Great Power Narcissism and Ontological (In)Security: The Narrative Mediation of Greatness and Weakness in International Politics

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Why do self-representations of weakness pervade public discourse in self-identified great powers? Moreover, why do they intersect with self-representations of greatness? Do such narrative instability, inconsistency, and incoherence simply indicate that great powers are ontologically insecure? This article advances a theoretical explanation that is both embedded in and contributes to scholarship that theorizes ontological (in)security from a Lacanian perspective. The gist, ironically, is that great powers' quest for greatness is co-constituted with the narrative construction of weakness. The article then challenges the assumption in existing ontological security scholarship that states are generally self-reflexive and experience pride when ontologically secure but shame when ontologically insecure. Since great power narratives reflect persistent, exaggerated, and simultaneous feelings of shame and pride, it argues that narcissism helps better account for great power self-identification and ontological security-seeking. Drawing on psychological research on narcissism, the article develops four narrative forms—shame, pride, denial, and insult—through which self-representations of weakness and greatness, and feelings of shame and pride, can be mediated. Finally, using empirical illustrations from the United States and China, the article analyzes how and with what implications political leaders have narrated about each respective great power's weakness and greatness, with a focus on the period 2006–2020.

¿Por qué las autorrepresentaciones de debilidad se extienden en los discursos públicos en las grandes potencias autoidentificadas? Asimismo, ¿por qué se entrecruzan con las autorrepresentaciones de grandeza? ¿La inestabilidad, la incongruencia y la incoherencia narrativa simplemente indican que las grandes potencias son inseguras en términos ontológicos? Este artículo propone una explicación teórica que está incorporada a una erudición, y que contribuye con ella, que teoriza la (in)seguridad desde una perspectiva lacaniana. Irónicamente, la idea es que la búsqueda de grandeza de las grandes potencias está coconstituida con la construcción narrativa de debilidad. Por lo tanto, el artículo desafía el supuesto de la erudición existente de seguridad ontológica que establece que, por lo general, los estados son autorreflexivos y experimentan orgullo cuando están ontológicamente seguros, pero experimentan vergüenza cuando están inseguros en términos ontológicos. Puesto que las narraciones de las grandes potencias reflejan sentimientos persistentes, exagerados y simultáneos de vergüenza y orgullo, se sostiene que el narcisismo ayuda mejor a dar cuenta de la autoidentificación y de la búsqueda de seguridad ontológica de las grandes potencias. Al recurrir a la investigación psicológica sobre el narcisismo, el artículo desarrolla cuatro formas de narraciones: vergüenza, orgullo, negación e insulto, a través de las cuales se pueden mediar las autorrepresentaciones de debilidad y grandeza, así como los sentimientos de vergüenza y orgullo. Por último, usando ejemplos empíricos de los Estados Unidos y de China, el artículo analiza cómo y con qué consecuencias los líderes políticos han narrado sobre la debilidad y la grandeza de cada gran potencia, y se centra en el período que va de 2006 a 2020.

Pourquoi les auto-représentations de faiblesse imprègnent-elles le discours public des grandes puissances autoproclamées ? De plus, pourquoi ces auto-représentations de faiblesse s'entrecroisent-elles avec des auto-représentations de grandeur ? De telles instabilités, inconstances et incohérences narratives indiquent-elles simplement que les grandes puissances sont ontologiquement insécurisées ? Cet article avance une explication théorique qui est à la fois intégrée et contributrice aux recherches qui théorisent l'(in)sécurité ontologique d'un point de vue lacanien. Ironiquement, l'idée générale est que la quête de grandeur des grandes puissances se constitue conjointement avec la construction narrative de la faiblesse. Cet article remet ensuite en question l'hypothèse des recherches existantes sur la sécurité ontologique, qui est que les États sont généralement auto-réflexifs et qu'ils ressentent de la fierté lorsqu'ils sont ontologiquement sécurisés mais de la honte lorsqu'ils sont ontologiquement insécurisés. Étant donné que les discours des grandes puissances reflètent des sentiments persistants, exagérés et simultanés de honte et de fierté, cet article soutient que le narcissisme aide à mieux prendre en compte l'autoproclamation des grandes puissances et leur quête de sécurité ontologique. Cet article s'appuie sur une recherche psychologique sur le narcissisme pour présenter quatre formes narratives—de la honte, de la fierté, du déni et de l'insulte—par le biais desquelles les auto-représentations de faiblesse et de grandeur, et les sentiments de honte et de fierté, peuvent être communiqués. Enfin, cet article utilise des illustrations empiriques des États-Unis et de Chine pour analyser la manière dont et les implications avec lesquelles les dirigeants politiques ont discouru sur les faiblesses et grandeurs respectives de chacune des grandes puissances en se concentrant sur la période 2006–2020.

Introduction

To be ontologically secure, self-identified great powers would seem to be dependent on the reproduction of relatively consistent and coherent autobiographical narratives that emphasize how great they are in a generalized sense. Great power narratives do indeed represent their protagonists as great, but self-representations of greatness surprisingly often intersect in public discourse with representations that worry about how weak the self is. For example, euphoric assertions of US preponderance intersect with expressions of fear and shame related to weakness (Reus-Smit 2004, 19–27). The rhetoric of former US President Donald J. Trump is a case in point. In his 2016 nomination acceptance speech, the then presidential candidate stated that the United States was "still free and independent and strong" but concurrently claimed that it was facing "death, destruction, terrorism and weakness" (2016). While these assertions are characteristic of Trump's way of speaking, they arguably resonated with "broader public sentiment" enough to get him elected (Homolar and Scholz 2019, 348).

Moreover, an "inner doubt" arguably existed in US society and international relations long before Trump's ascent (Cox 2007, 644; Arnold 2013, 3). Since the 1970s, there has been widespread concern that the United States is getting weaker relative to the Soviet Union (Dalby 1988), Japan (Campbell 1992, 223–43), and more recently China (Pan 2012). US political scientists also remain preoccupied with the question of US decline and weakness (e.g., Nau 1990; Kupchan 2003; Nye 2015). However, self-representations of weakness tend to intersect in public discourse with representations premised on the US self's greatness, as reflected, for example, in Arnold's (2013) analysis of Hollywood movies.

Self-representations of weakness and greatness intersect fairly similarly in the narratives of other self-identified great powers. Neumann (2017) details the uneasy coexistence of inferiority and superiority complexes in Russian identity narratives, which at the same time as obsessing over "the idea of being a great power" express fear that Russia might be on the verge of becoming a "banana republic." He notes: "Russia is stuck in a prison of its own making. The name of that prison is great power identity. Time and again since the fall of the Soviet Union, we have heard Russians state that Russia has to be a great power, or it will be nothing" (Neumann 2015, 5). To take another example, Japanese identity narratives recurrently emphasize that the country is at the same time greater than other Asian states, but too weak to compare with Western great powers or to approximate the normative standard for being a true great power (Hagström 2015). As China superseded Japan as the second largest economy in the world, and conflicts over disputed territory intensified in 2010, the latter trope became more dominant. The fact that Japan looked weaker than an Asian neighbor was widely regarded as particularly disheartening (Hagström 2012; Walravens 2014), but fear and shame related to imminent weakness almost immediately intersected with self-confident assertions to the effect that Japan was "back" (Abe 2013).

Ontological Security Studies (OSS) scholarship assumes that the identity of a state or nation emerges through the construction and dissemination of narratives that strive for stability, consistency, and coherence. Is the coexistence of self-representations of weakness and greatness, detailed above, simply proof of ample ontological insecurity in the United States, Russia, and Japan, linked perhaps to what is understood in each case as relative material "decline"? Interestingly, however, despite its material "rise" in recent decades, China harbors a similar "combination of a superiority complex, and an inferiority complex" (Callahan 2010, 9). Callahan calls this phenomenon "pessoptimism" and notes that it is epitomized by self-representations that simultaneously depict China as "civilised and backward" (2010, 130), a "victorious great power" and a "victim state" (2010, 168), and "the next superpower" and a "poor developing country" (2010, 196). Others concur that China is a "deeply conflicted rising power" (Shambaugh 2011, 7) that is "confused" about its identity (Pu 2017, 137), which is that of both "a weak country and a strong one" (Pu 2017, 139).

Existing OSS scholarship has begun to investigate the narrative functions of dystopia and utopia but located them as temporally separate (Kinnvall 2018; Browning 2019) and connected primarily with "populist leaders" (Kinnvall 2018, 525). The puzzle for this article, by contrast, is that weakness and greatness, and their associated notions of dystopia and utopia, are narrated as close to the present. Moreover, while incumbents and challengers in domestic politics are likely to represent things differently, the former do not simply advocate the self's greatness while the latter warn about its looming weakness, thereby "creating the very ontological insecurity that it promises to eradicate for political gain" (Homolar and Scholz 2019, 360). In fact, self-representations of weakness and greatness seem to intersect even in *competing* identity narratives. Finally, while it probably matters whether and how great power identities are (mis)recognized by others (e.g., Lindemann 2010), and how power and status are distributed in the international system (e.g., Waltz 1979; Ward 2019), this article argues that a more fundamental fear of weakness epitomizes the great power predicament. Such fear and its associated shame have little obvious connection with "underlying reality" (Herman 1997, 441) and are intersected throughout with confident assertions of pride in the self's greatness.

The aim of the article is to explain this puzzling mode of identity construction, which appears to manifest itself in several great powers, and to rethink ontological security and the way it applies to great powers. Drawing on Jacques Lacan's identity theory, the article begins to craft an explanation by conceptualizing the self as fundamentally fluid and fractured, incoherent and incomplete, and ontological security as an aspiration—the quest for which is motivated through the construction of ontological insecurities. It goes on to challenge the assumption that states have an equal capacity for self-reflexivity and experience pride when their autobiographical narratives are relatively stable, consistent, and coherent, but shame when their sense of self is challenged by contradiction. Since great power narratives reflect persistent, exaggerated, and more or less simultaneous feelings of both shame and pride, it argues that narcissism is more appropriate for making sense of great power self-identification and ontological security-seeking.

In fact, shame and pride are both central to narcissism. Indeed, narcissism is defined by an inflated sense of the self's importance and exaggerated feelings of pride. Yet, narcissists project pride to subjugate more fundamental feelings of shame that are believed to *drive* the personality disorder. Drawing on psychological research, the article develops four different narrative forms through which narcissistic self-representations of weakness and greatness, and feelings of shame and pride, can be mediated—what I call narratives of shame, pride, denial, and insult. Each narrative form is entangled with actions of interest to International Relations (IR) scholars: militarization (shame), "soft power" (pride), and the use of aggression (insult). Subotic and Zarakol (2013, 924) note that shame can lead to "denial

or hostile bravado," and this article argues that such a transformation can be made intelligible by understanding great power narratives as narcissistic and by distinguishing between different narrative forms. The article then returns to the United States and China to analyze briefly how and with what implications political leaders have narrated about each respective great power self's weakness and greatness over time, with a focus on the period 2006–2020. The aim is not to validate theory through empirical testing, but to undertake a "plausibility probe" of the theorization undertaken (Eckstein 1991, 148–52). This is the first step toward examining its "analytical generality" (Pouliot 2015, 238–39) or its relevance to instances of great power words and deeds.

The discussion thus far might be criticized for conflating great power self-representations with the rhetoric of leaders. If leaders speak in a way that sounds narcissistic, it might simply be due to the narcissism of particular office holders—a diagnosis that reputable psychiatrists have not only associated with Trump (e.g., Lee 2017), but extended to several US presidents and other world leaders both past and present (e.g., Pettman 2010; Post 2015; Bar-Joseph and McDermott 2017). With Trump out of office, it might be assumed that the United States will become the object of less narcissistic narratives. Such optimism may be premature, however, since narcissism appears to be a highly ingrained aspect of US identity construction and indeed of great power self-identification and ontological security-seeking more generally.

Ontological Security and Insecurity

Inspired by research in psychology and sociology, scholars began to develop OSS within IR about two decades ago, fundamentally to contend that states care about identity threats in addition to physical ones, which helps to explain why they at times act contrary to the expectations of materialist and rationalist IR theories (e.g., Steele 2005; Mitzen 2006). The existing literature defines ontological security as "a sense of continuity and order in events" regarding self-identity (Giddens 1991, 243) and "biographical continuity" (Giddens 1991, 53). The latter definition clarifies that most OSS scholarship adheres to a narrative conception of the self and a narrative ontology. According to such positions, pre-constituted actors not just become more or less secure by crafting narratives that situate them in the past, present, and future, but subjects emerge and vanish as such through narratives (e.g., Ringmar 1996; Berenskoetter 2014; Rossdale 2015). Some OSS scholarship contends that emerging actors reinforce their autobiographical narratives by establishing routines, and that narrative change occurs in tandem with changing routines (e.g., Giddens 1991; Steele 2005; Mitzen 2006; Zarakol 2010).

The existing OSS scholarship conceptualizes ontological security and insecurity as somewhat dichotomous, the latter defined as a "rupture" in both narrative and routine (e.g., Mitzen 2006, 348). While acknowledging the contingency and fragility of narratives, and the ubiquity of existential anxiety, these accounts nonetheless treat ontological security as the "guiding aspiration" (Rossdale 2015, 377), and indeed as possible, while claiming that "we rarely see ontological insecurity in daily life" (Mitzen 2006, 348). Building on Giddens, Steele argues that ontological security is imperiled only by "critical situations" (2005, 526). According to Giddens, critical situations are "circumstances of radical disjuncture of an unpredictable kind" (1984, 61). While Steele (2008, 12) acknowledges that critical situations are inseparable from the narratives through which they

are constituted, the OSS literature still tends to treat them as somewhat akin to "external shocks" in materialist accounts, and to imply that certain events are *inherently* bound to cause such ruptures. For example, some suggest that "power transitions" have this quality (Ejdus 2018). Others exemplify with reference to "increased communication, global financial crises, transnational migration, mobility of labor, unemployment, and the emergence of global criminal and other networks" (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2018, 828). However, if critical situations are indeed constituted as part of identity narratives, it is fair to assume that some events that seem inherently traumatic will not be narratively constituted as such, and vice versa (e.g., Croft 2006).

In this article, I conjecture that critical situations are not an aberration from the normal but a more endemic aspect of great power self-identification and ontological security-seeking. Inspired by psychoanalytical, postcolonial, and poststructuralist accounts, which in turn often draw on Lacanian identity theory, I conceptualize the self as more fundamentally fluid and fractured, incoherent, and incomplete. Defining ontological security as "security-as-becoming" (Cash and Kinnvall 2017, 269), rather than as "security as being" (Steele 2005, 526), goes some way toward accounting for this understanding. The point is that uncertainties, contradictions, and threats in the form of otherness—a "constitutive lack"—are not only ever-present, but what makes it possible to try to secure ontology in the first place (e.g., Huysmans 1998; Epstein 2011). Solomon (2015, 42) nicely captures this insight: "The split—or lack—of subjectivity is both the condition of possibility and impossibility of identification processes." Hence, it is not just narratives that mediate the relationship between ontological security and insecurity that tend to rely on the "double relation" between enemies and friends, exceptions to norms, and difference to identity (Huysmans 1998). Ontological security and insecurity also have the same kind of double relationship. The implication is that ontological insecurities both threaten and motivate a constant quest for ontological security.

According to Lacanian OSS scholarship, narratives seek to overcome the lack by engaging in fantasies that make the self seem more stable, consistent, and coherent than it actually is or can be. Fantasies convert the ontological lack into an "empirical lack" or a lack of "particular 'objects' whose recapturing promises the restoration of an imaginary full identity" (Eberle 2019, 246). Eberle emphasizes that fantasy is a narrative structure that only allows two possible versions of the future, with no room for "ambiguity or complexity" or even "middle ground": "either we recapture the 'object' and we are safe (the beatific scenario of securing a complete identity), or we fail and we are doomed (the horrific scenario of losing it)" (Eberle 2019, 248–49). While Eberle intimates that a fantasy can provide some ontological relief by offering an idea of how to escape the horrific scenario and approximate the beatific one, the bottom line is that the lack cannot be overcome more than just seemingly and momentarily, and that the desire for fulfillment remains frustrated (Eberle 2019, 245–47).

If ontological security is indeed unachievable, however, the *notion* of ontological security risks not only obscuring the self's fragility but also concealing the power struggles that unfold over the imposition of meaning and identity. The "'home' safe from intruders," which Kinnvall (2004, 763) likens to ontological security, may thus at the same time function as a "marker of exclusion, and a site of violence" (Rossdale 2015, 375). Meanwhile, OSS scholarship risks reifying the self as worthy

of protection and the other as a source of insecurity (Untalan 2020).

These discussions go some way toward explaining why seemingly contradictory self-representations of weakness and greatness intersect in great power narratives. They epitomize the "recursive and dynamic oscillation" between ontological insecurities and moments when meaning and identity *appear* to be more secure, as a product of intensified ontological security-seeking (Cash 2013, 116). The next section supplements and extends this explanation by supplanting the self-reflexivity assumption common in OSS scholarship with one premised on great power narcissism.

From Self-Reflexivity to Narcissism

Much of the existing OSS scholarship assumes that states have a capacity for self-reflexivity and can monitor the extent to which their identity narratives are internally stable and coherent, and consistent with routines. The assumption is that self-reflexive actors experience pride when their autobiographical narratives are more stable, coherent, and consistent, but shame when narratives are fraught with internal tension or inconsistent with established routines (e.g., Giddens 1991; Steele 2005). Self-reflexivity is central to Giddens' theory of ontological security and constructivist identity theory more generally. Self-reflexive actors are expected to sustain ontological security by continuously revising their autobiographical narratives and concomitant routines "in light of new information or knowledge" (Giddens 1991, 20). Steele even proposes that "materially 'powerful' states … have greater 'reflexive capability', making their decisions less 'deterministic' and constrained" (Steele 2005, 530).

Yet how fair is it to ascribe self-reflexivity to a state? While some OSS scholars intimate that states should be treated as akin to persons (Mitzen 2006), others focus on how they are represented by leaders who act on their behalf (Steele 2005) or contribute to their citizens' ontological security (Krolikowski 2008). A more fundamental critique is to ask whether a subject can engage in self-reflexive practices autonomously of the narrative power struggles through which it is constituted. The point is that self-reflexive practices may not bring us any closer to "critical knowledge of ourselves" (Button 2016, 268), but could push us further from that goal. Button (2016, 268–69) suggests that what he calls "social reflexivity" might nonetheless be possible. This entails "the organized force of plural political actors who question the fundamental terms by which political self-identity is constituted and defended." Transposed to the inquiry of this article, however, this should involve not only different narratives that compete over how to mediate self-representations of weakness and greatness, but perhaps more importantly critical interrogations of the very desire to be great, and the concomitant fear and shame related to weakness. Such alternative narratives should thus resort to less dialectical modes of self-representation and perhaps acknowledge that the self is "good enough" (Morrison 1989, 63). This is what psychological research calls "authentic pride" (Tracy, Cheng, and Robins 2009, 196).

Existing OSS scholarship in the psychoanalytical, postcolonial, and poststructuralist vein suggests that more "healthy" modes of self-identification and ontological security-seeking might involve crafting narratives that embrace and try to live with ambivalence (Huysmans 1998, 247) and anxiety (Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020), that allow mnemonical pluralism (Mälksoo 2015), that seek to dissolve binaries (Untalan 2020, 48), and that engage in a "radical exercise of doubt" (Eberle 2019, 253), "self-reflexive analysis of the community's own shortcomings" (Browning 2018, 340), and desecuritization practices (Browning and Joenniemi 2017). While narratives of this kind certainly do exist in self-identified great powers and could provide a route to more long-term ontological security, they appear marginal where traits believed to be central to the self's greatness are at stake (Browning 2018).

Interestingly, in the context of this article, Mälksoo (2015, 23) points out that "questioning oneself is often viewed as a sign of weakness by both internal critics and external adversaries—which is perhaps the reason why self-interrogation tends to be suspended." This comes close to describing former US President George W. Bush and some of his close advisors after 9/11: "He [Bush] saw questioning as wavering, doubting as weakness, indicative of a lack of moral clarity. He believed that he and those around him should make decisions and then stick with them—which meant no 'hand-wringing', no skepticism, especially in public" (Schonberg 2009, 165).

I thus interpret the excessive self-consciousness and self-interrogation inside great powers as a sign not of self-reflexivity, but of narcissistic self-absorption and perhaps "pseudo self-insight" (Lasch 2018 [1979], 45). The excessive self-centeredness that defines narcissism is easy to conflate with self-reflexivity, but it would seem more accurate to interpret it as an impaired capacity for the latter (Dimaggio et al. 2008). Existing OSS scholarship has indeed juxtaposed reflexive routines with rigid routines, and the latter are characterized by "rigid or maladaptive basic trust" and an inability to learn (Mitzen 2006, 350). As a psychological defense, narcissism is also incompatible with trusting others (Krizan and Johar 2015), and it prevents learning and emotional growth (Bar-Joseph and McDermott 2017, 29–30). While this article thus agrees that reflexivity should be differentiated from mistrust and a difficulty with learning, the existing research has not contextualized such deficiencies in relation to narcissism, and this article does not believe they are necessarily associated with *rigid* routines.

I argue that narcissism provides a new and important perspective on great power self-identification and ontological security-seeking. Indeed, the way in which self-representations of weakness and greatness intersect in self-identified great powers' autobiographical narratives could be likened to a narcissist's frustrated quest for ontological security. Great powers resemble narcissists in their explicit wish to be treated as "superior, special and unique" (Marissen, Deen, and Franken 2012, 269). Yet they also carry opposing, sometimes more implicit, notions of themselves as "contracted, small, vulnerable, and weak" (Morrison and Stolorow 1997, 63). While this mode of self-identification is full of contradiction and seeming ambivalence, these are not typically traits that narcissists can tolerate (Lasch 2018 [1979], 52). Self-representations of weakness and greatness therefore tend to be projected in an exaggerated and polarizing way, with little moderation or nuance.

Narcissism actually figures in Giddens' (1991, 178) work on ontological security as "one among several other pathologies of the body." He describes it as an obsessive preoccupation with identity—albeit one that "remains frustrated" (Giddens 1991, 170). Existing OSS scholarship in IR has not picked up on this discussion per se, but Chernobrov (2016, 587–88) draws on narcissism to understand why, during a crisis, states sometimes gloss over, or misrecognize, contradictions that challenge an autobiographical narrative premised on superiority. He argues that the desire for

narrative *consistency* is narcissistic but does not address the more fundamental contradiction that drives that narcissistic desire, apart from noting that it is "a celebration of self in response to anxiety" (Chernobrov 2016, 587). This is arguably also why he only treats one type of narrative as consistent with narcissism—what I call a narrative of denial.

In the closely related theorization of recognition, moreover, Lindemann (2010, 5) develops the concept of "narcissistic wounds" to explain why certain events might threaten an inflated "self-image." The concept is similar to that of "chosen trauma" (Volkan 2009, 211) and it can ignite what I call a narrative of insult. However, this is again a restricted perspective, which overlooks how "chosen traumas" narratively intersect with "chosen glories" (Volkan 2009, 211). Hence, while some researchers have made interesting and unique contributions to the IR literature by drawing on narcissism, they have obscured how narcissism is characterized by the uneasy coexistence of self-representations of greatness *and* weakness—or feelings of pride *and* shame.

In this article, I treat narcissism as akin to self-reflexivity in the existing OSS scholarship. Both concepts can be used to make sense of processes in which great powers are narratively imagined, reproduced, and contested. Much like self-reflexivity, narcissism originates from individual psychology and so the question again arises whether it is applicable to states, let alone self-identified great powers. First, it is important to note that narcissism is not *just* an individual-level concept (cf. Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020, 14). In fact, social psychologists have analyzed narcissism as a cultural phenomenon (e.g., Lasch 2018 [1979]; Twenge and Campbell 2009) and collective narcissism in terms of groups nurturing exaggerated beliefs in their own greatness (e.g., de Zavala et al. 2009). Cai and Gries (2013), moreover, note that the group can be a nation. Some political scientists have associated narcissism particularly with "a sense of ethnic superiority or hypernationalism" (Pettman 2010, 487) and the kinds of self-love and self-absorption that arguably characterize US patriotism and nationalism (Stam and Shohat 2007). While this literature again mostly focuses on greatness and superiority, de Zavala et al. (2009, 1024) clarify that inflated beliefs of this kind are "unstable" and "difficult to sustain"— they are "a strategy to protect a weak and threatened ego" (de Zavala et al. 2009, 1025).

Second, and more importantly, while this article considers people and states to be similar in that they have narratively constructed identities, they are also different. For example, territorial borders are narratively constructed rather than pre-social, and territory does not separate states in the same way as bodies separate people. Instead, great powers are understood as spoken and written into existence, and their ontological (in)security as narratively imagined, reproduced, and contested (cf. Epstein 2011, 341–42).

The Narcissistic Mediation of Shame and Pride

As noted above, the existing OSS scholarship assumes that self-reflexive actors experience shame when faced with identity contradictions. According to Giddens (1991, 65), shame corresponds to feelings of "personal insufficiency" when the identity is challenged at its core. Constructivist scholars argue that self-reflexive actors experience shame primarily due to exogenous processes, such as allegations of identity/behavior mismatch, stigmatization, or misrecognition (e.g., Subotic and Zarakol 2013; Adler-Nissen 2014; Gustafsson 2016). Pride is the opposite of shame in Giddens' model (1991) and it signifies stable identity narratives and ontological security.

The shame/pride binary also plays a fundamental role in the study of narcissism. Even though narcissists may seem incapable of shame (Robins, Tracy, and Shaver 2001), psychological research understands shame as the most basic feeling of inferiority that drives the personality disorder. For narcissists, shame is a response to deep-seated fears that the self is flawed. According to Morrison (1989, 48), shame "inevitably involves narcissism." Giddens (1991, 8) similarly suggests that shame has "close affiliations with narcissism."

Shame can undoubtedly be accentuated due to exogenous processes, as described above. Yet, how exactly an actor becomes vulnerable to allegations of weakness depends on how it constructs identity around greatness in the first place. As Lacan writes: the "gaze I encounter is … not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other" (quoted in Solomon 2015, 42). Moreover, research on narcissism emphasizes that narcissistic shame is "chronic," since it "come[s] from within" (de Zavala et al. 2009, 1091). Narcissists are thus particularly likely to become entrapped in a "psychotic spiral" where they project or imagine that "the danger they feel inside themselves (anxiety, panic, confusion, doubts) is coming from the *outside*, so that they can escape or destroy it" (Malkin 2017, 62, emphasis in original).

Scholars consider shame to be particularly pronounced in "vulnerable" narcissists (e.g., Freis et al. 2015). Some have objected to the notion that another form of narcissism, termed "grandiose," involves shame, allegedly because self-assessments show that these "narcissists see themselves as fundamentally superior" (Twenge and Campbell 2009, 19). However, other psychiatrists and psychoanalysts argue that grandiose narcissism is instigated by and compensates for excessive feelings of shame (e.g., Morrison 1989; Robins, Tracy, and Shaver 2001; Post 2015). Since narcissists have a deficient capacity for self-reflexivity and cannot be expected to understand what drives their desire to be great, it is perhaps unsurprising that shame leaves few traces in self-assessments. Indeed, the grandiose variant of narcissism is epitomized by an overdeveloped self-love, or a "sense of pride in oneself and one's accomplishments" (Giddens 1991, 68). Yet, even if narcissists identify as special, entitled, and unique, it again seems reasonable to conceptualize "hubristic pride" as a means for suppressing strong shame (Tracy, Cheng, and Robins 2009).

Feelings of both shame and pride define narcissism, and, I contend, great power self-identification and ontological security-seeking. However, shame and pride—and their associated self-representations of weakness and greatness—do not intersect in exactly the same way in all great power narratives. This article proposes four narrative forms as ideal types on a spectrum of different modes of ontological security-seeking: shame, pride, denial, and insult. All four narrative forms are preoccupied with the question of whether the self is weak or great—an obsession that is arguably located at the most institutionalized narrative layer of great power self-identification and ontological security-seeking. The "wider cultural-affective milieu" (Solomon 2018, 936) in which great powers (and states more generally) emerge as subjects is distinctly modern, state-centric, and Westphalian. This means that great powers in the making are bound not only to seek certain markers of prominence and outside recognition (Ward 2019, 213), but also to develop persistent fears of weakness as they aspire to greatness. They are thus inclined to construct and disseminate autobiographical narratives focused on "status preservation, pride, and recognition" (Untalan 2020, 43)—rather than ones characterized by "authentic pride," as discussed above. Meanwhile, narratives that take the four forms compete, and sometimes

collaborate, in pinpointing the relationship between pride and shame, and the exact object of each emotion. This, then, is testament to the politics of identity and difference that takes place in less institutionalized narrative layers, in attempts to secure the ontology as a great power. One narrative is dominant if it is reproduced more uncritically than others, and a critical mass of social actors are emotionally tied to it and consider it "common sense" (Solomon 2015).

The narrative forms are cast here as three emotions (shame, pride, and insult) and one defense mechanism for keeping difficult and pressing feelings at bay (denial). Emotions occupy a central place in the study of narcissism (Robins, Tracy, and Shaver 2001). Literatures in and beyond IR, moreover, argue that representation in widely circulated narratives is key to how emotions become collectively shared and collective sentiments develop. Narratives that emotionally resonate with audiences are more likely to be widely diffused (e.g., Hutchison and Bleiker 2014; Hall and Ross 2015). The analysis of great power self-identification and ontological security-seeking through a focus on narrative, moreover, is consistent not only with existing OSS scholarship, but also with narrative psychology (Polkinghorne 1991).

Constructivist and poststructuralist scholarship emphasizes that narratives, and discourses more generally, enable and constrain (but do not determine) behavior/policy, or that the two are co-constituted. The argument is that dominant narratives delineate a "range of imaginable conduct" and make some policies politically possible and others politically impossible (Doty 1993, 299). Narratives typically do so by culminating in a lesson or a "moral to the story" (Jones and McBeth 2010, 329). For the purpose of this article, I simply assume that whether great powers perform one action over another depends on the relative dominance of various autobiographical narratives, which surprisingly often mediate complex feelings of shame and pride around weakness and greatness.

The Four Narrative Forms

How to recognize the four narrative forms? Following the existing OSS scholarship, the focus is on *autobiographical* narratives. Such narratives do not necessarily appear in full in a single text but can emerge as broader societal—or *grand*—narratives. Moreover, great powers are spoken and written into existence, and this process is not limited to "the state" and its direct representatives (Epstein 2011, 341). A range of actors is likely to craft competing narratives, some of which become dominant. Moreover, while each narrative form is associated with distinct courses of action, such practices only make sense through their intertwinement with the narratives that legitimize and enable them.

When feelings of shame and pride are mediated in a *narrative of shame*, there is emphasis on the fear of weakness and the shame it elicits, but the greatness to which the self feels entitled remains an important undercurrent. Moreover, fear and shame related to weakness are expressed in a way that is exaggerated and hyperbolic rather than measured and self-reflexive. While self-identified great powers are expected to desire *generalized* greatness, fear and shame related to weakness primarily target traits that are deemed central to their identity construction. This might involve traditional markers of great powerness, such as military, economic, and technological/industrial prowess. An aging population can also be narratively constructed as an object of shame. Indeed, narcissists are said to be "terrified of aging" (Lasch 2018[1979], 5). As such, a narrative of shame is more consistent with vulnerable narcissism and its "sensitivity to shaming" (Besser and Priel 2010, 874). A narrative of shame seeks to offset fear and shame related to weakness by advocating concrete policies premised on self-restoration or self-betterment, and the mobilization of resources through which the threatened/desired greatness can be approximated, e.g., militarization, industrialization, as well as various economic, technological, and social reforms. Fear and shame related to weakness, moreover, tend to be projected alongside continuous expressions of entitlement and the boosting of important (albeit partial) successes. As Ahmed (2014, 15) argues, "Shame … can construct a collective ideal even when it announces the failure of that ideal to be translated into action." These then become the grounds for a narrative of "national recovery" (Ahmed 2014, 109).

Pride is more explicit and shame more implicit in a *narrative of pride*, which makes it resemble grandiose narcissism and its associated arrogance (Besser and Priel 2010, 875). Yet, as Neumann (2015, 5) notes in the case of Russia: "When people shout about their status, one immediately knows that that status is insecure, for people who are secure in their status do not have to shout about it." Hence, a narrative of pride seeks to offset fear and shame related to weakness by stressing how positively exceptional the self is. The goal, again, is to excel in traditional areas of great powerness, but a narrative of pride can also be compensatory by singling out traits other than those inherent in the threatened sense of greatness. For example, in states consumed with self-doubt, it has been common in recent years to stress how "soft power" can help compensate for the perceived loss of tangible power resources—and, indeed, even to declare that "soft power" is an updated, more accurate marker of great power status than "strength in war" (Nye 1990, 154). In the case of Russia, for instance, an identity premised on soft power was described in the 1990s as a "shortcut to greatness" (Larson and Schevchenko 2003, 78). Todd (2003, 121–22), moreover, analyzes talk of US "social and cultural hegemony" precisely as a sign of "its ever expanding narcissism," in the face of "the dramatic decline of America's real economic and military power." Similarly, Iwabuchi (2002, 447) describes the Japanese wish to disseminate its popular culture globally as a sign of its "'soft' narcissism."

A *narrative of denial* not only reproduces self-representations of greatness but does so while explicitly rejecting the notion of a weak self as utterly incomprehensible and unthinkable. As such, a narrative of denial is closely related to a narrative of pride and grandiose narcissism. A case in point is the statement by Jon Huntsman, who as a candidate for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination claimed that warnings about US decline were "simply 'un-American'" (Layne 2012, 21). Psychologists interpret narcissistic denial as a defense mechanism for suppressing negative feelings, especially painful shame about aspects that do not fit the ideal of a grandiose self (e.g., Morrison 1989; Robins, Tracy, and Shaver 2001; Tracy, Cheng, and Robins 2009). In this vein, a narrative of denial serves to "disavow or to disclaim awareness, knowledge, or responsibility for faults that might otherwise attach to them" (Brown 1997, 646). Of course, to reject outright even the possibility of being weak ironically confirms that weakness is the object of certain fears and shame. Lupovici (2012, 818)—one of the few IR scholars to have explored denial, or what he calls "avoidance"—observes that it enables the rejection of new information, the reinterpretation of events, and the creation of ambiguities. Denial is said to help an actor to avoid "annihilation." Steele (2008, 65) has also touched on the possibility that actors might wish to avoid sources of shame:

"we cover it up, we obfuscate, we rewrite texts, we discipline with talking points." This basically describes denial but, since narcissism has no place in Steele's understanding of ontological (in)security, he does not conceptualize it separately from shame. Since the fear and shame related to weakness is only implicit in a narrative of denial, it does not translate into a distinct policy agenda, other than one premised on correcting the misunderstanding that the self is weak.

When the fear of weakness becomes so persistent that it cannot be verbally denied or offset through a range of reforms, and the implicit feelings of abysmal shame at the core of narcissism threaten to annihilate the self, self-representations of weakness and greatness, and their associated feelings of shame and pride, are likely to be mediated in a *narrative of insult*. A narrative of insult thus treats fear and shame related to weakness as akin to an offense, which must be actively rejected through a host of actions intended to prove beyond reasonable doubt that the self is great. Steiner (2006, 939) writes of his narcissistic patients that they "feel humiliated when they feel small, dependent and looked down on." Narcissists are so emotionally attached to the belief in their own greatness that they tend to enter into "ego-defense" mode if they think there is an urgent need to protect this belief (Brown 1997, 647). While it is not only diagnosed narcissists who react to instances of misrecognition with feelings of insult, the perceived need to safeguard identity in this way can nonetheless be interpreted as *narcissistic*. Previous IR scholarship has demonstrated that when leaders believe that their national identity is inadequately recognized by others, feelings of insult can erupt and legitimize aggression (e.g., Lindemann 2010). Research in social psychology verifies the link in the case of collective narcissism (de Zavala et al. 2009). Psychological research finds that the connection between narcissism, feelings of insult, and acts of aggression or revenge toward the perceived source of the insult is particularly strong in vulnerable narcissists (Freis et al. 2015; Krizan and Johar 2015; Maciantowicz and Zajenkowski 2020). Yet, when faced with particularly persistent and public threats to the self, grandiose narcissists can also resort to anger and aggression (Bushman and Baumeister 1998). Transposed to the inquiry of this article, I thus assume that narratives of shame, pride, and denial can all transform into a narrative of insult, although such a transformation is arguably more likely in the case of a narrative of shame. Ultimately, to repudiate widespread fears of weakness and concomitant shame, the state acts like a great power—often by embarking on military adventures. Moreover, if an identity premised on greatness is seen as actively undermined by people who should be part of the self, domestic repression can also follow as "traitors" are separated from "patriots" (Hagström 2020; Hagström and Pan 2020). Acts of violence against domestic and foreign enemies alike thus seek to substantiate that an identity premised on generalized greatness is in no way threatened.

To exemplify, Russian leaders have repeatedly stressed in recent decades that the West is trying to undermine or weaken Russia and is not taking it seriously. They have repulsed these attempts by juxtaposing weakness and greatness in a narrative of insult (Neumann 2017). Nowhere was this clearer than in President Vladimir Putin's speech immediately following Russia's annexation of Crimea: "They [the West] are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner … And with Ukraine, our Western partners have crossed the line, playing the bear and acting irresponsibly and unprofessionally." He went on: "Russia found itself in a position it could not retreat from. If you compress the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard" (Putin 2014). Months before the annexation, moreover, Putin (2013) warned: "No one should entertain any illusions about achieving military superiority over Russia; we will never allow it." Meanwhile, Russian official statements "described political opposition and western non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as a 'fifth column'" (Chernobrov 2019, 352).

Finally, irrespective of form, no narrative can permanently brush off fear and shame related to weakness, and an identity premised on greatness will therefore always be incomplete and threatened. Drawing on Lacan, Solomon explains that the experience of having a "full" identity is inevitably "momentary" and "fleeting": "The joyous relief of a war triumph subsides, the elation of a sports victory quickly settles, and lack is felt again" (Solomon 2015, 49). While this Lacanian insight may be valid for all identity constructions, narcissists fit the description perfectly. As Post (2015, 75) writes: "No matter how positive the response [from others], they [narcissists] cannot be satisfied but continue seeking new audiences from whom to elicit the attention and recognition they crave."

Narcissistic Ontological Security-Seeking in Practice

This section undertakes illustrative case study analysis of how and with what implications political leaders in the United States and China have narrated their respective state's weakness and greatness, with a focus on the period 2006–2020. The two states are not only self-identified great powers, but also widely recognized as such. Nonetheless, materialist theories have quite different expectations of a "declining" United States and a "rising" China (Chan 2008). Within-case comparison in the United States is also illustrative, as the Trump era might intuitively seem more associated with narcissistic narratives than previous presidencies, particularly that of Barack Obama.

The material consists of major policy speeches: thirty-four speeches by US leaders and fifty-seven by Chinese ones. In each case, the time span allowed for some variation in who the leaders/speakers were. In the following, I analyze narratives about weakness and greatness by briefly addressing how leaders constructed meaning around what was happening, how and why it was happening, who the protagonists were, and what needed to be done in light of the above (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019). I have used relevant secondary sources to contextualize the findings.

The United States of America

Speeches by US presidents in 2006–2020 were permeated by US exceptionalism or narratives of pride in US greatness. Exceptionalism, defined as the idea that a country is "unique, superior, and even God-favored" (Gilmore 2015, 302), is believed to be particularly prevalent in the United States. In Trump's narrative, for instance, "America is strong, America is proud, and America is free" (Trump 2017)—it is "by far, the world's most powerful nation" (Trump 2019). In 2020, moreover, Trump claimed to "have shattered the mentality of American decline" and "rejected the downsizing of America's destiny" so that "pride is restored." He went on to boast that "our economy is the best it has ever been" and "[o]ur military is completely rebuilt, with its power being unmatched anywhere in the world" (Trump 2020).

Trump and Obama are sometimes contrasted as two of the most dissimilar US presidents. Some Republicans even criticized Obama for his alleged lack of exceptionalism (Gilmore, Sheets, and Rowling 2016, 304–5). Nonetheless,

there was intriguing continuity in how the two presidents constructed narratives of pride in US greatness. For example, Obama said: "The United States of America is the most powerful nation on Earth. Period" (Obama 2016a). Much like Trump, he derived US strength from its military and economy: "Our troops are the finest fighting force in the history of the world. No nation dares to attack us or our allies because they know that's the path to ruin." Moreover, "the United States of America … has the strongest, most durable economy in the world" (Obama 2016a). Consequently, "if the playing field is level, I promise you, America will always win" (Obama 2012). In his speeches in 2006–2008, George W. Bush also designated the United States "the most powerful nation on Earth and a beacon of hope for millions" (Bush 2008), expressing confidence in the "skill and spirit of our military" and establishing that the "American economy is preeminent" (Bush 2006).

Pride in military and economic greatness is arguably located at a highly institutionalized layer of US identity construction and ontological security-seeking (Gilmore 2015, 305). This makes the US resemble a grandiose, rather than a vulnerable, narcissist. In Obama's narrative, but not Trump's, the United States was great also because of its democracy, rule of law, optimism, and willingness to "think beyond narrow self-interest" (Obama 2016b). These qualities were construed as making the United States a popular partner and trusted leader: "Surveys show our standing around the world is higher than when I was elected to this office, and when it comes to every important international issue, people of the world do not look to Beijing or Moscow to lead—they call us" (Obama 2016a).

While Trump began to promote a narrative of pride as president, his 2016 presidential campaign was underpinned more by narratives of shame and insult, revolving around US loss of greatness, and targeting the people and states seen as responsible, but also a strong sense of entitlement reflected in the promise to "Make America Great Again" (McMillan 2017). After becoming president, Trump continued to craft narratives of shame targeting less central features of US greatness, such as its "crumbling infrastructure," which "it is … time to rebuild," and "outdated immigration rules," which it "is time to reform" (Trump 2018a). Obama (2012) also discussed the need to rebuild US infrastructure, saying in 2012: "So much of America needs to be rebuilt." Unlike Trump, he also talked about deepening inequality—a trend he pledged "to reverse" (Obama 2014).

Narratives of shame also permeate recent commentary on US power. They lament "the end" of the American century and prescribe a set of policies for restoring US pre-eminence (Acharya 2014, 32). However, also in line with grandiose narcissism, US presidents have tended to place such fear and shame related to weakness in a narrative of denial. In a classic example, Bush (2006) said: "we must never give in to the belief that America is in decline, or that our culture is doomed to unravel." Obama (2012) made several similar remarks: "anyone who tells you that America is in decline or that our influence has waned, doesn't know what they're talking about." A narrative of denial is arguably prominent in debates on US power (Acharya 2014, 1) and inherent in US exceptionalism: while "other nations and indeed empires have risen to power only to fall, the US will _not_—it will resist this law of history" (Restad 2019/20, 67, emphasis in original).

The only acknowledged threat to US greatness is China's rise—particularly its "unfair" trade policy. Several speeches by Trump and Obama attested to the fact that this threat was seen as particularly persistent and dangerous. Obama

(2015), for example, concluded: "We should level the playing field". Trump, moreover, said: "We will no longer tolerate such abuse. We will not allow our workers to be victimized, our companies to be cheated, and our wealth to be plundered and transferred. America will never apologize for protecting its citizens" (Trump 2018b). This resembles more a narrative of insult, and in Trump's case it was intertwined with and legitimized the imposition of US tariffs on Chinese products in 2018, setting off a "trade war." The debate about how to handle relations with China draws on a more institutionalized narrative, according to which any conciliatory gesture vis-à-vis China is seen as "appeasement" and "showing signs of weakness" (Pan 2012, 94).

Even more aggressive measures could have been taken, however, given that US collective narcissism has been represented as "armed and dangerous" (Stam and Shohat 2007, 61). A case in point is the response to 9/11—which was a particularly public threat to the US self. Some observers explained the attack as "the product of two decades of American weakness … we came to be seen as a 'weak horse'" (Croft 2006, 99). President Bush, however, flatly refuted the notion of US weakness: "Our enemies believed America was weak and materialistic, that we would splinter in fear and selfishness. They were as wrong as they are evil" (Bush 2002). Hence, the "War on Terror" and the invasion of Iraq might be interpreted as measures not just to defeat indistinct enemies, but more importantly to establish beyond reasonable doubt that US identity was premised on greatness. Meanwhile, prominent figures in the Bush administration believed that diplomacy was "indicative of weakness" and equated it with "appeasement" (Schonberg 2009, 234). This is arguably why states that did not unequivocally support the wars were met with suspicion and bitterness (Croft 2006, 189–90) and why dissenting views within the United States were demonized as anti-American and as "giving comfort to America's enemies" (Hutcheson et al. 2004, 47).

The People's Republic of China

In their speeches in 2006–2020, Chinese leaders reproduced narratives of pride in China's greatness, revolving significantly around "the glories of Chinese civilization" (Hu 2008). For example, President Xi Jinping stated: "The Chinese people are great people, the Chinese nation is a great nation, and Chinese civilization is a great civilization" (Xi 2019; see also Callahan 2010; Schneider 2018). Another narrative of pride revolved around China's economic development over the past forty years or more, through which China has been transformed "from a closed, backward and poor country with a weak foundation" (Wang 2019). Speeches detailed achievements of all kinds and portrayed them as a "miracle" (Wang 2019), as bringing "infinite pride to every son and daughter of the Chinese nation" and as "the marvel of the world" (Xi 2019).

However, the latter narrative in particular is not easily disentangled from one of shame, which instills the notion that "national rejuvenation" is incomplete and remains partly a dream—as in Xi's "Chinese Dream" slogan from 2012 to 2013. Underlying the agenda of "national renewal" is a highly institutionalized narrative of "national humiliation," according to which China was victimized at the hands of colonial powers in the ninetieth and twentieth centuries (Deng 2008, 4; Callahan 2010, 14). In Xi's (2017b) words, China was "an abyss of poverty and weakness." Hutchison (2016, 226) notes also that shame intertwines with pride so that victimization and suffering serve as a "badge of honor" for the Chinese people.

Leaders have thus continued to stress that China is a "developing country" (Xi 2020c), where development is "unbalanced and inadequate" (Xi 2017c), and which faces severe social, legal, ethical, and security problems. The notion that China remains inferior or backward in comparison to the West, in particular, motivates continued "domestic reforms to overcome China's weaknesses in the political, social, economic, technological, and military arenas" (Deng 2008, 66). Moreover, some of China's achievements—notably, its hosting of mega events—have been narrated as "a way of curing China's national weakness" (Callahan 2010, 8) and crafting "its image as a strong nation" (Pu 2017, 145). Meanwhile, speeches by senior leaders have displayed a clear sense of entitlement: Although China's international status is yet to be fully restored, the country will eventually be in a position to advance "the noble cause of peace and development for humanity" (Xi 2019). Since becoming president in 2013, Xi has narrated the Belt and Road Initiative as just such an initiative (Xi 2018).

Since a narrative of shame is strong in China, the country resembles a vulnerable narcissist more than a grandiose one. In that sense, Chinese leaders would also be more prone to craft a narrative of insult should they perceive a lack of outside recognition for the country's various achievements. A narrative of insult has indeed been activated particularly around Western attempts to obstruct China's rise and when suffering and humiliation are depicted as the negative consequences of Western and Japanese colonialism and imperialism. The slogan "the backward will be beaten" carries the lesson not only that China must continue to pursue self-betterment in all areas, *but also* that it must remain vigilant regarding the intentions and actions of external powers that take every opportunity to weaken China (Wang 2020). Similarly, narratives on the need to "cleanse" humiliation legitimize militarization and military buildup *and* underpin calls for revenge (Callahan 2010, 198–205). Shambaugh (2011, 12) notes that many Chinese realists have strong grievances regarding "China's long period of weakness and believe that now that China is strong, it should retaliate" against those states that kept China in a subordinate position. Speeches by senior leaders feature narratives of insult revolving primarily around Hong Kong, Taiwan, and some sensitive aspects of relations with Japan and the United States (e.g., Xi 2017a). These narratives have yet to intertwine with foreign aggression, but some have involved the threat of force and/or legitimized domestic repression and violence against those construed as traitors for weakening China.

From the start, Xi has portrayed reunification with Taiwan as the most important step toward overcoming China's past weakness and achieving the greatness it is entitled to: "The Taiwan question originated from national weakness and disorder, and will definitely end with national rejuvenation" (*New China* 2019). He continued: "We make no promise to renounce the use of force and reserve the option of taking all necessary means. This does not target compatriots in Taiwan, but the interference of external forces and the very small number of 'Taiwan independence' separatists and their activities" (*New China* 2019).

The relationship with Japan has also often been the object of narratives of insult. A case in point is the Sino-Japanese territorial dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, especially Japan's nationalization of three islands in 2012. A Chinese statement at the time noted: "Long gone are the days when the Chinese nation was subject to bullying and humiliation from others. The Chinese government will not sit idly by watching its territorial sovereignty being infringed upon" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2012). While armed conflict did not break out on that occasion, Chinese vessels increased their presence in the disputed area. In addition, nationwide protests erupted within China and Japanese-run factories were targeted and attacked along with anything and anyone displaying even the smallest and vaguest association with Japan. For example, a Chinese national received serious head injuries during a riot for driving a Japanese car (Schneider 2018; Hagström and Pan 2020).

On a more general note, Suzuki (2014, 645) finds that slightly contradictory consensuses have emerged among Chinese analysts: China should avoid "getting embroiled in major wars with other great powers," on the one hand, while beginning to "act as a 'great power'," on the other. At the very least, China's performance in the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1937–1945) and the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea (Korean War) (1950–1953) have often been construed as helping to wash away humiliation, falsify the notion that China was "the sick man of East Asia," and demonstrate "the position of new China as a great nation" (Xi 2020b; see also Xi 2020a). The implication is that war can be seen as a feasible strategy for refuting the notion that China is weak and for restoring China's greatness.

Conclusions

This article departs from the observation that self-representations of weakness coexist with self-representations of greatness in competing identity narratives in several great powers. It argues that this is puzzling for OSS scholarship, which assumes that state identities emerge through stabilizing narratives that strive for consistency and coherence. The article contributes by theorizing why, how, and with what implications self-representations of weakness and greatness intersect in great power narratives. First, it argues that, while seemingly contradictory, self-representations of weakness and greatness are co-constituted. Second, the article revisits a neglected discussion in Giddens (1991) to contend that the intersecting of these self-representations and their associated feelings of shame and pride are evidence of narcissism rather than self-reflexivity. Third, drawing on psychological research on narcissism, the article contributes by developing the narrative forms of shame, pride, denial, and insult, through which seemingly conflicting self-representations and complex feelings are mediated with different implications for great power action. Regardless of which narrative form predominates, however, the fear of weakness is only temporarily dealt with and cannot be completely overcome.

The article illustrates the relevance of this theorization by analyzing the speeches of political leaders in the United States and China in 2006–2020. The extent to which these speeches mediate notions of each respective great power self's greatness *and* weakness is striking. There are also clear narrative tendencies in each state that transcend individual leaders/speakers. In the United States, narratives of pride in US greatness predominate, but narratives of denial and insult have also been reproduced in attempts to eliminate feelings of fear and shame related to weakness and restore feelings of pride in greatness. While these narrative tendencies make the United States resemble a grandiose narcissist, Chinese leaders narrate more in line with vulnerable narcissism. Hence, while they tell a narrative of pride in China's rise, this is almost inseparable from narratives of shame and insult related to national humiliation. The lesson is that China must continue to strive for self-betterment (shame) while also remaining vigilant against foreign powers that might seek to weaken it again (insult). Narratives

of insult are most consequential for international politics in the sense that they can be a harbinger of aggression and conflict. However, they can also enable and motivate domestic repression, as occurred in China after Japan's nationalization of disputed territory in 2012 and in the United States after 9/11.

Great powers are unique in the sense that their identity construction is premised on *generalized* greatness. However, self-representations of weakness and greatness seem to intersect in the autobiographical narratives of smaller states too, albeit around more isolated traits that are central to their self-identification and ontological security-seeking. For example, the Finnish sense of greatness—being a "sports superpower" (Laine 2006, 69) and an honest skiing nation—was threatened by a doping scandal in 2001. Fear of weakness and concomitant shame activated, and were activated by, widespread feelings of inferiority vis-à-vis other European states. These were mediated in a narrative of shame and legitimized measures intended to resurrect the erstwhile identity (Laine 2006). Moreover, narratives about how different states have handled the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have resorted to similar narcissistic identity construction and ontological security-seeking. Hence, they have tended to vacillate between euphoric assertions that the state has handled COVID-19 very well—perhaps the best in the world—and gloomy characterizations of total failure. While narcissistic identity construction and ontological security-seeking may not be limited to self-identified great powers, future research will have to theorize how the self-identification and ontological security-seeking of smaller states differ from those of great powers. For instance, a narrative of insult may not be as tied up with belligerence in smaller states, since war-making is not as deeply ingrained in their identity construction and they typically have less military capability at their disposal.

Future research also needs to theorize with greater precision why certain narrative forms come to dominate public discourse, how they legitimize one action rather than another, and also how narrative forms mutate. It should continue to theorize why and how different narcissistic narratives become consequential in international politics. We have established that both vulnerable and grandiose narcissists can embark on aggression when they feel insulted. While the two forms of narcissism are not fully distinct, future IR research should try to disentangle whether and how the two pathways differ in the context of international politics, either through a deeper engagement with narcissism theory or inductively by conducting more thorough empirical analysis.

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