Established scholars such as Mitzen (2006) suggests that the Self of a state does not vary, and therefore, ontological security-seeking cannot explain variation in behavior (Mitzen 2006, 343). Instead, she suggests that we must seek the explanation elsewhere. Steele (2008), on the other hand, suggests that the Self and self-identity are not as static and dependent on an Other to be established, but that they can transform (Steele 2008, 45; 48). My aim in this thesis is to explain what these scholars failed to do: How can we understand recurring variation in state behavior towards a significant Other within the frames of ontological security-seeking?

This is a qualitative study where I set out to explain this puzzle, and in doing so I aim to make a theoretical contribution to the field. Primarily regarding the understanding of the constitution of the nation-state and how it relates to the ontological security assumption. In this thesis, I will explore the case of South Korean presidents’ varying behavior towards North Korea, to seek an answer to the puzzle. Since the 1990s, South Korea has had several presidents, some of whom have been hardliners towards the North whereas others have pursued a more diplomatic behavior towards Pyongyang. This, despite there has been little change in North Korean behavior.

To understand Korean presidents’ contradictory behavior within the frames of ontological security, I argue that we need to understand the constitution of the nation-state in a different
way, suggesting the existence of what I call “parallel national biographies.” Using the approach to the nation-state as a “national biography” introduced by Felix Berenskoetter (2014), I apply a narrative analysis to the National Liberation day speeches of four South Korean presidents who have been diplomatic and hawkish respectively towards the North: Presidents Moon Jae-in (2017–) and Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003); and Park Geun-hye (2013–2016) and Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013). Lee and Park are renowned for their hardline stance on North Korea (cutting humanitarian aid, increasing defense spending and curtailing diplomatic initiatives), whereas Moon and Kim are known for the opposite behavior towards Pyongyang. This study shows that South Korea has two parallel national biographies, and thus, two varying, yet coexisting, ontologies which makes recurring and varying behavior within the frames of ontological security perfectly logical.

1.2 Ontological and epistemological assumptions, concepts and disposition
This is an interpretivist study. It entails the ontological assumption that social reality is a man-made construction, which we as social scientists must explore from within. This exploration focuses on language as it is the door to access the social world – which is the epistemological assumption I make (Blaikie and Priest 2017, 101–103).

In this thesis, I use concepts such as “conservative national biography” and “progressive national biography” when discussing the Korean nation-state. This does not automatically entail that all Korean conservatives share this national biography, nor that there is something particularly “conservative” with the narrative. The same goes for the progressive national biography. Rather, there is a need for labels to these biographies. I simply adopted the names of the political camps which I thought publicly represented the respective narrative the best. Throughout this thesis I will occasionally refer to South Korea as ROK (Republic of Korea) and to North Korea as DPRK (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea). Moreover, I will also use concepts such as the “state” and the “nation-state.” These are not interchangeable concepts. My use of “nation-state” will be more prevalent throughout this thesis, because of my assumption that we need to discover the nation when discussing the state. When I only mention to the “state,” I refer to the state in a legal, realist sense: a limited territory where a sovereign and recognized government holds control and the monopoly of violence. When I use the term “foreign policy behavior” I refer to a summary of a president’s specific foreign policies. The behavior can either be hawkish or diplomatic. The aim of this study further renders specific policies less relevant. Therefore, I have made this choice.
Disposition is as follows. Next section contains a literature review. As my case in this thesis is South Korea and its behavior towards the North, I the literature review will cover works on South Korea’s national identities and what they entail. The section will be concluded with two research questions. After that follows a theory section where a theoretical review and my assumptions will be discussed before my proposed theoretical framework is presented. Thereafter, I will discuss my methodological choices and methods before the actual analysis proceed. The final section of the paper is dedicated to the conclusion.

2. Literature review

Of relevance when discussing the ontology of the nation-state is national identity; to some “…the most important form of large-scale social and political identity” (Waever et al 1993, 22). National identity is a form of collective identity, concretizing and illustrating the “Self” of a nation-state. This section of the thesis will thus cover the current literature on South Korean national identity, how it correlates with domestic politics, and how it affects the country’s foreign policy. But whereas the competing national identities of South Korea are duly noticed and analyzed by scholars, the same scholars fail to properly explain on what these national identities are based and why they entail different behavior to the North.

2.1 Brief history of South Korea

After 35 years of Japanese occupation, the Korean Peninsula was divided in a Soviet-dominated northern part and a US-dominated southern part as it became a pawn in the Cold War. North and South Korea were both established in 1948, and war broke out when the North attacked the South in 1950. The war ended in 1953, resulting in millions of dead and resulted in a status quo ante bellum. The partition of the peninsula and the Korean War have since dominated South Korea’s short history and national identity. Whereas North Korea has remained an authoritarian communist state under the reign of the Kim family dynasty, the South has been subject to political change. Between 1948–88, the South was a fiercely anti-communist authoritarian state. But after years of public pressure, demonstrations and bloodshed, the South democratized in 1988 and has remained a rather stable democracy for the past 30 years. Yet, the division between the South and the North has persisted and continues to dominate politics in the South (see Oberdorfer and Carlin’s The Two Koreas, 2014).
2.2 South Korean domestic politics and national identity

South Korean politics is divided between conservatives and progressives, very much like other countries in the world. However, the country’s violent, war-torn and oppressive past adds yet another sensitive dimension to its politics. The polarization in domestic ROK politics is, however, not merely a result of varying opinions in specific political issues, but also an expression of varying ideas of the South’s national identity and collective memory. Although Ha and Jang (2015) notes that South Korea is a country with “a strong collectivist culture” which view themselves as a “racially and ethnically homogenous nation that shares a common bloodline and culture” (472–473), it is undeniable that South Korean politics is extremely polarized, as is its society.

The past is a central aspect of a nation’s identity and different opinions on controversial historical issues can illustrate the differing national identities. In South Korea, the subject of Koreans who collaborated with the Japanese occupation power is a perfect example. As Japanese occupation ended in 1945, administration over the North and South half of Korea was handed to the Soviet Union and the United States respectively. In the South, the US heavily relied on former collaborators, officials and policemen in Japan’s colonial administration to entrench the new South Korean state under president Rhee Syngman (Kim and Fine 2013, 186). The coming authoritarian administrations in the South came to be dominated by an elite, often consisting of former Japanese collaborators, something which made any form of post-colonial justice processes impossible. It was only in the 1990s after South Korea’s democratization that the dormant bitterness towards Japan and the lack of justice gained a public foothold. Not because of its previous absence, but because it just had not been feasible to air such opinions under the authoritarian rule (Kim and Fine 2013, 134–135).

In 2001, a number of Korean scholars embarked on a project to publish an encyclopedia over Koreans who collaborated with the Japanese between 1910 and 1945 (ibid, 131). This encyclopedia came to be very controversial. Right-wing conservative groups criticized the project, demanding its cancellation, citing that it threatened the South Korean nation’s cohesion and served the purposes of North Korea (ibid, 139–140). The South Korean progressives, on the other hand, argued that the encyclopedia project was imperative. It was,

* Although I use the label “progressives” here, it is worth saying that South Korea generally is a conservative society when it comes to social politics (Jeong and Shin 2018, 58).
according to the encyclopedia’s proponents, a necessity to establish who in Korea had worked together with the Japanese and betrayed the country (ibid).

This debate about the South’s past and national identity is deeply connected to the portrayal of so-called “national heroes” (Podoler 2016, 282). One concrete example is the former – and controversial – South Korean president Park Chung-hee, whose authoritarian reign stretched from 1961 to his assassination in 1979 (ibid, 271–272). A very polarizing figure, Park is by those who admire him (generally conservatives) accredited with South Korea’s development from a poor country, dependent on foreign aid to a vibrant, prosperous economy with massive wealth from international export (ibid). Indeed, nostalgia from the days of Park Chung-hee paved, according to Kang, the way for his daughter Park Geun-hye to be elected president in 2012 (Kang 2018). But whereas conservatives celebrate Park’s economic feats, progressives tend to emphasize the brutal nature of Park’s reign and also the fact that he served as an officer in the Japanese army during the occupation (ibid; Kim and Fine 2013, 139–140).

Observing the debate about the past, national heroes alongside the polarization on political issues, one can easily discern a distinct, if not an absolute, pattern. South Korea’s conservatives tend to have a more forgiving approach towards Japan and a more hardline approach towards North Korea. Former president Park Chung-hee is regarded by many as a national hero, and the fact that he served in the Japanese army is intentionally forgotten. Progressives in South Korea have a softer, if not unconditionally friendlier, posture towards the North. They have a generally more skeptical approach to Japan and their shared past and regard Park Chung-hee more as a collaborator and brutal dictator, rather than a national hero (ibid).

### 2.3 Insufficiencies of the existing literature

Whereas the literature clearly shows that there is a clear and polarized difference between progressive and conservative national identity, it does not explain on what these two national identities are based on. This is central, since we need to understand the fundament of these identities to understand why they entail differing behavior towards the North. This second aspect is also something which these scholars also fail to explain.

Podoler (2016), for instance, just notices the difference by stating that conservatives and progressives have varying approaches to North Korea. He does not pursue a deeper discussion on the roots of this divide or on what the varying behavior towards the DPRK are part of these identities. Jeong and Shin (2018), however, go deeper into the roots of Korean conservatism.
and national identity. They claim that the legacy of Park Chung-hee and the influence of Japanese “statism” on his politics (an Asian “version” of European fascism, but with some differences) shaped Korean society, making it more conservative in general (58–59). Korean conservatism is a well-documented political phenomenon, and there seem to be widespread acceptance that primarily the Korean War and ensuing authoritarianism consolidated a fierce anti-communism in Korea, thus, stamping out all tendencies towards progressive movements (non-communist ones as well) in South Korea (Moon and Kil 2001, 1–2).

Whereas Korean conservatism finds its hero in Park Chung-hee, Korean progressive movements tend to celebrate those who struggled for democratization against authoritarian leaders such as Park (Park 2016). Progressive presidents such as Kim Dae-jung, who in the 1970s and 1980s risked their lives in the struggle for democracy have been lionized by the progressive movements in South Korea. Events such as the Kwangju massacre in 1980 – when demonstrating students took over the city of Kwangju and were subsequently and indiscriminately killed by special forces – serves as symbols for the democratization struggle (Gray 2008, 111).

Yet, there is something missing in these works. Whereas individuals such as Park Chung-hee and Kim Dae-jung are significant embodiments of these national identities, they do not constitute these identities themselves. They are mere expressions of them; inspirations to future adaptations. National identities evolve, experiences and collective memories are accumulated over time. One can, however, assume that both have their beginnings in Korean nationalism. Ideological differences exist in large groups of people, and circumstances cause some groups to be more successful, prevalent and/or more toxic than others. In Korea’s case, it is likely that authoritarian conservatives and anti-communists were the influence because of the nature of the partition of the peninsula, the dynamics of the Cold War and the tragedy of the Korean War.

There is still, however, a need for something which ties together all threads of experiences and memories; roles of certain individuals, other actors and wars – a story, a biographical narrative. This is what constitutes the foundation of a national identity and the perceived collective Self of a nation-state. Few things are as powerful as a common and compelling biographical narrative. The narrative is a sense-making tool, and it has a massive impact on the collective, national identity of a people. As I will elaborate in the next section, the nation-state is constituted by a shared narrative and idea of what it [the nation-state] is. Therefore, to understand nation-state behavior and identity, it is essential to understand the nation-state’s national biography. And in South Korea’s case, I argue that there is more than one national
biography that needs to be understood. South Korean politicians tend to be hawkish or diplomatic towards North Korea, some cut aid and demand denuclearization whereas others seek rapprochement.

There is now a need to concretize the presented puzzle as two research questions in relation to the ROK case: (1) *What are the prevailing national biographies of the ROK?* And (2) *why do they* [the national biographies] *influence varying ROK behavior towards the DPRK?*

3. **Theory section**

I will now review the existing literature on ontological security which I, in its current state, deem insufficient in explaining the presented puzzle. This insufficiency has its basis in other scholars’ flawed assumption regarding the ontology the nation-state, so before I go on and critique this, it is necessary to flesh out what assumption I make in regards to the ontology of the nation-state. Thereafter, I identify, what I argue, is the main hurdle on the road to better understanding the developments of the international system – the “state personhood.”

3.1 **Assumption about the ontology of the (nation)state**

I make the assumption that the nation-state’s ontology is its national biography, in line with the work of Berenskoetter (2014). To pedagogically illustrate my assumption, I present the rivalling perspectives from different IR theories, on the ontology of the state.† Within IR scholarship, as within other disciplines, there are a large variety of theories on what the state is. Realists‡ understand the state as a sovereign piece of territory where the government holds the monopoly of violence (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001). The state’s existence with clear comprehensible borders is just assumed to exist, autonomous from the theory itself (ibid). In the liberalist theory, states are not regarded as closed billiard ball-like units. Rather, the internal dynamics are emphasized alongside the dynamics of the international system. Liberalist theory further highlights the importance of international institutions, hierarchy and norms (Keohane 1984). Despite this more elaborate view on the state, liberalist theory does

† This pedagogical exercise is also performed in Berenskoetter (2014).
‡ Realism can come in a large variety of forms: classical realism; structural realism (offensive and defensive). But for the sake of space and length I will refer to all these subgroups as “realism” since the cornerstones of all mentioned sub-theories, and in particular the view of the state, tend to be similar.
not make any contribution to the understanding of the state that differs from realism. The IR theory that actually differs in its view on the ontology of the state is constructivism. Rather than seeing the state as autonomous billiard balls without significant content, constructivists emphasize how the state is created from within through processes and acquisition of knowledge, culture and norms (Berenskoetter 2014, 267). In other words, states are social constructions and only exist because we agree upon their existence. Humans ascribe meaning to certain territories, places and events to make sense of the world and forge their “Self” in relation to an “Other” – i.e. another actor in the system (ibid, 264).

While these various perspectives offer different accounts of the ontology of the state, they all miss crucial aspects. Although this rather concrete view on state ontology is easy to comprehend, it does neglect the importance of the community and the idea of the “nation.” Now, I return to the assumption I make regarding the ontology of the state. As Poggi puts it, there is more to the state than just borders and sovereignty. “There is something ‘Gemeinschaftlich’ about the state” – i.e. we cannot separate the state from the nation (in Berenskoetter 2014, 263). The state is what we (the population of a society or a community) perceive it to be. Shared experiences and pasts, passed down through generations forge collective memory and identity. These communities of shared experiences often fit neatly within the Westphalian borders (especially in Western Europe), but they can also transcend them. This collective idea of past, present and future, alongside one’s “role” in the world are all covered and structured through a national biography. In other words, this national biography constitutes the state ontology. I will revisit and elaborate the notion of national biographies in section 3.4 National biography and state ontology.

3.2 Theoretical review of current ontological security thought

This assumption about the ontology of the nation-state as a national biography leads back to the theory of ontological security – the security of the ontology; or put differently, the security of the Self. As briefly described in the introduction, “ontological security” refers to a protection of the Self and the self-identity (Giddens 1991) – i.e. the “ontology.” A product of the 1990s’ wave of new security-thinking, ontological security has been used by many IR scholars (Huysmans 1998; Ringmar 1996; McSweeney 1999; Mitzen 2006; Manners 2002; Kinnvall 2004; Zarakol 2010; Kumagai 2015). Jennifer Mitzen, one of the more recent contributors to the field, defines ontological security as following “…the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time – in order to realize a sense of agency” (Mitzen 2006, 342). In other words, “we” – both states and individuals – want to be stable in who we
are and how we perceive ourselves. A state’s actions reflect how stable the state is in its self-perceived identity, be it being a great power, the most productive economy or the enemy of someone (361). Action is primarily driven by anxiety about the Self and the self-identity. The sense of “shame” is especially potent in guiding the state to action, even ill-conceived and reckless decisions (Giddens 1991, 68–69; Steele 2008, 51–57).

To further illustrate what ontological security is, one can contrast it to “traditional security.” Traditional security thought, prevalent within realism,§ argues that states rationally pursue physical security in an anarchic self-help system (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001). Ontological security scholars, although constructivists, do not necessarily disagree with the notion that states seek physical security – even though they assume that the international system is a social construction and anarchy is “what we make of it” (Wendt 1992). However, they argue that there are issues more important to a state than physical security – ontological security.

There is an interaction-aspect of ontological security which is particularly emphasized by Mitzen (2006). She argues that interaction does not merely affect other actors, but that it “constitutes the self” (2006, 358). In other words, one actor forms a self-identity vis-à-vis an “Other,” in terms what the actor is not. This notion is not new in identity literature as the relational approach is widely recognized by scholars (Rumelili 2004; Hagström and Gustafsson 2015; Katzenstein 1996, 18–19; cf. Lebow 2008). There is, however, disagreement about to what extent the interaction and relational aspect are central to ontological security. Mitzen is, for instance, very much of this opinion, whereas other scholars emphasize the importance of internal processes (Steele 2008; Berenskoetter 2014).

However, despite disagreement, interaction is still of importance. If we accept the assumption about interaction, it entails that a state’s need for ontological security actually can undermine its physical security by becoming “attached” to conflicts. The attachment signifies a routine – something which individuals and states practice to achieve said continuity in regards to themselves and is key in concept of ontological security (Giddens 1991, 39–41; Mitzen 2006, 347; Steele 2008, 23). Israel and Palestine, for example, have since the 1940s “routinized” their hostile and adversarial relationship, thus basing a large portion of their respective self-identities on the conflict’s persistence. Thus, the actors have become “attached” to the conflict, and because of the threat that peace posed to their ontological security and because no new self-identity and “routine” were offered in the actors’ interaction,

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§ This time, I refer to structural realism – both defensive and offensive.
the peace process failed miserably (Mitzen 2006, 361–362). Another example is the US–North Korea relation. The United States is dependent on routinely portraying North Korea as “evil,” “a rogue” and “irrational” to maintain its self-identity (i.e. ontological security) as a “rational force for good.” This in turn, threatens North Korea’s ontological security because of its self-identity as a sovereign, legitimate “great power” and counterpart to Washington (Hagström and Lundström 2019, 101).

Whereas the concept of ontological security opens up for new understandings of world politics, it also leaves us puzzled when faced with certain cases, such as the case of this thesis. South Korea has, ever since its creation in 1948 had an adversarial and conflict-ridden relationship to the North. Initially as a war (the Korean War, 1950–53), and then as bitter counterparts throughout the Cold War. Ever since South Korea’s democratization in 1987–88, however, the policies towards the North have been more diversified. Some presidents, generally representing progressive parties have a less hostile and more diplomatic stance on the North Korean issue, whereas conservative presidents have a significantly more hawkish behavior towards the northern neighbor. North Korea has remained a totalitarian and nuclear-obsessed communist dictatorship ever since its creation in 1948, and thus, the concept of ontological security-seeking presented by Mitzen fails to explain the South’s foreign policy behavior (2006, 343).

If anything, South Korea should constitute a so-called “crucial case” (George and Bennett 2005, 9) for Mitzen’s argument due to the lengthiness and depth of the Korean conflict. Yet, Mitzen’s argument does not hold up for closer scrutiny. Let us briefly follow the chain of logic: If ontological security is constant, if North Korea has remained the same in character throughout its existence, and if South Korea has become “attached” to the conflict; why are the South’s various leaders then shifting in their behavior towards North Korea? South Korea’s self-identity cannot be completely dependent on routinized enmity with North Korea.

There are other significant ontological security scholars, such as Brent Steele (2008) who have different views on the properties of ontological security which may be better suited to explain our puzzle. Instead of taking Mitzen’s rather rigid view regarding the necessity of interaction to create one’s self-identity, Steele argues that the Self not necessarily is constructed in relation to an Other. According to Steele, the relational approach is not incorrect, but insufficient as only premise (2008, 48), something which opens for transformation of the Self, and the identity, thus accounting for variation in state behavior. Steele further assumes that the self-identity – regardless whether it is created from the outside or from within – vary “from state to state” and vary “within states over time” (ibid, 45).
South Korean presidents’ foreign policy behavior towards North Korea certainly varies. But Steele seems to argue that self-identity transforms in a permanent way (2008, 48). In other words, a state’s self-identity can go from “ontology A” to “ontology B” over time, thus altering the state’s behavior.

This view, however, does not account for the type of variation as we can see in the case of South Korean presidents’ behavior towards North Korea. Ever since South Korea became democratic in 1988, there has been a constant “back-and-forth” variation between “hawkish” presidents who are in favor of sanctions and a hardline approach to North Korea (generally conservatives such as Roh Tae-woo, Lee Myung-bak, Park Geun-hye) and presidents who have had a more diplomatic approach to Pyongyang (generally “progressive” presidents such as Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, Moon Jae-in). As the presidential power change hands between the conservatives and progressives, so does the South’s behavior towards the North.

This variation in behavior cannot be explained by a “transformation” of self-identity, since the South Korean self-identities (note plural) seem to persist without transformation. Evidently, the current assumptions about ontological security cannot explain this case, and I would argue that the problem lies in the idea of the state as a “person.”

3.3 The problem of state “personhood”

The general acceptance of the idea that states are “persons” has skewed the research on ontological security from its start. Accepting the idea of the state as an individual – regardless reason – leads us to believe that the state has the qualities of an “intentional person” with a particular “unitary identity that persists” (Wendt 2004, 295). If states are persons, then I would argue that most of them suffer from a severe personality disorder with very differing and coexisting self-identities.

Why do scholars talk and write about states as “persons” when they clearly are constellations of millions of individuals in smaller groups? Erik Ringmar suggests that there actually are very few alternatives available to IR scholars who want to concretize and discuss the “state.” Academics need to capture and understand themselves what they are talking about, and in lieu of many vague metaphors, they turn to calling states “persons” (Ringmar 1996, 451). This is also a point made by Alexander Wendt, who embarks on an in-depth discussion about physical and philosophical arguments regarding state personalities and makes the case for the realist view on state’s as persons – both for philosophical and practical reasons (Wendt 2004). Conversely, I argue that there is a need to question and relax the assumption about state as a person. Instead, we must accept and understand the state as a
collective idea, a community, a nation; created and concretized, as previously discussed, through the national biography. Politicians and scholars tend to use the individualist symbolism when talking about the nation-state, and this is important to keep in mind as we analyze the national biography. However, to completely accept this notion will have a distortive impact on an adequate understanding of the world.

Ontological security is, as mentioned, about safety, continuity, routine and order regarding a state’s sense of the “Self in the world” and self-identity. Logically, a recurring varying behavior should point towards differentiating understandings of those two things within the same nation-state. To understand variation in the behavior, we need to understand the formation and existence of the identity and the Self in a different way.

As mentioned in the introduction, the ontology of the nation-state is dependent on what the shared and agreed-upon perception of it is. But as the ontology of the community coincides with the state’s Westphalian borders, the communities’ sense of the Selves and their history tend to be overlooked, even though they are relevant for IR scholars (Berenskoetter 2014, 263).

Additionally, I argue that several ontologies can exist within one state; a result of parallel writings of parallel national biographies. A nation-state does not have necessarily one ontology. My perspective will not only explain larger variations over time in state behavior within the boundaries of ontological security-seeking, but also recurring variation over shorter spans of time.

One critique that could be raised here is that if you remove the personhood, how can the Self exist? I would argue that the state is a collective idea, a collective perception and agreement of a place, its history and of the people living there. The collective idea of the state is concretized through border fences, flags, monuments, history books and common narratives. The state represents a collective Self. Personhood is not a condition to experience a collective Self.

To return to this thesis’ case, in South Korea, there are those who share the national biography where North Korea is the enemy, and those who share the national biography where the North is regarded as fellow countrymen, subjects to an unjust partition of the Korean Peninsula by outside forces. The latter’s ontology of “Korea” thus transcends the 38th parallel, and enables the more diplomatic approach to the North within the framework of ontological security. Within ROK politics, there is a constant re-establishment of the Self of the South Korean nation-state. The side of this “dispute of the Self” that is in power has
significant bearing on the South’s North Korea policy because of the constant pursuit of ontological security.

3.4 National biography and state ontology
The practice of giving states personhood becomes especially easy when the assumption is made that collective identity, and ontology is produced in relation to another and not a product of internal processes. Now we return to my assumption of the nation-state, as a national biography. As Max Weber points out: “a mistake comes in… when one speaks of the state alone and not the nation” (in Poggi 1978, 98–101, emphasis added). This means that to properly understand a state’s behavior, it is necessary to open the “black box” of the state and dissect its community/communities to discover the nation.

Returning to my assumption regarding the nation-state, it is important to stress the work of Felix Berenskoetter (2014). Introducing the concept “parameters of national biography,” he takes a phenomenological approach to the creation of knowledge, assuming that knowledge about the world and the Self is obtained through experience. The knowledge obtained by the actor is not accumulated; rather it tends to shape the “structures of meaning” that we have in the back of our mind, which make sense of our being-in-the-world (268). The national biography – making sense of the “being-in-the-world” – is a continuous, and never-complete story.

There are two dimensions of the national biography: (1) its function to give a sense of the actor’s “place in the world”; and (2) provide with “a sense of orientation” where the actor has come from, where it is and where it potentially is heading (269). In other words, the actor uses this biography to understand how the Self is unfolding in space and time (270, 275). The national biography provides the actor with meaning in its existence; hence the national biography is the nation-state’s ontology. Whereas the members of the nation-state constantly acquire new knowledge and history, some of these experiences are more important than others.

Noteworthy is that these biographies do not need to be truthful or accurate accounts of reality to qualify as national biographies. On the contrary, national biographies are “pieces of art,” collectively designed in a biased way to counter anxiety (269). With this framework in hand, Berenskoetter suggests that the creation of the state ontology is an internal process, rather than the product of interaction with significant Others (264). “Others” are of course important, but we do not construct the collective memory and identity (ontology) of the Self
just through “Othering” but through these narratives (ibid). Rather than becoming attached to an Other, actors become attached to memories and visions about the future (272).

The narrative approach is, as Berenskoetter notes, hardly new to IR and the ontology of the state (267–268) as scholars have been approaching IR from a narrative perspective for a long time (Bially Mattern 2005; Ringmar 1996; Waever 2002). Comparatively few, however, have taken Berenskoetter’s approach of national biographies. He touches on the importance of taking this approach by stating that: “Clarifying these parameters, then, is not only an exercise in ontology. It sheds light on the structures guiding – enabling and constraining – policymakers, thereby contributing to the understanding of the phenomenon and the direction of collective agency” (2014, 263). Berenskoetter goes on: “The political potency of a national biography lies in its function to provide a community with a basic discourse, or master narrative, which guides and legitimizes courses of action and provides ontological security” (279). In other words, to understand why nation-states (people in the state to be more precise) act and reason as they do, it is necessary to explore their national biographies. Figure 1 illustrates this below and concretizes these parameters of national biographies; how they are created, and how they constrain and enable politics – and relate to each other.

Figure 1. Model on the parameters of national biography (Berenskoetter 2014, 278).

In his article, Berenskoetter explicitly states that he does not view the nation-state as “a person” (269), thus addressing the flaw I previously discussed. Nor does he confine the state to physical Westphalian borders. He also acknowledges that biographical narratives can be,
and frequently are contested by actors within the nation-state (279–281). Politics in a nation-state is “negotiated” in-between the knowledge of the past, and the prospects/fears of the future (270). Depending on the political system, there is varying opportunity to voice these challenges to a prevailing biographical narrative.

However, Berenskoetter does not entertain the idea that contesting biographical narratives may persist, despite one being more prevalent. The existence of parallel national biographies might seem strange and contradictory to the notion of a nation-state – and granted in a “naturally emerged” nation-state there might be limited disagreement on the Self. However, worth noting is that our case South Korea is a very artificially created state. Outside forces drew its crude borders in the aftermath of World War II, and this has undoubtedly had a major impact on national identity and biography. The constant and repetitive recurrence of ROK presidents’ different behavior to North Korea since its democratization suggest that South Korean society has two different views on the northern sister state, and that different presidents represent these two ideal types which I will elaborate on in the forthcoming section. When displaying this, I will use the model of the parameters of national biography, as presented by Berenskoetter and illustrated in Figure 1, but refine it.

3.5 Suggesting the existence of parallel national biographies

First, however, it is necessary to establish the concept of parallel national biographies. Berenskoetter himself acknowledges that “…because formulating a narrative is an interpretive act, it [the narrative] is principally open to contestation” (2014, 279). When dealing with biographical narratives it is important to remember that they are crafted and interpreted by humans, and humans are more complex and less streamlined that we may think. This view is shared by Ezzy:

Societies and their experiences are never homogenous and always hold potential for alternative, even competing accounts of its past and future. And all biographical narratives, no matter how coherently constructed, contain tensions and contradictions (Ezzy 1998, 247).

My theory is based on the very notion that societies are not homogenous. Unlike Berenskoetter and Ezzy, however, I entertain the idea that contesting national biographies can coexist parallelly. According to Berenskoetter, communities (or nation-states in this case) form these national biographies as a sense-making and anxiety-controlling tool. Contestation is a natural part of this phenomenon, as homogeneity in experiences hardly exist. However,
the literature so far seems to suggest that the mere existence of a prevalent national biography makes the existence of a contradicting national biography insignificant if not impossible. I would argue the opposite. As national biographies can “transcend” Westphalian borders (Berenskoetter 2014, 277), more than one national biography should theoretically be able to exist within the same borders.

As the national biography is the state’s ontology, the ontology of the state can vary, depending what national biography represented by those in power. In the South Korean case, I argue that the domestic political camps represent the two ontologies of the nation-state. If we accept this, the assumption of ontological security-seeking is reconcilable with reoccurring variation in foreign policy behavior. The ontological security-seeking behavior varies, because the ontology of the state varies. This can of course be to different degrees and be more or less explicit. The ontological security need is constant, however, depending on the prevailing ontology (or rather, the group in power), the Self and self-identity are different. Therefore, the necessary actions in relation to the significant Other to control the anxiety of the Self vary.

Scholars of ontological security need thus to alter their view on the state. Although it can be convenient to treat states as coherent actors (or “persons”) it skews results and neglects the internal complexities of the nation-state. Mitzen (2006) might be right that variation towards a significant Other is unlikely to occur, but to suggest that the internal differences regarding the state’s ontology do not have an impact on foreign policy behavior is to ignore reality.

As displayed in the literature review, there is little doubt that South Korea has two competing national identities. What the scholars who discuss these South Korean national identities seemingly fail to spot, however, is that these two streams of identities illustrate two different ontologies of the Korean nation-state, a product of two coexisting national biographies.

Figure 2 neatly illustrates my suggested theoretical framework. The writings of the two national biographies in South Korea leads to parallel ontologies of the nation-state. Thus, the ontological security-seeking behavior shifts, due to the varying ontologies. Therefore, ontological security-seeking might well be constant, as Mitzen argues. But ontological security-seeking can still account for variation in behavior.
4. Methodology

It is useful to remind ourselves of the purpose of this thesis. The main puzzle, which I aim to answer, and one of my research questions regard why there is variation in ROK foreign policy behavior towards the North. To explain this within the frames of the ontological security assumption, I first and foremost need to address what the parallel ontologies (or national biographies) of the South are (my first research question), in order to explain why they cause different behavior towards the North (my second research question). Since the assumption of ontological security-seeking is well-established theoretically, the emphasis in the methodology section will be placed on how to explore and analyze the existing national biographies, as they constitute the ontologies (“Selves”) of the ROK.

4.1 Research design

This is a qualitative case study. There are a number of reasons for why I have settled for this design. Ontological security, self-identity and other subjects treated in this thesis are all very thick concepts which are difficult to operationalize in a large-N way. Therefore, I do think
that the richer and thicker approach that qualitative case studies offer is more appropriate in this context (George and Bennet 2005, 19–21).

Moreover, the ontological and epistemological assumptions I made in the introduction makes a qualitative case study the obvious choice for this thesis. Rather than testing hypotheses to determine causal laws in the social world, I aim to explore the reasons and meanings behind social action, as I regard them as the causes (Blaikie and Priest 2017, 100). The choice to conduct a qualitative, small-n study limits my ability to generalize about the larger population, but interpretivism, the social scientific research paradigm I adhere to, does not value generalizations. As social scientists, we are part of the socially constructed reality we set out to explore. The questions we ask and the assumptions we make are all influenced by our own experiences, and we must keep this in mind when we conduct our research. To reflect over this is known as “reflexivity,” and is a fundamental principle in interpretivist research and therefore necessary in this thesis too (Schwartz-Shea 2006, 102; Yanow 2015, 108). As someone who is dedicated to academia, I value knowledge, transparency, independence and academic integrity. Some of these values could conflict with the ones of those who glorify and are nostalgic about former authoritarian presidents. Yet, I would argue that this does not interfere with my analysis of that particular narrative. I live in a country far away from Korea with very different political culture and legacy. Although I have lived in Seoul, I acknowledge that there can be a certain deficiency regarding my knowledge about Korean society. This does not prevent me, however, from conducting a thorough, transparent and deep analysis to the best of my abilities.

4.2 Unit of analysis and case selection

The two national biographies of South Korea are those of two groups in ROK society: progressives and conservatives. I would argue that Korean presidents are the ultimate representations of these national biographies. They are elected as representatives for these groups. Naturally, public opinion in South Korea – as in other democracies – varies from year to year. Nevertheless, the two groups persist, even when they are not in power. The unit of analysis in this thesis is therefore South Korean presidents. In this study I will analyze four presidents’ speeches, representing their respective group. Considering one of the interpretivists’ epistemological assumptions – that access to the social world is through language – presidential speeches are seemingly ideal to analyze.

South Korea has had a number of presidents since its democratization. Some, such as Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye represent the conservative party, and others, such as Kim
Dae-jung and Moon Jae-in are representatives of the progressive parts of society. All of these presidents have been faced with the challenge to approach North Korea one way or the other. Thus, I have a rather substantive population to draw my cases from. Lee Myung-bak was a traditional hardliner on North Korea, severely cutting aid to the neighbor in the North and rolling back the sunshine policy. He embodied the fierce anti-communist sentiments of the Cold War South Korea, combined with the economic feats of Park Chung-hee. Although Park Geun-hye initially sought to soften this approach, she is still considered a hardliner towards the North (Boykoff 2017).

Current president Moon Jae-in has been the standard-bearer of the progressive cause in South Korea. Moon’s take on the North is completely contrary to Lee and Park’s. Moon’s softer and diplomatic behavior towards the North very much resembles the “sunshine policy” of Kim Dae-jung – unilateral diplomatic initiatives towards the North to improve the inter-Korean relation.

As presidents, these individuals made many public speeches. However, I have chosen to focus my analysis on their National Liberation Day speeches of 2009 (Lee Myung-bak), 2019 (Moon Jae-in), 2015 and 2016 (Park Geun-hye), \(^\ast\ast\) and 2002 (Kim Dae-jung). August 15 is the National Liberation Day of Korea. It is the date when Japanese occupation ended in 1945, and is a national holiday in South Korea when the president addresses the country. These speeches are thus suitable for a number of reasons. First, they are addresses to the entire country, drawing large crowds. The significance of the speeches demands meaning and thoughtfulness regarding the content. Second, these speeches rarely are about single issues. Rather, they evolve around the nation as a whole. The presidents project their visions of the nation to a major audience, motivating their policy choices. The speeches are meant to string an emotional national chord among the population. Thus, they are ideal for analysis for a study such as this. Although I primarily will analyze the presidents’ National Liberation Day speeches, I will also use other material of relevance – such as remarks after inter-Korean summits and national surveys on Koreans’ perceptions of their neighbors. I do not see this as an issue, since more empirical material can further enlighten us, and guide us towards the solution of the puzzle.

\(^\ast\ast\) Park is rather contradictory in her speeches, something which made me want to increase the empirical material on this particular president. Had I had the space in this thesis; I would have increased the empirics on all of the presidents.
Before moving on, I want to make a small comment. In this thesis, I am discussing so-called “ideal types” of South Korean national biographies. As always, reality is complex and all people in Korea do not necessarily fit into these ideal types. Nonetheless, to explore and outline these ideal types help us understand the world, albeit in a more stringent and simplified way.

4.3 Methods: narrative analysis

National biographies constitute a nation-state’s ontology. They are furthermore narratives, as Berenskoetter notes (2014, 264). The most natural choice of methods would hence be so-called “narrative analysis,” where the content of a narrative is explored through deconstruction (Propp, in Berger 1997, 23). There are naturally multiple ways to approach narrative analysis (see Johansson 2008; Lieblich et al 1998), but the deconstruction gives us an idea of how the various parts of the narrative relate to each other, thus providing us with the knowledge necessary to analyze the story. Furthermore, by dissecting a narrative, using this method, we can explore the vital components and meaningful events in a nation’s history. In particular, we can, through this method, understand what roles the various actors play in history and how the components relate to each other – this is a so-called morphological approach to narrative analysis (Propp in Berger 1997, 23). According to Berger, the key components of a narrative are: (i) actors; (ii) plot; (iii) context; (iv) conflict; and (v) a proposed solution (Berger 1997, 2–4). By exploring who the actors are, how they are portrayed, what designated roles the actors are awarded, what the plot and context are, what the conflict is and what the solution might be, we can get a clearer image of what the national biography of the actor who projects the narrative is.

4.4 Operationalization

As this is established, it is now time to turn to operationalization. I will use the deconstructing framework of Berger, and combine it with Berenskoetter’s parameters of national biography (horizons of experience and possibility) when operationalizing the analysis of the speeches. This, in the following way: (i) actors – and their character traits/connotations; (ii) experiences; and (iii) prospects or fears for the future. All of these categories are structured in Figure 3. This operationalization differs notably to what Berger identify as the key components of a narrative. The main reason why I have decided to modify Berger’s approach to narrative analysis is that it needs to fit better with what Felix Berenskoetter view as the “national biography.” I would argue that in this study, it is less meaningful to identify single “conflicts”
or “issues” (of which there can be many in the larger narratives that Liberation Day speeches constitute) comparatively to analyzing the overarching experiences and visions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Conservative national biography</th>
<th>Progressive national biography</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Actors</em> (North and South Korea, what connotations do they have?)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Experienced space</em> (past).</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Envisioned space</em> (future).</td>
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*Figure 3. Illustration of the operationalization*

Furthermore, narrative analysis is an interpretive research form. Depending on the researcher, the results might vary. However, as I am transparent throughout this study, I would argue that my findings are valid. The observations I make in this thesis exclusively regard South Korean domestic politics and national biographies. I do believe this way of reasoning and viewing the world can contribute a great deal to IR, and especially to the field of ontological security studies.

### 4.5 Material and caveats

In this thesis I will rely on transcripts of speeches made by the South Korean presidents, Moon Jae-in, Kim Dae-jung, Park Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak. The transcripts can be found on the official website of the Ministry of Unification, and Cheong Da Wae (the Blue House, Office of the President of the Republic of Korea). It is necessary to make a caveat here. I do not speak Korean, and therefore I must rely on translated sources. Whereas this might blunt the material somewhat, since this analysis relies on text, I do not accept any notion that this will render my research invalid, mainly because small linguistic deficiencies do not hamper an overarching and thorough narrative analysis. The translations I am using are from the official websites of the Ministry of Unification and Cheong Wa Dae.
5. Analysis

In this section of the thesis, I will systematically go through and analyze the Liberation Day speeches made by Lee and Park, and Moon and Kim respectively. Based on this analysis, I will suggest what their respective national biographies contain and how they in turn forge their ontologies of South Korea. Thereafter, I will connect this to ontological security theory, and suggest how the national biographies are connected to varying behavior to North Korea within the assumption of ontological security-seeking.

5.1 Narrative analysis

Actors. North Korea is without a doubt the most relevant outside actor for a South Korean president to address. The DPRK is discussed with very different connotations depending on which president is delivering the speech. Lee Myung-bak states that if the “North shows such determination [to denuclearize and stop the provocations] my Administration will come up with a new peace initiative on the Korean Peninsula” (Ministry of Unification 2009). He discusses his visions for a more peaceful peninsula by stating that the peace initiative which, according to Lee, will “enhance the quality of life for the North Korean people” (ibid).

All put together, in Lee’s speech, North Korea is portrayed as an aggressive actor, and the main hurdle to reach progress on the peninsula. One must remember that in a narrative, it is equally important what is not said – “lack of certain kinds of action must be construed as action” (Berger 1997, 9). For example, in an excerpt from another 2009 speech to the UN General Assembly, president Lee stated the following: “…we [South Korea] became the only legitimate government on the Korean Peninsula” (United Nations 2009). This clearly suggests that North Korea is an “illegitimate government.”

By portraying South Korea as peace-seeking and legitimate, constantly emphasizing how desirable peace is for his administration, Lee insinuates that the North is the exact opposite of what the South represents. In describing North Korea in her 2015 Liberation Day speech, president Park Geun-hye projects the same image:

North Korea is conducting purges that are unlike any other in the world, and the North Korean people are trembling with fear. North Korea has yet to take up our repeated offers to engage in dialogue, and is undermining peace and running counter to the cause of integrating the two Koreas. North Korea is threatening our security and that of the international community by continuing to develop its nuclear capabilities and launching cyber-attacks (Cheong Wa Dae 2015).
This portrayal of North Korea by Park fits very well with the expected conservative national biography. However, there are more contradictions found in Park’s speech than one might expect. Contrary to Lee, she states in the same 2015 speech, the importance of “restoring a sense of common identity that has been undermined by seventy years of division” (Cheong Wa Dae 2015). Park’s sympathies seem to be with the North Korean people, but not with its regime. In the 2016 Liberation Day speech Park stated: “We [the South Koreans] will not turn a blind eye to the plight of North Korean residents who suffer because of the wrong decisions made by the North Korean authorities” (Cheong Wa Dae 2016). But just because Park seemingly has sympathies with the North Korean people does not mean she views them as part of a larger political project. In the 2016 speech she states:

In order to protect the safety of our nation [the South Korean nation] and people [the South Korean people] from North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats, the government will take all necessary and possible measures while further strengthening coordination with the international community. The decision to deploy the THAAD [a controversial American-made missile defense system] system was also a measure in exercise of our right of self-defense to protect the lives of our people from North Korea’s reckless provocations. /.../ If there is any other way to protect our nation and people, such an alternative should be proposed (Cheong Wa Dae 2016, emphasis added).

There are some clear contradictions regarding Park. Although Park talks about “restoring a common identity,” she also portrays North Korea as an enemy (an Other). Park explicitly states how her administration will take all “necessary” steps to ensure the safety of “our nation [South Korea]” and “our people.”

Whereas conservative presidents portray North Korea mostly as an illegitimate and aggressive state obstructing any rapprochement through its provocations, the progressive president use a different language. In his Liberation Day speech of 2019, Moon does not talk about North Korea as an enemy. Instead, he talks of North Korea as one half of the nation their forefathers envisioned, a country “…in which a girl from a small town on the southwestern island of Wando can study hydrogen industry in the southeastern city of Ulsan [in present day South Korea], start a business in the northwestern city of Nampo [in present day North Korea]” (Cheong Wa Dae 2019). Rather than stating that the North needs to denuclearize if progress is to be made, he states that his ambition is to:
establish a peace economy in which prosperity is achieved through peace and also complete our liberation through the unification of the Peninsula. By overcoming the division of the Peninsula, we must transform the Korean people’s energy into a driving force for future prosperity (ibid).

Moon further goes on: “When we [North and South Korea] overcome division, our liberation will finally be completed and Korea will become a country that cannot be shaken” (ibid). It seems clear that Moon does not regard the North as an adversary in his narrative, or even a different nation. President Kim Dae-jung’s way to describe the North is very much in line with the progressive national biography of the Korean nation-state. Following a summit in Pyongyang in 2000, Kim stated:

I found that Pyongyang, too, was our land, indeed. The Pyongyang people are the same as us, the same nation sharing the same blood. /.../ If you talk with them, you notice that right away. That is quite natural because we have been a homogeneous nation for thousands of years. We lived as a unified nation for 1,300 years before we were divided 55 years ago against our will. It is impossible for us to continue to live separated physically and spiritually. /.../ I have returned with the conviction that, sooner or later, we will become reconciled with each other, cooperate, and finally get reunified (Ministry of Unification 2000 2002).

Kim does not describe North Korea with any adjectives in his 2002 Liberation Day speech (despite the fact that the speech takes place only months after a violent naval incident between the countries) (see Van Dyke et al 2003, 143). Very much like Moon Jae-in, Kim refrains from any rhetoric that could be perceived as alienating towards the North.

The other central actor is South Korea. There are some notable differences in how the presidents portray South Korea as well. Lee Myung-bak is among the most vocal proponents of South Korean nationalism. In his 2009 Liberation Day speech he stated:

Sixty-one years ago today, the national flag, which represents the pride of the nation, was flying high in the wind as the inaugural President, Syngman Rhee, declared the establishment of our nation, his voice slightly trembling with an overwhelming feeling of joy (Ministry of Unification 2009, emphasis added).

The “pride of the nation” refers to the South Korean nation – a stark contrast to Moon’s narrative about a common nation on both sides of the 38th parallel. The emphasis on the “national flag” and phrases such as “our nation” further suggests that, according to Lee, South Korea is the nation worth defending. Throughout his speech, Lee continuously celebrate South Korea and its achievements. He condemns “regionalism” which he argues is the root to
“unproductivity” in South Korean, standing in the way of nationalism (ibid). Much like Lee, president Park stressed the legitimacy of the ROK (and implicitly the illegitimacy of the DPRK). “Over the years, our Republic of Korea has been carrying forward the time-honored heritage and legitimacy of the Korean people, safeguarding our free democracy and laying the groundwork for the enduring prosperity of the economy for both the nation and its people” (Cheong Wa Dae 2015, emphasis added).

Albeit being a progressive president, Moon Jae-in does not have negative connotation about South Korean achievements in his speech. This pride over South Korea’s economic feats is similar to Lee’s. But his rhetoric strongly diverts from Lee’s emphasis on the pride of the South Korean nation. Rather, when he talks about the Korean “nation,” Moon states the following: “… However, we have yet to become an unshakable nation. That is because we still lack sufficient strength and remain divided” (ibid). This view on the Korean nation is a recurring theme in the speech of Moon Jae-in. Instead of praising the South Korean nation, he prefers to use terms as a “nation that cannot be shaken” (i.e. a unified Korean peninsula) (ibid). Kim Dae-jung does also celebrate the economic feats of South Korea, brings up the triumph of the 2002 FIFA World Cup that was hosted by South Korea and Japan. Interestingly enough, he does also bring up the so-called “West Sea Incident” on June 29, 2002 – when North Korean intrusion in ROK territorial water caused a limited naval battle between ROK and DPRK naval forces (Van Dyke et al 2003, 143). Despite bringing this up, there is an interesting difference to what president Park spoke of; instead of discussing how they must defend “our nation and our people,” Kim states “To defend the peace on the Peninsula we will do everything that is necessary” (Ministry of Unification 2002).

Experiences (past). A nation-state’s biographical narrative is largely constituted by history, or what Felix Berenskoetter refers to as the “space of experience” (Berenskoetter 2014, 277). The history of a nation constitutes the backbone of the national biography. It is through the “space of experience” the past of a nation-state is given meaning. Conservative president Lee Myung-bak projects a distinct narrative about South Korea’s past experiences. Lee notes that:

About 90 years ago, our ancestors, who had then lost their country, established a government in exile in Shanghai, showing the world that Korea was an independent country that would not tolerate being governed by foreign forces. And 64 years ago today, we saw the entire nation overwhelmed with joy as we welcomed our independence. We gathered together and became one in inexpressible euphoria. Sixty-one years ago today, the national flag, which represents the pride of the nation, was flying high in the wind as the inaugural President,
Syngman Rhee, declared the establishment of our nation, his voice slightly trembling with an overwhelming feeling of joy (Ministry of Unification 2009).

The final sentence in this quote was used in the previous section, but something else interesting appears when it is put into the context of the nation’s experiences. Lee begins with bringing up the independence movements against the Japanese of the early 20th century, then he brings up the liberation in 1945, concluding with the familiar description of the founding of South Korea and president Rhee. He does not mention the tragedy of the partition of the peninsula, he does not seem to acknowledge the North’s existence, or those Korean communists who fought against the Japanese alongside the Korean nationalists. In the next section of Lee’s speech, he tries to incapsulate Korea’s post-1945 history by celebrating those who contributed to the country’s development.

Here today, as we commemorate the anniversary of liberation, I would like to once again pay respect to the people of Korea that have made the country what it is today. /…/ Every single Korean is a hero. The spirit of our ancestors who dedicated themselves to recovering our country, establishing our country and defending our country still lives on today and is probably one of the most valuable things we have inherited. /…/ Today I would like to shed new light on how Koreans made a history of miracles within the larger frame of world history (ibid, emphasis added).

Lee commemorates how the South Koreans’ ancestors defended South Korea in the Korean War; how they worked and transformed the country from an aid-receiving and insignificant actor to one of the world’s strongest economies. The word “defended” is significant, which suggests an “attack” by an outsider (i.e. North Korea) (which is the only place in the entire speech where he – indirectly – touches upon the North when discussing the nation’s history). Park’s narrative is very similar to Lee’s in many ways (she does bring up the forefathers who fought for independence and the journey from poverty to prosperity and so forth), but there is a notable difference here:

The tragedy of our people and the ravages of the Korean War completely swept away the livelihood of our people. /…/ But we were far from daunted. Through unity of purpose and the strength of our people, our nation [South Korean people and nation] made great new strides forward (Cheong Wa Dae 2015).

Park clearly acknowledges that the partition of the peninsula was a tragedy. However, this point is then undercut by her clear allegiance to the South Korea nation. Just because Park
 states that the past is a tragedy does not necessarily entail that she regards the North as part of the Korean nation-state. 

In contrast, a visible theme in Moon’s speech is that he does not focus to much on the past and experiences in his Liberation Day speech, but rather turns his gaze to the future. Some history is naturally present in Moon’s speech, but rather than commemorating the “pride of our nation” as Lee did, Moon puts the independence movement forward – and their vision for a unified Korea. He states that the ROK “…was created by the indomitable spirit of our forefathers who fought for independence while refusing to buckle or give up in the face of any tribulation” (Cheong Wa Dae 2019). Instead of celebrating the South Korean nation he invites people to “…envisioning the nation that our forefathers sought to build with exuberance on the day Korea was liberated, and the country that we aim to create by carrying on where they left off” (ibid). Moon does furthermore bring up the experience of the South Korean economic growth in his narrative, much like Lee, but he concludes that the country has something which it is “yet to be” (i.e. unified with the North) (ibid). Another experience he brings up is the Japanese occupation; an emphasis very much in line with the “progressive national identity” previously discussed.

Liberation was not just a cause for celebration for us [the Korean people] alone. /.../ It was also the day of liberation for East Asia. The Japanese people were also able to cast off the yoke of imperialistic oppression and were liberated from wars of aggression (ibid).

Kim Dae-jung also emphasized the colonial rule of Japan in his Liberation Day speech: “After we were liberated from the yoke of Japanese colonial rule, the country was divided, and a war devastated the entire land, and the authoritarian regimes oppressed the citizens” (Ministry of Unification 2002). But he also articulated the experiences of division and the Korean War – national traumas which, alongside the struggle for democracy, are parts of the progressive national biography.

**Envisioned space (future).** The second part of the national biographical narrative is the “envisioned space” – the prospects and fears of politicians and citizens of these two groups in society. The “envisioned space” gives meaning to the future – oftentimes through the depictions of utopias or dystopias (Berenskoetter 2014, 277).

Unsurprisingly, Lee, Park, Kim and Moon offer rather different envisioned spaces for the nation-state of Korea. In his Liberation Day speech Lee’s envisioned space, does contain a
South Korea with less “toxic” regionalism, democratic reform with fewer elections, decreased corruption and increased transparency (Ministry of Unification 2009). When he comes to North Korea, he outlines how the North must give up its nuclear program and find other ways to ensure its security. He argues that Pyongyang must take the first step, and “realize that nuclear weapons cannot guarantee its security, but rather are an obstacle to a better future for them” (ibid, emphasis added). It is very clear that he does regard North Korea not as a part of the Self, but as an enemy with whom one can, at best, coexist. The North is “them.” Overall, Lee’s envisioned space of the Korean nation is dominated by ideas of a more coherent nation, liberated from regionalism, continuously separated from the North, ready to prosper as it did during the 1970s and 1980s. Park on the other hand is, as previously discussed, contradictory. She speaks that reunification: “Let us all stand together and prepare for unification, and set our vision on a 100th anniversary where the dream of peaceful unification has become reality” (Cheong Wa Dae 2015).

Moon’s envisioned space has some similarities with Park’s, but differs notably from Lee’s Liberation Day speech. Moon sets out that he wants to unify a divided nation, build a new peace economy together with North Korea, establish the new Korean nation geopolitically and cast off the shackles of the surrounding “four major powers” (presumably China, Japan, Russia and the US) (Cheong Wa Dae 2019). Moon further concretizes the advantages of a unified Korea as the following:

…. when we pass this hurdle, denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula will move closer and inter-Korean relations will also make significant strides. When economic cooperation accelerates and the peace economy begins, unification will beckon as stark reality before us someday /.../ ...this will be possible if South and North Korea join forces and commit themselves to deciding the fate of the Korean Peninsula. When we overcome division, our liberation will finally be completed and Korea will become a country that cannot be shaken (ibid).

Compared to the remarks following the 2000 summit in Pyongyang, Kim speaks notably little about reunification and the future in his 2002 Liberation Day speech. The remarks about the future are not as visionary as Moon’s. Rather they reflect that “the policy of reconciliation /.../ should be maintained for the lasting peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula” (Ministry of Unification 2002). Considering the West Sea incident, the same year, it is understandable why Kim toned down the grand visions of his remarks after the 2000 summit.
5.2 The two national biographies and ontologies of the ROK

These different narratives (summarized in figure 4) represent two different national biographies – two different “Selves” – of South Korea, collectively perceived in each societal group respectively. Rather than giving states “roles” to play in the international system (such as security-seeker), their collectively perceived Self is a product of the national biography. This way, we get a more adequate picture of the world.

The conservative national biography’s self-identity is the one of a South Korean nation – the only legitimate representation of a Korean nation – which experienced poverty and assaults (by illegitimate actor North Korea). The conservative narrative emphasizes South Korea’s rapid progress, and envisions continued prosperity and enhanced national cohesion in the future. At best, the South and the North can peacefully coexist. However, the defense of the nation and its people are imperative to those who are in power. This is the conservative Korean Self. The progressive national biographical narrative suggests that the two Koreas is one nation, divided by outside forces. It highlights the experience of being one nation previously in history. North Korea is regarded as part of the Korean nation – part of the Self – not as an enemy. The progressive Self was a nation enslaved under Japanese colonialism, traumatized by division by outside forces and a subject to brutal dictators. The envisioned utopia is reunification and final realization of the “real” Self of the Korean nation. The envisioned dystopia is presumably continued partition and conflict.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Conservative national biography</th>
<th>Progressive national biography</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Actors</strong> (North and South Korea, what connotations do they have?)</td>
<td><em>The role of North Korea:</em> illegitimate and aggressive. Responsible for the conflict. <em>The role of South Korea:</em> heroic, successful and legitimate. Strives for peace and security.</td>
<td>North and South part of the same nation. The North is not evil, illegitimate or aggressive. Outside forces caused this tragic dyad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experienced space (past)</strong></td>
<td>South Korea has been subject to occupation, attacked from the outside (by North Korea), but was built, defended and economically developed by the people in ROK.</td>
<td>Japanese occupation, the unfulfilled goal of those who fought for Korean independence (i.e. one Korean nation), implied that the partition was a trauma. Korean War not mentioned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Envisioned space (future)</strong></td>
<td>Reduced regionalism to enhance ROK nationalism. Peaceful coexistence with North Korea (“them”) at best. The North must take the first step. Enhanced security (utopia). Negligence leading to new attack from the North (dystopia).</td>
<td>A final liberation of the Korean peninsula through unification and the creation of one Korean nation (utopia). Prosperity together. Continued partition or even war (dystopia).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4. Compiled and summarized narrative analysis*
I make the case that these two ontologies exist, not only with support in my narrative analysis, but also with support from a 2018 national survey *South Koreans and Their Neighbors*. It showed that 55.8 percent of South Koreans view North Korea as “one of us/neighbor” and 31.9 percent of the population viewed the North as a “stranger/enemy” (The ASAN Institute for Policy Studies 2018). But whereas the national biographies remain different, the politicians who represent them are not always clear-cut in their projection. Park is for example willing to envision a future of peace and reunification, whereas Lee avoided such projections. The world, and politics in particular, tend to be somewhat grey. Although this divide is demonstrated in domestic politics, it is important to remember that there are other issues which may sway the Korean electorate one way or the other.

One of this study’s purposes was to explore what the different ontologies of South Korea were. I have now identified the two ideal types; and I can simultaneously conclude that domestic politics can render projection of them ambiguous and less clear than they essentially are.

### 5.3 Back to theory: South Korea’s ontological security-seeking

Now as we have established that South Korea has two different national biographies and thus two different ontologies, it is time to return to theories of ontological security-seeking. As mentioned, the theorized assumption about ontological security-seeking is that the state constantly seeks to protect the Self and the self-identity – its ontology. My study shows that there are two rather distinct national biographies in South Korea – what I call a “progressive” and “conservative” Self respectively. These two national biographies represent two groups in South Korean society and are illustrated – with varying degrees of clarity – by South Korean presidents and in their Liberation Day speeches.

The discovery of two coexisting and parallel national biographies here leads to a new understanding of ontological security-seeking. As two “Selves” exist within the Westphalian borders of the nation-state, the routinized protection of them are bound to be different, mainly because their relationship to the supposedly significant Other (North Korea) is varying.

The conservative ontology (collective Self) view South Korea as the only legitimate Korean nation-state. North Korea’s role as enemy persists in the experiences, and the envisioned future – something which has caused a routinized hostile relation with the DPRK. The conservative Self is a product of this narrative. Those who find meaning in this national biography have thus become “attached” to the conflict, or more accurately, to the vision of
persistent conflict. As a consequence, they adopt a fiercer and more hostile foreign policy posture towards Pyongyang, maintaining status quo, as a more diplomatic approach would render them ontologically anxious, with disrupted routines. Lee and Park’s policies towards the North reflect this well. Both of them cut ROK aid to the DPRK (in 2016, Park froze 100 percent of the humanitarian aid to the country) and demanded full denuclearization from the North before any steps could be taken to remove the international sanctions towards Pyongyang (Moon 2011, 3; Kim 2018, 168).

Progressive ontology does not reinforce the Self through a national biography where the North is the enemy. The prevailing narrative is instead that the Korean nation transcends the border between South and North. The experiences emphasized in this narrative are those from before the partition; experiences of a unified Korea fighting against the Japanese occupation force. Envisioned is the reunification of the nation. Therefore, in a simplified sense, there is no “conflict” to be attached to, since the North is “part of the Self” – not an Other. North Korea is not the significant Other in the enemy-sense; rather the Self. The North is a lost part of the nation following the tragedy of great power politics, and thus, rapprochement does not pose an ontological threat to those adhering to this national biography. On the contrary, for those who share the progressive national biography, rapprochement is highly desired – the memories and visions contain a united peninsula. This ambition is reflected in the foreign policy behavior of Kim Dae-jung and Moon Jae-in towards the North. Kim famously introduced the “sunshine policy,” arguing for unilateral diplomatic initiatives, which earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in the year 2000 (The Norwegian Nobel Institute n.d.). Moon has very much carried Kim’s legacy on with his current diplomatic approach to North Korea; lobbing for economic cooperation, unification and peace (Ministry of Unification n.d.). The progressive collective Self does not find ontological security in a narrative where the North is an enemy. One could possibly assert that the progressive presidents’ skepticism towards Japan suggests that the former colonial power is the progressives’ experienced and envisioned Other, on which they are dependent for their ontological security – causing diplomatic rows to this day (Lundström 2019).

6. Conclusion

In this study I set out to explore the puzzle of recurring variation in foreign policy behavior towards a significant Other within the frames of ontological security-seeking – something
which scholars of ontological security have thus far been unable to explain. To explore the presented puzzle, I focused on the case of South Korean presidents’ varying behavior towards South Korea’s assumed significant Other: North Korea. To do so, I opened up the assumed black box of the state and relaxed a number of assumptions. With the puzzle in mind I crafted two research questions: (1) What are the prevailing national biographies of the ROK? And (2) why are they [the national biographies] causing varying ROK behavior towards the DPRK? My narrative analysis of ROK presidents’ National Liberation Day speeches shows that there is a conservative national biography, which is a narrative where the nation-state of South Korea is the legitimate protagonist and North Korea is the antagonist who attacked the ROK and started the Korean War. The past is portrayed as a time of great trial and poverty for the young South Korean nation which, thanks to its forefathers then prospered and gained power and influence in the world. Continued prosperity and enhanced nationalism constitute the ideal future. This collective conservative self-identity of the Korean nation-state prevents conservative presidents from diplomatic initiatives towards the North as it would render them ontologically insecure. The findings also show that there is a progressive national biography. This project the image of the North as part of the Korean nation; part of the Self. The past is dominated by the division of the peninsula, and the envisioned space contains the reunification and creation of one Korean nation. For this group, rapprochement to the North is favorable and does not render them ontologically insecure. South Korean presidents tend to belong in one of these camps (albeit that the distinction occasionally can be a bit blurred). Their respective foreign policy behavior will be dominated by what they consider the ontology of the Korean nation state to be. Thus, even though both progressive and conservative presidents are ontological security-seekers, they have different understanding of what the nation-state is – i.e. their perception of South Korea’s Self differ. Thus, their behavior towards North Korea differ. Conservatives view North Korea as an Other, whereas progressives rather view North Korea as “part” of the Self. To summarize, in order to understand recurring variation in foreign policy behavior towards a significant Other, within the frames of ontological security, we must understand the state differently. First, we cannot separate the state from the nation. In turn, the nation-state’s ontology is its national biography, formed by an internal process – a collective narrative that provides the past, present and the future with a meaning. Foremost, however, we need to abandon the flawed assumption that the state is a unitary actor with one national identity. Rather, the study shows that there can exist parallel national biographies on which the ontology of the nation-state is based. If we see the world this way, we can square the assumption of constant ontological security-seeking
with recurring variation in foreign policy behavior towards a significant Other. This study provides with new insights into the ontology of the nation-state as a collective idea, and on how this is connected to foreign policy behavior. It can help us to better understand ontological security-seeking, persistence of conflict and national identity. If we understand persisting conflicts in a more profound way, it may provide us with the tools to solve them, thus contributing to a better world. However, the subject is far from sufficiently explored and I encourage future research within this realm.

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7. References

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**Empirical material**


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