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Research article

The ‘Geographical Here’ and the Pursuit of Ontological Security: Spheres of Influence Narratives and Great Power Identity in Times of Threatened Status

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Abstract

This article explains why self-identified great powers seek to provide a ‘sphere of influence meaning’ to geographical space when such narratives have the potential to insult the smaller actors in the space over which such powers seek exclusive influence. The article draws and expands on the ‘physical turn’ in ontological security studies by introducing the notion of a ‘geographical here’ as key to a great power that perceives its status as threatened. The argument is illustrated through a comparative analysis of three US presidential administrations. The article analyses (i) how the US’ status is perceived and narrated, and (ii) what meaning officials assign to the ‘geographical here’.

Keywords: spheres of influence, ontological security, narratives, great power rivalry, US foreign policy

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Introduction

Giving geographical space political meaning is unavoidable in international politics, and it is foundational for how events in the world unfold. Doing so can also be utilised as a tool of foreign policy (Ó Tuathail 1996; Pamment 2014) and has real-world effects. It is therefore puzzling when powerful and ambitious actors voluntarily resort to publicly ascribing meaning to geographical space in a way that could work against their 'best interest' insofar as the maximisation of benefits is concerned. This is particularly palpable when a powerful actor assigns an adjacent geographical space the meaning of a 'sphere of influence'. The notion – and the literal concept – is widely considered pejorative (Hast 2014: 1–6) and it is easy to see how it is insulting for a smaller state to be put in a great power's 'sphere' and have its self-determination called into question.

From this perspective, a 'rational' and 'influence-maximising' approach would be to reject that one's power is malign or threatening. China's leader Xi Jinping, for example, stated that the People's Republic of China would never seek 'hegemony' or a 'sphere of influence' during a visit to Vanuatu (Xi Jinping 2021). This is a recurring theme when Chinese officials comment on China's regional power. Arguably, the most effective power resides in the shadows and is not experienced as coercive or intrusive (Barnett & Duvall 2005: 55). Xi's remarks allow smaller Pacific nations to maintain their pride and, combined with economic means, increase Chinese influence in the South Pacific. However, not all great powers follow this example. For instance, Russian political figures such as Vladimir Putin and Dimitri Medvedev frequently express the opinion that Russia has exclusive rights and privileges in its vicinity, or the 'Russian world' (*russkii mir*), and have acted on this by putting it into law and invading neighbouring states (Suslov 2018: 333; Ó Loughlin et al. 2016: 746–753). Moreover, representatives of France have for many decades said how France's former colonies in West Africa represent a sphere of influence (*Françafrique*, or France's *pré carré*) (Bovcon 2013; Recchia 2020: 513). Such a public formulation of great power mentality, or arrogance, has prompted fierce anti-Russian or anti-French sentiment in the countries located in these respective 'spheres'.

Insulting smaller states by assuming the role of a hegemon in a self-proclaimed sphere of influence can also benefit a great power's adversary. Arguably, one of the most puzzling cases is how various presidential administrations in the United States have characterised their relationship with Latin America. An article in *Foreign Affairs* makes the argument that the Trump administration's arrogant and even aggressive rhetoric towards Latin America, invoking the Monroe Doctrine (on the US sphere of influence in Latin America, see below), has driven the region into the arms of China (Stuenkel 2020). Similarly, a reference to the controversial doctrine by former presidential candidate Ron DeSantis during his campaign prompted assessments that 'it wouldn't be wise to brand any stepped-up en-

gagement under the umbrella of the Monroe Doctrine. For Latin Americans, the dogma conjures up . . . a grim century of coups, invasions and protectorates that still rankle to this day' (Mirski 2023). This can be verified by Latin American leaders' recent statements in relation to the United States and China (see e.g. Gabriel Boric, quoted in Weymouth 2023), and how the US narratives are used extensively in Chinese and Russian propaganda and disinformation (see e.g. Sheng 2023; People's Daily 2023; Sputnik News 2019). Indeed, upon analysing the op-eds and statements made by Russian ambassadors in various Latin American capital cities, one can see that neo-colonialism, anti-Americanism and the Monroe Doctrine are among the major subjects (Digital Forensic Lab 2024).

It is not difficult to see why the doctrine is controversial and why it is used by Russia and China in their strategic narratives, especially given how leading US politicians refer to it themselves. Hast writes that the Monroe Doctrine marked 'the beginning of a division of the world into spheres of influence, even a new world order' (Hast 2014: 40). As a measure to formalise US hegemony in Latin America, President James Monroe and Secretary of State John Quincy Adams introduced the Monroe Doctrine in 1823. As James Pamment tells us: 'The Doctrine defined the American sphere of influence as the entire New World. Monroe boldly asserted that the European powers no longer had the right to colonial activity in the Americas' (Pamment 2014: 52). Originally conceived as a defensive doctrine, 'over the nineteenth century, it became "expansionist as well as exclusionist" and was used to justify American interventionism and imperialism' (Murray 2019: 147; Crandall 2006). Using the doctrine as a pretext, the United States intervened and meddled in Latin American nations countless times from the late nineteenth century and throughout the Cold War, with a brief intermission in the 1930s and 1940s (Guerrant 1950: 1–3; Crandall 2006: 15–18). Although some welcomed these interventions, they also generated trauma and indignation. Possibly the most emblematic expression of anti-Americanism in Latin America occurred during then-Vice President Richard M. Nixon's visit to Venezuela. In Caracas, Nixon's motorcade was attacked by an angry mob. To quote McPherson: 'These groups [a mixture of students, peasants, and 'unemployed dwellers'], also, had accumulated a vast repertoire of anti-U.S. imagery over decades – the predatory eagle, the omnipresent octopus, greedy Wall Street tycoons, the impersonal boots of U.S. Marines, and so on' (McPherson 2003: 10). The US has employed different tools other than a 'sphere of influence-policies' to construct a regional order; but it is the interventions and covert operations that in many ways stick out in the collective Latin American memory. With this in mind, it might be expected that a 'rational actor' would avoid invoking these painful memories, as doing so might provide its adversaries with ammunition for their strategic narratives and greater sympathy in the region. Derived from this research problem, this article sets out to answer the question: Why do great powers narratively construct an

adjacent geographical space as a sphere of influence when such narratives might benefit their adversaries and undermine their ability to practice influence in that geographical space?

The geopolitical realist international relations (IR) literature tends to view spheres of influence as 'natural' either through geographical determinism or the possession of power capabilities. However, whether states seek to establish spheres of influence because of a concern for security (Jackson 2020: 258; Mearsheimer 2014: 82), or to maximise their international influence (Gilpin 1981: 24) remains disputed. It appears, however, that characterising neighbouring small states in terms of a sphere of influence can generate undesirable effects, benefit an adversary and thus reduce the physical security of the great power. At the same time, the liberal literature notes how spheres of influence are incompatible with the liberal international order (Ikenberry 2011: 18), and that these spheres largely disappeared with the end of the Cold War (Allison 2020: 30). However, a superficial analysis of world politics since the Cold War reveals that such a notion is oversimplified. Great powers have expressed positive views on spheres of influence during this time, not least the United States under the Trump administration. Conversely, constructivists posit spheres of influence as intersubjective products, socially constructed through language and/or practices. This intersubjectivity can be either between the great power and those influenced (sharing an identity) or between the great powers themselves (Jackson 2020: 261–263), 'agreeing' on the centrality of a sphere of influence to being a great power (Murray 2019: 63–64). In other words, the sphere of influence is central to the idea of great power identity. States that wish to be perceived as great powers set out to create such spheres through either rhetoric or practice (Recchia 2020: 513; Zala 2020: 213). Simply acknowledging that a sphere of influence is part of a great power identity, however, is not sufficient when seeking an explanation to the puzzle as a reduction in the great power's influence would *threaten* the sought-after great power identity that prompted the narrative construction of a region as a sphere of influence.

To address the puzzle, this article turns to ontological security studies (OSS) and the assumption that actors pursue a sense of stability in relation to their identity, or their 'Self'. It draws inspiration from the established contradiction that the pursuit of ontological security can interfere with an actor's pursuit of physical security (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008). Some scholars in the OSS literature suggest that practices may contribute to the formation of a stable identity (Mitzen 2006; Murray 2019), though this perspective might have limited relevance to the research problem addressed in this article. To understand why a state would formulate rhetorical narratives that could undermine its ability to practice influence, we must recognise the importance of autobiographical narratives in the formation of identity and the maintenance of ontological security (Hagström 2021: 333). Based on these premises, I argue that adjacent geographical space can

become *foundational* to great power identity. To conceptualise this, I introduce the term 'geographical here', an abstraction of adjacent geographical space that is endowed with emotional properties. In a context where the status of a great power – implicitly its identity – is perceived as threatened, it responds by providing a 'sphere of influence meaning' to its geographical here. To illustrate this theoretical argument, the article engages with the cases of the United States under three successive administrations: the Obama (2009–2017), Trump (2017–2021) and Biden (2021–) administrations.

In advancing this argument, the article sets out to contribute to three principal strands of literature. First, the article contributes to the literature on ontological security by noting the tension between narratives and practices when pursuing a sense of a stable Self. In devising this research puzzle, the article highlights the paradox that narratives intended to provide ontological security can generate unwanted actions from other (insulted) actors, which can undermine the desired ontological security. It notes that this perpetually reinforced ontological insecurity could escalate beyond the control of actors, creating dangerous situations in international politics reminiscent of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Second, the article contributes to the identity literature in IR by introducing the notion of the geographical here as constitutive of identity alongside the Self/Other dichotomy. Drawing on the 'material turn' in OSS, this article looks beyond the state's 'body' as a source of ontological security by introducing the importance of adjacent geographical space in times where status/identity is narrated as threatened. The third, and possibly most significant, contribution seeks to generate new knowledge in relation to the sphere of influence literature by going beyond the 'usual' observation that spheres of influence are part of a 'great power identity'. Although such a statement has some weight, the article adds more nuance and context *when* the sphere of influence becomes part of great power identity.

A relevant criticism is *why* the article focuses on a liberal great power at a time when the international system faces more urgent threats posed by authoritarian great powers using force in active attempts to incorporate smaller states into their spheres of influence (e.g. the Russian Federation) (see Götz & Staun 2022). This is a fair point, and the study of autocratic states should indeed be taken seriously. Nonetheless, I maintain that serious self-reflection is vital if a relatively rules-based order is to prevail and persevere. It is not sustainable for representatives of a liberal world order to express themselves in a way that directly benefits their adversaries.

The sphere of influence literature: The hows and whys

It is a common observation that the concept of 'spheres of influence' has been neglected in the IR literature (Etzioni 2015: 118; Hast 2014: 1; Zala 2020: 213), lately, however, the concept has received more attention among scholars (see

for example, Allison 2020; Etzioni 2015; Recchia 2020; Weede 2018; Schreer 2019; Sankey 2020; O'Rourke and Shiffrin 2022; Fix 2022). Nonetheless, the concept's properties and theoretical utility remain underexplored and quite vague. This led Filippo Costa Buranelli to call 'spheres of influence' an 'essentially contested concept' (Costa Buranelli 2018: 379).

Several scholars have tried to define the sphere of influence in terms of its 'unique' hierarchical characteristics. Edy Kaufman writes that a sphere of influence is 'a geographical region characterized by the high penetration of one superpower to the exclusion of other powers and particularly of the rival superpower' (Kaufman 1976: 11). Paul Keal offers a definition of a sphere as 'a determinate region within which a single external power exerts a predominant influence, which limits the independence or freedom of action of political entities in it' (Keal 1983: 15). More recently, scholars such as Resnick have defined the concept in a slightly narrower way, as 'the explicit or implicit agreement by one state (the grantor) to allow a rival state (the recipient) to militarily dominate a territory that lies outside both states' borders' (Resnick 2022: 564). Etzioni suggests that the nature of the 'influence' defines a sphere of influence, as it is primarily 'economic' and 'ideational' rather than coercive (Etzioni 2015: 117). What all this means in practice, however, is rather unclear. The problem is aptly summarised by Jackson: 'the logic, mechanisms, and implications [of spheres of influence] . . . can vary significantly depending on key analytical assumptions that derive from divergent theoretical traditions' (Jackson 2020: 256). Recent developments suggest we should view spheres of influence as a 'negotiated hegemony' where there is bargaining between 'the influencer' (the great power) and 'the influenced' (Costa Buranelli 2018). The properties of the concept are murky, and so is its theoretical utility (Jackson 2020: 255; Hast 2014: 78–82).

To scholars of 'geopolitical realism', the sphere of influence appears to be a 'given' of international politics where the strong impose their will on the weak. However, the concept remains elusive in the respective strands of the literature. In the essentialising geopolitical literature, 'spheres of influence are present as circles on a map' (Hast 2014: 80). To quote Hast, 'The geopolitical intention is to discover who will rule the world and how, not to discuss matters of sovereignty, intervention, justice and other themes which relate to the pejorative associations of the present idea of spheres of influence' (ibid.). However, 'there is no comprehensive engagement with the idea or the concept of sphere of influence [in the geopolitical literature], because the imperialist dimension does not capture the originality of the phenomenon' (ibid.).

Similarly, realism largely neglects the concept's theoretical underpinnings and implications. While Morgenthau and Waltz do not mention the concept in their major works, Mearsheimer mentions the role of 'regional hegemons' (Mearsheimer 2001: 40–42, 247–249; Hast 2014: 81), but without explicating 'the relationship between the hegemon and its subordinates' (Hast 2014: 81). Meanwhile, Robert

Gilpin writes that states seek to establish spheres of influence to increase their influence over other states' behaviour (alongside measures such as coercion and threats) (Gilpin 1981: 24). In a similar vein, Stephen M. Walt acknowledges that several great powers had spheres of influence in different places in the world, at different times (Walt 1996: 180). Tacitly, these strands of the literature appear to accept that it is natural for great powers to seek spheres of influence – and, by implication, natural for smaller states to be in these spheres – although the geopolitical literature is more deterministic than its realist counterpart. In realism, the pursuit of spheres of influence is either to maximise power or to maximise security through a defensive 'buffer zone' (Jackson 2020: 258–259; Mearsheimer 2014: 82). The overarching purpose is to become more secure and ensure survival. Nonetheless, despite the fact that it is highly relevant to them, these perspectives do not address the research problem at hand. Narratives should not be considered epiphenomenal if they have an effect on national security. We must therefore, in this case, look beyond the geopolitical and realist literature.

Meanwhile, the liberal literature takes the view that spheres of influence are antiquated and disappeared with the victory of liberalism over communism in the 1990s. As Ikenberry writes, the 'liberal order can be seen as a distinctive type of international order', which 'can be contrasted with closed and non-rules-based relations – whether geopolitical blocs, exclusive regional spheres, or closed imperial systems' (Ikenberry 2011: 18). It is in relation to liberal ideas that spheres of influence are considered 'pejorative' (Hast 2014: 1), because they violate principles such as the self-determination of small states. Regardless, the liberal idea is that spheres of influence are deleterious and incompatible with the system that prevailed following the break-up of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, if they are returning, they are doing so in the hands of revisionist great powers that are seeking to overthrow the unipolar world order. While it is undeniable that autocratic regimes are trying to coerce small states into obedience, it is also obvious that liberal states have a much more complex relationship with spheres of influence than the liberal literature suggests.

There are various examples of leaders of liberal states referring indirectly to their spheres of influence, such as former Prime Minister of Australia Scott Morrison (Chacko 2023: 1; Pearlman 2019: 3–4), and senior US political figures in the 1990s (Madeleine Albright quoted in Sciolino 1994). Graham Allison argues that spheres of influence did not disappear after the Cold War, but were converted into a single US sphere (Allison 2020: 30). Regardless of whether this is an adequate account of the post-Cold War world, there are palpable limitations to the liberal IR literature as it pertains to the sphere of influence debate. Most notably, it argues that spheres of influence go against the ideals of the liberal international order but fail to properly acknowledge actual contemporary arrangements and practice. Nor does it address the research puzzle discussed in this article.

The constructivist literature, lastly, has a more diverse take on spheres of influence. One is that spheres of influence are formed through intersubjective agreements between the more powerful actor and the less powerful state, and concern shared identities (Jackson 2020: 261–262). From this point of view, the sphere of influence appears quite similar to conventional understandings of security communities (see Adler & Barnett 2005). However, this perspective cannot account for spheres of influence where the subject of influence resists or disagrees with ‘the influencer’. Here, a second constructivist perspective explains, in that there is an intersubjective understanding among the great powers, that a sphere of influence is an essential element of seeking great power status. Indeed, several scholars note that spheres of influence are a staple of great power identity (Zala 2020: 213; Recchia 2020: 513; Murray 2019: 63–64). One issue for this article is that most scholars view spheres of influence from a practice point of view. Yet, such an approach does not adequately address the research problem. Narrating a geographical space as a sphere of influence appears to insult the smaller states within that sphere, potentially undermining any sense of great power identity. This is why great powers ‘double speak’ and what Jackson seeks to address by offering a ‘rigorous conceptualisation’ (Jackson 2020: 272). Spheres of influence appear important to great power identity, but this does not resolve the narrative puzzle.

Thus, the question remains: why would a great power narrate geographical space as a sphere of influence if that action undermines the influence practices that are central to great power identity? To make sense of the research problem, it is useful to turn to existing research on ontological security in international politics. However, it is first necessary to develop how great power identity and spheres of influence, geographical space external to the state’s ‘body’, interact. To do so, I introduce the *geographical here*.

‘Self/Other narratives’, the ‘geographical here’ and ontological security

The guiding assumption in ontological security studies (OSS) is that actors – individuals and collectives (states) alike – seek stability in their sense of Self (Hagström 2021: 333; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2005; Kinnvall 2004; Giddens 1991; Laing 1990 [1960]), which informs how these actors operate in the social world. There are two principal strands in OSS: one that emphasises practice as a source of identity stability (see e.g. Mitzen 2006; Murray 2019), and one that emphasises autobiographical narratives as the required vehicle for achieving stability in the sense of Self (Hagström 2021: 333; see also, Berenskoetter 2014; Steele 2008; Ringmar 1996). This article adheres to the latter category, where autobiographical narratives are considered foundational for identity. As Erik Ringmar puts it, ‘when we wonder who we are . . . we tell a story which locates us in the context of a past, a present and a future’ (Ringmar 1996: 451).

The primary theoretical argument of this article is that the actor (in this case, the great power) narrates its geographical vicinity (and its role in it) as a sphere of influence to counter a sensation of ontological insecurity, i.e. anxiety connected to the sense of Self in the world. The sensation of ontological insecurity originates in the narratively constructed notion that the actor's established status – implicitly, their identity – is threatened. In the case of a great power, or even a hegemon, the threat is the rise of a powerful challenger that could displace it. One can understand it as experiencing 'inadequacy in one's own eyes' and/or 'inadequacy in the eyes of others' (von Essen and Danielson 2023: 12–13, 15–16). Thus, to re-assert its identity, it ascribes a 'sphere of influence meaning' to its geographical vicinity in its autobiographical narratives. The great powers do this regardless of the effects it might have on their 'actual influence' over the small states that end up in their sphere.

In making this argument, the article draws heavily on several works within OSS. Based on the assumption that states seek stability in their perception of their own identity, Jennifer Mitzen suggests that a state can become 'attached' to conflicts as they identify against an antagonist (Mitzen 2006: 342). Mitzen's work illustrates that states prioritise a sense of ontological security at the expense of physical security, which in turn is based on the notion that identity is 'co-constituted with difference' (Hagström et al. 2022: 317; see also Campbell 1998). 'Self/Other relations' means that to be able to establish our own identity, we need to know what we *are not*. Consequently, if an actor's identity becomes dependent on a conflictual relationship with an enemy, the conflict itself provides security for the actor's sense of Self.

Although these insights are valuable, they do not address this article's research problem. The question remains: Why do great powers narratively construct an adjacent geographical space as a sphere of influence when such narratives might benefit their adversaries and undermine their ability to practice influence in that geographical space? Such narratives can also rekindle painful collective memories of previous military interventions, or benefit an adversary that in the long run could compromise the state's national security. There should be other ways of reaffirming one's identity. Instead, the projected narratives could undermine the sphere of influence practices that some argue are key to maintaining ontological security (Murray 2019: 63–64; cf. Mitzen 2006). So, how to make use of Mitzen's insights to address this article's research problem? First, we can note that states seem to prioritise ontological security over physical security, which is in line with Mitzen's findings. Second, autobiographical narratives are a source of great power identity, based on the reasoning described above. The practices of influence are negatively affected by narratives that ascribe a sphere of influence meaning to geographical space. Thus, this article takes the position that actors engage in storytelling when ascribing meaning to themselves and the world around them

(Polkinghorne 1988: 1). However, these narratives must be prompted by something since they are a reaction to ontological insecurity. This article argues that a self-perceived great power experiences ontological insecurity when faced with an actor that challenges its status. In response, the great power narrates its adjacent 'geographical here' as a sphere of influence to reassert its status. But to understand why they do so, it is necessary to introduce the concept of the 'geographical here'.

The 'geographical here' concept is an abstraction of geographical space. Rather than an actual location, it is a feeling of proximity and geography. It is a feeling that something is *close* but in an unspecified way. It is malleable, it can be stretched to encompass places such as Panama, Grenada or Venezuela. To provide a short definition, I would suggest that the 'geographical here' is an abstract sense of geographical proximity that heightens (potentially skews) threat perceptions and becomes foundational for great power status. It is a place where the great power can (and possibly 'should') project its power. The 'geographical here' has particular properties, it is often the 'periphery' in a 'core-periphery order' that was emblematic of the previous world order (Flockhart 2024: 475). The geographical here is an extension of the state's body that is *not quite the state* but occupies a key position in relation to a certain state's self-perceived status.

The invention of the concept draws on the observation that 'questions of identity and territory are always deeply entangled' (Toal 2017: 70). This is not a novel view of OSS. Several works make this argument as part of the 'material turn' in ontological security studies (Ejdus 2020; Mitzen 2018). Whereas much of this work stresses the importance of the physical 'body' of the state as another source of ontological (in)security (Krickel-Choi 2022: 165–168; see also Giddens 1991: 55), this article suggests that *adjacent geographical space is also important for ontological security*. One can see this as the 'home' or 'garden' in which 'the body' (the state) is located. For the great power, the physical Self is not complete without a deferring, adjacent geographical space for which it has responsibility. A response to an emerging *Other* that threatens one's status in the international system is to reassert adjacent geographical space as a sphere of influence by invoking old metaphors and doctrines with great power connotations. This suggests that the formation of great power identity is to be found not only in the relationship between Self and Other, but also in geographical space, the 'geographical here'.

The article suggests the existence of two principal Self/Other narratives relating to great powers' status. Self/Other narrative #1 generates a worldview of how great power status is threatened by the rise of one or more challengers. If the established identity of the Self is anchored in the status of a hegemon, the notion of emerging 'Others' that challenge this status causes ontological insecurity, a sense of inadequacy in their own and others' eyes (von Essen & Danielson 2023: 12–13, 15–16). The state responds to its emotions of anger, anxiety and shame by attempting to reassert its hegemonic identity through an autobiographical narrative that

gives the geographical here a sphere-of-influence meaning. It remains an open question of *who* experiences the emotional reaction, whether it is the decision-makers themselves or whether they somehow react to a collective sense among the population and workers within the state. This article does not address this. Instead, it adopts Mitzen's view that the issue of 'state personhood', i.e. whether a state can 'feel' something, is a theoretical device, useful regardless of whether states seek physical or ontological security (Mitzen 2006: 352).

A geopolitical master narrative is activated that dictates what a great power 'ought' to be, and which posits spheres of influence as *natural* or even *necessary* for great power status (Jackson 2020: 257). Thus, the state engages in narration of the (abstract) 'geographical here', awarding it sphere-of-influence meaning. Ortmann summarises the role of the sphere of influence quite well: 'The concept "sphere of influence" is strongly associated with what John Agnew has called the *modern geopolitical imagination*. . . . At its core is the "Westphalian myth", an understanding of state space as fixed and bounded that is associated with classical geopolitics and Realist approaches in International Relations' (Ortmann 2018: 405, emphasis added).

Conversely, Self/Other narrative #2 constructs a world where status and identity are stable in relation to other great powers. In this context of relative ontological stability, there is little need for the great power to narrate the 'geographical here' as a sphere of influence. It may even provide the state with the confidence to publicly dismantle the generally perceived sphere.

That ontological security is at stake in relation to spheres of influence is something already noted by Murray (2019: 63–64), and thus not something novel. However, as discussed in the literature review, Murray does not explain why the controversial sphere-of-influence narratives are projected. This, I argue, is the underlying logic of why, despite the potentially problematic consequences of

Table 1. Illustration of the interplay between geography and identities (Self/Other and geographical here) and the sphere of influence narrative (the explanans) highlighted

	Self/Other narrative #1 (narrated threat to status)	Self/Other narrative #2 (no narrated threat status)
Meaning assigned to the 'geographical here'	Sphere of influence narrative (foundational for identity)	Non-sphere of influence narrative; potential dismantling of previous sphere-of-influence narrative

their actual influence, great powers narrate their adjacent geographical space as a sphere of influence.

This new meaning of adjacent geographical space, however, makes the great power more vulnerable. As discussed above, it can insult the small states in 'its sphere' and push them closer to the great power's adversary. Moreover, an adversary can deal a significant blow to the great power's credibility and status by inserting themselves in the geographical region adjacent to the great power. This can start a dangerous chain reaction, further fuelling ontological insecurity for the great power, initiating a vicious circle. Such a situation can quickly escalate, potentially placing several actors on a collision course and generating military intervention.

This article offers a theoretical framework to explain why actors (particularly great powers) narrate adjacent geographical space according to a sphere of influence logic (see Table 1). The explanation is derived from ontological security and the dominant narrative about the actor's Self in relation to Others. The methodology and analysis below illustrate this framework in more detail.

Methodology

This article sheds light on why great powers narrate the geographical space in their vicinity as their 'sphere of influence' when this potentially antagonises the smaller states the great power seeks to influence. Through within-case comparisons of US presidential administrations, this article develops the theoretical argument discussed in the previous section to address the puzzling phenomenon of publicly articulated spheres of influence. It does so by showing the connection between particular 'status narratives' and which meaning is provided to the 'geographical here'. First, it explores the respective administrations' narratives pertaining to the international system, particularly with regard to great power rivalries, adversaries and challengers. This helps to define whether it is a Self/Other narrative that constructs the status of the state as safe or threatened. Second, the article traces the meaning assigned to the adjacent space, or the geographical here, to illustrate how in times of great power competition and subsequent ontological insecurity geographical space becomes co-constitutive of great power identity. Within the case of the US, the Obama administration (2009–2017), the Trump administration (2017–2021) and the Biden administration (2021–present) are selected based on their differences, particularly in relation to the world in which they had to operate, moving from a state of US hegemony to one where US hegemony is being challenged. The results are summarised in Table 2.

With this framework, the article offers, on the one hand, an analysis of how US administrations narrate the United States concerning the international system and other great powers (the Self/Other narratives concerning status) and, on the other, an account of how these administrations assign meaning to the geographi-

cal space of Latin America (the 'geographical here narrative'). First, the 'Self/Other narrative' is explored by analysing who is depicted as the threatening and the implications for the United States. While a terrorist organisation, for example, is presented as a threat to the physical security of US citizens, it is not a threat to a great power's international status in the same way as a rising adversary. Thus, a Self/Other narrative is coded '#1' if it constructs a world where US status as a hegemon is threatened by rising challengers, but a Self/Other narrative is coded '#2' if the Self is constructed as secure in an established role and an entrenched status, and 'Others' have accepted this structure of the international system. Second, to assess the meaning assigned to the 'geographical here', I analyse how the United States constructs its own current role in relation to the space, how this role uses the past and the principal threat(s) to the region. If the great power constructs the geographical here as its historical responsibility, from where it must combat external threats, the narrative is coded as a 'sphere of influence narrative'. The empirical material is primarily derived from secondary sources, such as public speeches by administration officials, memoirs and open national security documents. These are taken from the official websites of the White House and the US State Department.

Analysis

The Obama administration: US hegemony and a geographical here of equals

On entering office in 2009, the Obama administration stuck to a narrative of an international system where the United States was still the undisputed hegemon. Despite many controversial foreign policy decisions in the early 2000s, the US status as the global hegemon established at the end of the Cold War was still relatively intact as great power rivals appeared significantly inferior. President of Russia Vladimir Putin (and Dimitri Medvedev) were beginning to demonstrate imperial aspirations to reassert Russian dominance in the post-Soviet space that challenged US hegemony, such as in the war in Georgia in August 2008, but on the whole, there were few expressions of this in US national security strategies of the time.

Rather, the 2010 US NSS discusses how the administration was seeking 'to build a stronger foundation for American leadership' (NSS 2010: 2), noting that 'just as America helped to determine the course of the 20th century, we must now build the sources of American strength and influence, and shape an international order capable of overcoming the challenges of the 21st century' (NSS 2010: 1). The subsequent strategy notes that the United States 'will lead with strength' (NSS 2015: 3), and that 'after a difficult decade, America is growing stronger every day. The US economy remains the most dynamic and resilient on Earth' (ibid.). Multiple pages in both strategy documents discuss how the United States *would lead* in the capacity of a hegemon. Meanwhile, the most prevalent of the threats to

the United States identified in the 2010 NSS was till terrorism, and defeating and dismantling al-Qaeda remained at the top of the list of priorities (NSS 2010: 19–22), something which also appeared in the subsequent document (NSS 2015: 9). On the United States' fellow great powers in the international arena, or the international order, the narrative is congruent with the notion of US hegemony. Several other actors are acknowledged as important:

We are working to build deeper and more effective partnerships with other key centers of influence—including China, India, and Russia, as well as increasingly influential nations such as Brazil, South Africa, and Indonesia—so that we can cooperate on issues of bilateral and global concern, with the recognition that power, in an interconnected world, is no longer a zero-sum game. (NSS 2010: 3)

Similarly, the document notes that:

More actors exert power and influence. Europe is now more united, free, and at peace than ever before. The European Union has deepened its integration. Russia has reemerged in the international arena as a strong voice. China and India—the world's two most populous nations—are becoming more engaged globally. (NSS 2010: 8)

These passages indicate that the Obama administration *acknowledged* the power of its fellow states, but at the same time that these states had *accepted US hegemony*. They have been integrated into the US-led world order. This ties into the wider narrative of the 'end of history' (Fukuyama 1989), or how the liberal world order had prevailed under US leadership, and all other states were obliged to adapt to this new reality. The 2015 NSS strikes a different tone in relation to Russia than the one published five years before, following Russia's annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014. Although Russian 'aggression' is a frequent theme (NSS 2015: 4, 10, 19, 25), there is little to suggest that US status is threatened. China's 'rise' is discussed, but overall, the strategy expresses how 'the United States welcomes the rise of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous China. We seek to develop a constructive relationship with China that delivers benefits for our two peoples and promotes security and prosperity in Asia and around the world' (NSS 2015: 24). Furthermore, the 2015 NSS begins with the words: 'Today, the United States is stronger and better positioned to seize the opportunities of a still new century and safeguard our interests against the risks of an insecure world' (NSS 2015: i). US ontological security under the Obama administration reflected its narratives on the geographical here.

In his second term, Obama's administration rejected the notion of a US sphere of influence over Latin America by publicly dismantling the Monroe Doctrine. It narrated a past in which the United States behaved in a bullying way towards its southern neighbours, leading by power rather than example. Consequently, the

Obama administration sought to orient itself in the present by juxtaposing itself with a *negative, imperial past*. In November 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry told the Organization of American States (OAS) that:

[t]he relationship that we [the United States] seek and that we have worked hard to foster is not about a United States declaration about how and when it will intervene in the affairs of other American states. It's about all of our countries viewing one another as equals, sharing responsibilities, cooperating on security issues, and adhering not to doctrine, but to the decisions that we make as partners to advance the values and the interests that we share. (Kerry 2013)

Kerry declared an end to the Monroe Doctrine – the era was ‘over’ – and remarked how such a proclamation was worthy of the spontaneous applause that erupted from the Latin American delegates (Kerry 2013). The Obama administration constructed the United States as a *reformed* great power. During the administration's normalisation with Cuba (2014–2016), Obama stated while standing next to the Cuban leader, Raúl Castro, ‘America chooses to cut loose the shackles of the past so as to reach for a better future – for the Cuban people, for the American people, for our entire hemisphere, and for the world’ (Obama 2014). In a speech delivered during a visit to Havana in 2016, Obama stated: ‘I have come here to bury the last remnant of the Cold War in the Americas. . . . A policy of isolation designed for the Cold War makes little sense in the 21st century’ (Schulteis 2016). Instead, the Obama administration narrated a vision for the *continuation* of the liberal world order with sovereign states acting under the same principles, not least in Latin America. The 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS) concluded that the United States ‘will work in *equal* partnership to advance economic and social inclusion, safeguard citizen safety and security, promote clean energy, and defend universal values of the people of the [Western] hemisphere’ (NSS 2010: 44). At a press conference in Havana in 2016, Obama echoed these sentiments: ‘I affirmed [to Raúl Castro] that Cuba's destiny will not be decided by the United States or any other nation. *Cuba is sovereign* and, rightly, has great pride. And the future of Cuba will be decided by Cubans, *not by anybody else*’ (Obama 2016, emphasis added). The narrated threats to the region primarily internal, most notably drug trafficking (NSS 2010: 43, 46; 2015: 27).

In sum, the Obama administration embraced the prevailing narrative of the day. It adhered to the characterisation of the Self as possessing the status of hegemon and the Other as either criminal terrorist organisations or states that have accepted US leadership. This is a Self/Other narrative #2 where US status was not acutely threatened. In short, the United States did not experience ontological insecurity in its identity as a hegemon at this time. Consequently, it did not resort to a sphere of influence narrative to provide meaning to the geographical space of Latin America.

Instead, it had the confidence and room to dismantle the notion of a US sphere of influence publicly and explicitly in Latin America.

The Trump administration: The re-narration of the geographical here

The world as narrated by the Trump administration was very different from the one described by its predecessor. The administration characterised the Self as declining, where US status as hegemon was disappearing due to the rise of China and the decisions of previous US leaders. Indeed, the first words of the administration's NSS echo Trump's campaign slogan: 'The American people elected me to make America great again' (NSS 2017: 1, emphasis added). While this was a campaign slogan designed to make Trump appear a saviour and connect back to former US President Ronald Reagan, the notion of a United States in relative decline permeates much of the document. Unlike the two preceding documents, 'the Others', China and Russia, are constructed as severe threats to US hegemony:

China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence. (NSS 2017: 2)

This is the horizon of experience that the Trump administration offers to make sense of the present: a Self that is damaged and has lost its status to aggressive great powers. The administration contends: 'These competitions [with Russia and China] require the United States to rethink the policies of the past two decades – policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners' (NSS 2017: 3). Alongside these narratives found in national security documents, it is also notable that it was in 2018, during the Trump presidency, that the 'China threat narrative' was cemented among scholars, analysts and debaters, sowing further doubt and anxiety about US status and identity (Jerdén & Winkler 2023), and further fuelling the US experience of a loss of status.

This Self/Other narrative (#1), which orients the Self between a past of power and a horizon of lost status, provokes emotions of anxiety and shame, something which can be counteracted in part by approaching the geographical here through a sphere-of-influence narrative. For the Trump administration, the way to reassert great power status was to return to the controversial doctrine that the previous administration sought to dismantle and bury. In 2018, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson gave a speech praising the relevance of the Monroe Doctrine in countering an 'imperial' China (Gramer & Johnson 2018). Similarly, his successor, Mike Pompeo, contended that the Monroe Doctrine was *as relevant in contemporary times as it was when it was created* in 1823 (Pompeo 2019, emphasis added). On another occasion,

Trump's second National Security Advisor, John Bolton, remarked that 'the Monroe Doctrine is alive and well' (Schake 2019). Trump also weighed in publicly while addressing the United Nations in September 2018: 'Here in the Western Hemisphere, we are committed to maintaining our independence from the encroachment of expansionist foreign powers. *It has been the formal policy of our country since President Monroe that we reject the interference of foreign nations in this hemisphere and in our own affairs*' (Trump 2018, emphasis added).

Two years later, in his 2020 White House memoir, Bolton oriented the United States in relation to a very different horizon of experience from the Obama administration. He identified the United States as a great power that keeps order in its 'backyard': 'America had opposed external threats in the Western Hemisphere since the Monroe Doctrine, *and it was time to resurrect it* after the Obama-Kerry efforts to bury it' (Bolton 2020: 248, emphasis added). On Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, Bolton writes:

Maduro's autocratic regime was a threat due to its Cuba connection and the openings it afforded Russia, China, and Iran. Moscow's menace was undeniable, both *militarily and financial*, having expended substantial resources to buttress Maduro, dominate Venezuela's oil-and-gas industry, and impose costs on the US. Beijing was not far behind (ibid.).

In terms of visions for the future, the 2017 NSS defined the US role somewhat in accordance with the Monroe Doctrine as the powerful, responsible regional leader, stating that it would 'build a stable and peaceful hemisphere that increases economic opportunities for all, improves governance, reduces the power of criminal organizations, and *limits the malign influence of non-hemispheric forces*' (NSS 2017: 51, emphasis added). Once again, there is a differentiation between the 'hemisphere', where the United States is the hegemon, and 'non-hemispheric forces'. These forces were once European colonial powers but today they are China and Russia. President Trump further expressed his vision of the world when discussing his administration's policy on Cuba, which was on a par with the logic of the sphere of influence: 'Countries should take greater responsibility for creating stability in their own regions' (Trump 2017).

In sum, the Trump administration adhered to a Self/Other narrative in which the established status of the Self was severely threatened (Self/Other narrative #1) by rising rival powers. Consequently, it turned to its geographical here to reassert anxiety regarding great power identity through a sphere of influence narrative.

The Biden administration: Quietly maintaining the meaning of the geographical here

Although it has offered softer rhetoric compared to the preceding administration, the Biden administration has largely maintained the Trump administration's

policies towards China, for which there is bipartisan support (Borg 2024: 8–11). However, the Self in relation to hegemonic status is less clear. The 2022 NSS reads: ‘We are in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order’ (NSS 2022: i). The narrative of the world is very similar to that of the Trump administration: US hegemony is under threat, or possibly just a memory. It offers a possibility that the US could return to its rightful place in the world, but this is far from certain: ‘We are now in the early years of a decisive decade for America and the world. The terms of geopolitical competition between the major powers will be set. *The window of opportunity to deal with shared threats, like climate change, will narrow drastically*’ (NSS 2022: 6, emphasis added). The Biden administration narrates a Self that must reassert its role as a benevolent hegemon in the face of emerging autocratic great powers. The administration makes this clear by stating: ‘The need for a strong and purposeful American role in the world has never been greater’ (NSS 2022: 7). The administration seeks to emphasise that the United States has faced this challenge before: ‘Prophecies of American decline have repeatedly been disproven in the past – and . . . it has never been a good bet to bet against America’ (NSS 2022: 8). The threats are also specified:

Russia and the PRC [Peoples Republic of China] pose different challenges. *Russia poses an immediate threat* to the free and open international system, recklessly flouting the basic laws of the international order today, as its brutal war of aggression against Ukraine has shown. *The PRC, by contrast, is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order* and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective. (NSS 2022: 8, emphasis added)

The Biden administration appeals to classical US great power narratives, and an overwhelming need to rearticulate a status and identity is obvious. I therefore conclude that this is a case of a Self/Other narrative #1, as the narrative pertaining to the ‘Self/Other’ is similar to that of the preceding administration, especially in national security documents.

Turning to the geographical here, the Biden administration’s position also resembles that of its predecessor: ‘The Western Hemisphere directly impacts the United States more than any other region so we will continue to revive and deepen our partnerships there to advance economic resilience, democratic stability, and citizen security’ (NSS 2022: 12). In addition, ‘[the United States] will support effective democratic governance responsive to citizen needs, defend human rights and combat gender-based violence, tackle corruption, *and protect against external interference or coercion, including from the PRC, Russia, or Iran*’ (NSS 2022: 41, emphasis added). The 2022 NSS further states that: ‘These challenges may be internal, including from local gangs, or transnational, including from criminal organizations that traffic drugs and humans and undertake other illegal operations – *or external,*

as *malign actors seek to gain military or intelligence footholds in the region*' (ibid., emphasis added). This echoes quite a lot of how the Trump administration made sense of the US role in the region and the threats it had to face. There are, however, some differences. First and foremost, in 2021 the administration's secretary of state, Antony Blinken, set out the US position on spheres of influence in no uncertain terms. Blinken made it clear that the US did not recognise 'spheres of influence' and that the notion 'should have been retired after World War II' (Removska 2021). Moreover, in a press conference, Biden stated:

We used to talk about, when I was a kid in college, about 'America's backyard'. It's not America's backyard. Everything south of the Mexican border is *America's front yard*. And we're equal people. We don't dictate what happens in any other part of that—of this continent or the South American continent. We have to work very hard on it. (Biden 2022, emphasis added)

Referring to Latin America as a 'yard' of any sort is quite controversial, but Biden stressed that the Latin American nations were 'equals' with the United States. It should be remembered, however, that Trump also occasionally floated liberal tropes of self-determination and freedom within the scope of a sphere-of-influence narrative. The Biden administration still narrates a special responsibility in the geographical here to *keep out the bad actors* and although the Trump administration was much more public in its references to the controversial Monroe Doctrine than its successor, the Biden administration has not reversed the reintroduction of the doctrine. Instead, it has maintained a silence on the topic. Publicly

Table 2. Illustration of the article's findings

	Narrated status of the own state	Meaning of the geographical here
Obama administration (2009–2017)	Self/Other narrative #1: US status is secure	Non-sphere of influence narrative
Trump administration (2017–2021)	Self/Other narrative #2: US status is threatened	Sphere-of-influence narrative
Biden administration (2021–present)	Self/Other narrative #2: US status is threatened	Sphere-of-influence narrative¹

Source: Author

- 1 The Biden administration has been much more careful in its sphere-of-influence narrative and taken a softer approach.

rejecting the US' role in Latin America in times of great power confrontation would be to voluntarily abandon its status as a great power.

Whereas the Biden administration has been less clear than the Trump administration in this respect, possibly because it takes greater care to stress liberal values, it still approaches its geographical here in an almost protective way. This is despite the fact that several Latin American states, such as Chile (Government of Chile 2023), are happily engaging in new trading agreements with China or moving closer to Russia. (Russian troops were invited to a military parade in Mexico last year [Associated Press 2023].) Narrating Latin America as a sphere of influence, regardless of whether this is done to show responsibility or to coerce a certain outcome, probably insults many small countries in the region, making them more prone to engage with Washington's adversaries. This, in turn, is likely to have a negative impact on US national security.

Conclusion

Using ontological security studies and the new notion of the 'geographical here', this article offers an explanation as to why great powers engage in a potentially counterproductive behaviour of assigning the contentious meaning of sphere of influence on adjacent geographical space. It argues that states that experience anxiety regarding their established status and identity resort to narrating their 'geographical here' according to a sphere-of-influence logic, despite the risk of insulting smaller states and subsequent undesirable effects. In developing the theoretical framework anchored in OSS, the article primarily illustrates the importance of spheres of influence as *narrative vehicles* for ontological security, which has not previously been discussed, as well as the significance of geographical space external to the state for identity construction alongside the Self/Other relationship at times when a great power's status is perceived as threatened. It also sheds light on the paradox that socially constructing a geographical space as a sphere of influence could reduce a great power's ability to exercise influence in that geographical space by encouraging smaller states to seek support from the great power's adversaries, potentially reducing the physical security of that great power. Thus, the article contributes to the literature on spheres of influence, great power identity and ontological security in international politics.

The article illustrates its theoretical contribution through analyses of three US presidential administrations. It notes how the narratives that provide meaning to the Western Hemisphere change alongside the Self/Other narrative that gives meaning to the status of the United States in the world. Much as the notion that China is a security risk to the US is bipartisan (Borg 2024), the importance of the role of the United States in protecting Latin America from external enemies seems to transcend ideological lines in the White House, although the Biden administration formulates its narratives on Latin America with a greater degree of prudence.

It will be important to continue to study the significance of the geographical here for great powers in times of ontological insecurity. Insulting small states in times of great power rivalry is potentially risky as there is a chance that they might turn to a great power adversary for money and support. If the 'geographical here' is foundational for the maintenance of a great power identity, such a turn of events could generate even greater ontological insecurity. This situation could get out of control and make military confrontation unavoidable. At the same time, however, other perspectives also require greater attention – especially those of the small states and the people in those states.

Trine Flockhart writes that it is highly unlikely that we will revert to a bi- or multi-polar world order following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2024: 473–474). This may very well apply to the 'traditional' sphere of influence as frequently referred to by political actors in their public communication. Arguably, their unwillingness to let go of such an 'ordering' concept and tendency to resort to it are expressions of an inherent anxiety about the uncertainties of the future, and not least, their status in the future global order.



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