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Ontological (In)Security and Neoliberal Governmentality: Explaining Australia's China Emergency

CHENGXIN PAN
Deakin University

AND

LINUS HAGSTRÖM
Swedish Defence University

One of the mysteries in contemporary world politics is why in recent years Australia has been leading the world in its hawkish approach to China, its largest trading partner. More than most of its allies, the Australian government seems to regard the China emergency — fuelled by threat perceptions ranging from foreign influence operations to economic coercion — as more pressing than, say, climate change. This article extends and supplants existing explanations of this puzzle by providing a more theoretically oriented account. Situating Australia's China emergency in the context of its ontological (in)security, this article traces the rise of such insecurities and Australia's responses through the conceptual frameworks of state transformation and neoliberal governmentality, which together offer a more socially and historically grounded account of the dynamics of ontological (in)security. The article argues that the China emergency narrative, as a specific routinised form of neoliberal governmentality, both helps sustain Australia's dominant identity construction as a free, democratic, and resilient state, and provides a *raison d'être* for the national security state that has become part and parcel of the evolving techniques of neoliberal governmentality.

The past few years have seen Australia gripped by a China threat emergency (hereafter referred to as the "China emergency"). Alarm bells have been constantly ringing over the purported danger of both a "silent invasion" by insidious and ubiquitous "Chinese influence" in the Australian body politic,[1] and Beijing's "grey-zone warfare" tactics including economic coercion and exploitation of Australia's domestic division.[2]

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[1] Clive Hamilton, *Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia* (Richmond, Vic.: Hardie Grant, 2018).

[2] Ben Scott, "We Can't Combat China's 'Grey Zone' War While Polarised," *Lowy Institute for International Policy*, 20 January 2021, *https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/we-can-t-combat-china-s-grey-zone-war-while-polarised.*

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Deemed "subtle and sophisticated", the China challenge was, until recently, thought to be largely non-military in nature.[3] But barely a few months into 2021, the scale of the China emergency went up a notch: a real war between Australia and its largest trading partner was no longer considered unthinkable.[4] In his message to commemorate Anzac Day, Home Affairs Secretary Mike Pezzullo did not mince his words: as the "drums of war are growing louder", he said that Australia might have to "send off, yet again, our warriors to fight the nation's wars".[5] His "drums of war" clarion call echoed a quick succession of warnings by senior officials, military commanders, and retired politicians about the likelihood of war involving Australia and China over Taiwan.[6]

Why, then, have Australian drums of war with China been beating in recent years? Readers of the Australian press may be already familiar with several explanations on offer: domestic politics with a tough stance on China described as a vote-winner, the influence of the United States alliance, historical anxieties about Asian (particularly Chinese) invasions, and last but not least, the widely shared view that China has changed and that Australia is simply responding to the new and more dangerous geostrategic reality. We will review these explanations below and agree that they all have some merit. However, they can be enriched and partly supplanted by the introduction of an analytical framework informed by ontological security, state transformation, and neoliberal governmentality, concepts which have so far rarely been applied to understanding Australia's China debate. Our contention is that Australia's China emergency is best understood as a governmentality mechanism in the renewed quest for ontological security among segments of Australian society, prompted by accumulative uncertainties and anxieties associated with Australia's decades-long neoliberal state transformation. We conceptualise the China threat narrative as a specific, national-security-oriented technique of neoliberal governmentality, deployed both to distract from and compensate for the unprecedented uncertainties that now face many Australians and their institutions.

In addition to offering an alternative explanation of Australia's China emergency, this article also makes a theoretical contribution by putting the literatures on state transformation, neoliberal governmentality, and ontological security in closer dialogue. Most scholars treat ontological security as a largely psychological and "trans-historical need" of monolithic and static states,[7] while paying less attention to the dynamic political and economic contexts in which insecurities are activated and governing techniques are used in attempts to secure ontology anew. Meanwhile, scholars of state transformation and neoliberal governmentality usefully highlight the failures and pathologies of the neoliberal state and how it tries to govern and mitigate risk,[8] but

[3] David Wroe, "China Challenge 'More Subtle and Sophisticated' than the Threat of War," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 February 2018.
[4] Greg Sheridan, "Think the Unthinkable," *The Australian*, 8 May 2021.
[5] Michael Pezzullo, "The Drums of War Are Growing Louder," *The Australian*, 27 April 2021.
[6] Sarah Martin, "Australian Defence Minister Says Conflict over Taiwan Involving China 'Should Not Be Discounted'," *The Guardian*, 25 April 2021; Andrew Greene, "Former Defence Minister Christopher Pyne Warns of Potential War with China in the Indo-Pacific Region," *ABC News*, 12 April 2021; Nick McKenzie and Anthony Galloway, "Conflict with China a 'High Likelihood', Says Top Australian General," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 May 2021.
[7] Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, "An Introduction to the Special Issue: Ontological Securities in World Politics," *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol 52, 1 (2017), pp. 3–11.
[8] Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, "COVID-19 and the Failure of the Neoliberal Regulatory State," *Review of International Political Economy*, 2021, *https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2021.1892798.*

seldom do so in relation to the concept of ontological security.[9] This article hopes to bridge the divide through an empirical analysis of Australia's China emergency.

The article is divided into five parts. First, after briefly describing Australia's China emergency puzzle, the article turns to a critical analysis of the existing explanations. Second, it introduces the concepts of ontological security, state transformation, and neoliberal governmentality and discusses their understudied connections. The third section traces Australia's neoliberal transformation and examines how the ontological insecurities arising from this process call for the activation of techniques of neoliberal governmentality. The fourth section illustrates how the renewed quest for ontological security among many Australians entails the routinised narrative on the China emergency. The final section sums up the strengths of the new approach and its implications for policymaking. It stresses the need to question the state-centric ontology, and to link the study of Australia–China relations more closely to the critical security studies literature.

Australia's Puzzling Fixation with the China Emergency

While China has long been described in Orientalist fashion as "inscrutable", Australia, by leading the world in a growing panic about China,[10] seems to present some level of inscrutability of its own. Why does Australia "have an uglier attitude toward China [than] other Western countries despite the fact that there is no major clash of interests between the two countries and the two are bound by close trade ties?"[11] asks an editorial in China's state-affiliated *Global Times*. While *Global Times* may not be taken seriously in Australia, a CNN article also calls the idea of Australia going to war with China on its own "ridiculous".[12] Indeed, with the world seemingly "baffled" by Australia's escalation with China,[13] even some Australians feel a little bewildered: does not it strike anyone as odd that we spend close to $30 billion a year to protect our trade with China from China? A satirical video produced by Melbourne-based Working Dog asks this question.[14]

Canberra's contrasting responses to China and climate change further add to the mystery. It sees fitting to lead the world on urging a COVID-19 inquiry in China but dismisses the global impact of its contribution to tackling climate change.[15] In November 2019, when the retired Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO)

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[9] Exceptions include Jim Marlow, "Governmentality, Ontological Security and Ideational Stability: Preliminary Observations on the Manner, Ritual and Logic of a Particular Art of Government," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol 7, 2 (2002), pp. 241–59; Anthony Burke, *Fear of Security: Australia's Invasion Anxiety* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2008). In his book, Burke traces the roles of Australia's security discourses as a technology of governmentality in a contested century-long nation-building effort to provide ontological stability to a highly conflictual space.

[10] David Brophy, *China Panic: Australia's Alternative to Paranoia and Pandering* (Carlton, Vic.: La Trobe University Press in conjunction with Black Inc., 2021).

[11] "China Cool to Australia's Contradictory Policy," *Global Times*, 4 September 2018, *https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1118351.shtml.*

[12] Ben Westcott and James Griffiths, "Why Are Australian Officials Hinting at War with China?" *CNN*, 5 May 2021, *https://edition.cnn.com/2021/05/05/china/australia-china-war-military-mic-intl-hnk/index.html.*

[13] Natalie Wolfe, "World Baffled by Australia's Escalation with China," *news.com.au*, 7 May 2021, *https://www.news.com.au/technology/innovation/military/world-baffled-by-australias-escalation-with-china/news-story/b2827c69a53d1a79a72f2cf1e5d94ec5*.

[14] *https://twitter.com/workingdogprod/status/902855541143117825.*

[15] Jason Yat-sen Li, "There's a Way to Ease Tensions with China That Would Be a Win for the Australian Economy," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 May 2021.

boss Duncan Lewis warned that China was using "insidious" foreign interference operations to "take over" Australia,[16] much of Australia was already or about to be taken over by climate-change-induced bushfires. The 2019–20 bushfires burnt over 24 million hectares, destroyed more than 3,000 homes, and killed 33 people and 3 billion animals. The estimated financial costs totalled at more than $10 billion.[17] And yet, within a month after Lewis's warning, the Morrison government allocated $88 million to create the joint ASIO–Australian Federal Police Counter Foreign Interference Taskforce to catch foreign (read: Chinese) spies.[18] By comparison, the government's funding boost to aerial firefighting capacity, announced ten days later, was a fraction of that amount, at $11 million.[19] The irony is that the well-funded Taskforce, armed with a raft of national security laws, has still not delivered the "scalp [*sic*]" senior politicians have allegedly long wanted.[20]

However puzzling the Australian government's fixation on China may be, the setting of policy priorities in politics is never accidental nor merely anomalous. One common explanation is that Australia's hawkish posture on China is a function of domestic politics. Criticising the Morrison government's China rhetoric, the Labor Senator Penny Wong insists that "[i]t's always about the domestic political advantage".[21] Some analysts agree. As legendary journalist Max Suich argues, "[q]uite early, the domestic political advantages of a China threat narrative were grasped by coalition ministers and advisers […]. In 2021, domestic political advantage is now a key driver of China policy".[22]

Indeed, appearing tough on national security often brings political dividends domestically, reflecting a longstanding tradition in and beyond Australia to use the spectre of foreign menace for domestic political gains.[23] However, this perspective does not adequately explain why it is China that has become the target of such a political campaign and why now. As late as the 2019 federal election campaign, Scott Morrison actually vowed to stand by both the United States as a friend and China as a "customer". He even took the trouble to open a WeChat account to reach out to

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[16] Australian Associated Press, "China Is Seeking to 'Take over' Australia's Political System, Former ASIO Chief Claims," 22 November 2019, *https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/nov/22/china-is-seeking-to-take-over-australias-political-system-former-asio-chief-claims.*

[17] Mark Binskin, Annabelle Bennett, and Andrew Macintosh, *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements Report* (Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth of Australia, 2020), *https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2020-11/Royal%20Commission%20into%20National%20Natural%20Disaster%20Arrangements%20-%20Report%20%20%5Baccessible%5D.pdf.*

[18] Eliza Laschon and Jade Macmillan, "Spies Called in to Oversee Taskforce amid Heightened Foreign Interference Threat," *ABC News*, 2 December 2019, *https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-02/asio-to-lead-foreign-interference-taskforce/11756060.*

[19] Eliza Laschon, "Federal Government Announces $11m Aerial Firefighting Boost after Calls for More Water-Bombers," *ABC News*, 12 December 2019, *https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-12/federal-government-announces-aerial-firefighting-boost/11790862.*

[20] Andrew Greene, "Chinese Spying Allegations Increase Pressure on National Security Community to Claim Scalps," *ABC News*, 26 November 2019, *https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-26/pressure-is-on-to-reign-in-chinese-spying-in-australia/11736530*.

[21] Penny Wong, "Speech to Launch Peter Hartcher's 'Red Zone'," Old Parliament House, Canberra, 19 May 2021, *https://www.pennywong.com.au/media-hub/speeches/speech-to-launch-peter-hartcher-s-red-zone-king-s-hall-old-parliament-house-canberra-19-05-2021/.*

[22] Max Suich, "How Australia Got Badly Out in Front on China," *Australian Financial Review*, 17 May 2021.

[23] Burke, *Fear of Security*; Ryan C. Hendrickson, *The Clinton Wars: The Constitution, Congress, and War Powers* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002).

Chinese Australian voters,[24] which suggests that domestic political advantage need not come only from hyping up the China emergency.

A second explanation cites the influence of the US alliance, whose importance has long been internalised by Australian political elites. In the wake of Canberra's call for a COVID-19 inquiry, China accused Australia of pandering to its US ally.[25] And in beating the latest drums of war over Taiwan, Australia is believed to harbour the "desire to achieve greater relevance in the minds of US strategic planners",[26] by proving once again that it is a dependable ally in Washington's fight against its main competitor.[27] While clearly relevant, the US alliance explanation is inadequate given that Australia has not always followed the United States in its policy on China. For instance, it joined the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as late as 2015, despite US pressures against such a move.

A third perspective points to Australia's history of anxiousness *vis-à-vis* Asia and China.[28] This anxiety is reflected in the popular genre of invasion fictions, such as *Tomorrow, When the War Began*, and has been construed as responsible for generating the heated debate, for example, over Hugh White's 2010 *Quarterly Essay* "Power Shift".[29] Some argue that the latest fear of a Chinese takeover can be traced back to "a constant and perhaps ironic anxiety of external invasion" in Australian social and political culture.[30] History and culture do matter in contemporary Australian foreign policy, but they better account for continuity than change, and the puzzle remains why there has been a surge in "the China emergency" rhetoric *now*.

This brings us to a fourth and quite mainstream perspective. Unlike the other arguments, which focus on Australia and its US ally, this perspective suggests that Australia's position on China simply responds to the fact that "*China* has changed": that is, it has become increasingly repressive at home and aggressive abroad since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012. Head of National Security College at the ANU, Rory Medcalf, maintains that the sense of a China emergency has emerged after Australia's relations with China "have gone through a reality check".[31] Clive Hamilton, the author of *Silent Invasion*, similarly argues that Australia is "finally starting to wake up" to China's interference.[32] Xi Jinping has undoubtedly departed from China's previous

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[24] Iris Zhao, Jason Fang, and Holly Robertson, "Australian–Chinese Community Outraged over Scott Morrison Referring to Beijing as a 'Customer'," *ABC News*, 14 May 2019, *https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-05-14/chinese-community-in-australia-reacts-scott-morrison-customers/11111186.*

[25] Michael Smith, "Beijing Accuses Australia of Pandering to US in Anti-China Crusade," *Australian Financial Review*, 20 April 2020.

[26] Clinton Fernandes, "China Games," *Arena*, 26 May 2021, *https://arena.org.au/china-games/.*

[27] Chengxin Pan, "Neoconservatism, US-China Conflict, and Australia's 'Great and Powerful Friends' Dilemma," *The Pacific Review*, Vol 29, 4 (2006), p. 442.

[28] David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia, 1850–1939* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1999); Burke, *In Fear of Security*; Catriona Ross, "Prolonged Symptoms of Cultural Anxiety: The Persistence of Narratives of Asian Invasion within Multicultural Australia," *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, No 5 (2006), pp. 86–99.

[29] Chengxin Pan, "Getting Excited about China," in *Australia's Asia: From Yellow Peril to Asian Century*, eds, David Walker and Agnieszka Sobocinska (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2012), pp. 245–66.

[30] Chris Khatouki, "In Fear of the Orient: How Australia's Debate of Foreign Interference Draws on our Xenophobic Past," 7 April 2018, *https://medium.com/@chriskhatouki/in-fear-of-the-orient-how-australias-debate-of-foreign-interference-draws-on-our-xenophobic-past-38ed30f5250f.*

[31] Rory Medcalf, "Australia and China: Understanding the Reality Check," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol 72, 2 (2019), p. 109.

[32] Cited in Kishor Napier-Raman, "The Unravelling: How Australian-Sino Relations Became about the Politics of Dissent," *Crikey*, 28 October 2020, *https://www.crikey.com.au/2020/10/28/australia-china-relations-politics-dissent/.*

"hide capacity, bide time" strategy. His sweeping Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), together with the rise of more assertive diplomatic tactics — or the so-called "wolf warrior diplomacy" — seems to signal Beijing's bid for regional dominance at the expense of the US-led "rules-based international order", from which Australia has long benefited. Under such circumstances, it seems unsurprising that Canberra's attitudes towards Beijing have taken a dramatic turn.

Nevertheless, if the main reason is China's assertive turn, it is still unclear why it has made such a forceful impact on Australia's China policy. One would expect South Korea, the Philippines, and Vietnam to be more agitated about China, especially since all have complex historical tensions and territorial disputes with its immediate neighbour. But this is not the case. A recent report shows that while emotions towards China are becoming increasingly negative in many countries, Australia, along with Japan and Sweden, tops the list.[33] Former Australian Ambassador to China Geoff Raby claims that "in Australia, China Fear has been more virulent than anywhere else".[34] When it comes to war talk, Canberra is even "Out in Front of the Biden administration".[35] So why *Australia*? And, again, why *now*?

There are still other explanations, which, for example, highlight the role of Australian mainstream media, think tanks (e.g. the Australian Strategic Policy Institute), and even individual China hawks.[36] These, however, address a *who*-question rather than a *why*-question. No doubt, all of the above-mentioned factors have played a part in the rise of Australia's China emergency narrative. Still, an overarching framework to tie these factors together in a more comprehensive and intellectually satisfying explanation remains lacking. This article proposes a different approach, premised on the factor of ontological security in the context of neoliberal state transformation and governmentality.

Ontological Security Meets Neoliberal State Transformation

Ontological Security and Routinised Narratives of Self and Other

Ontological security refers to "a sense of continuity and order in events" regarding self-identity or "biographical continuity".[37] While physical security concerns the security of the body, ontological security is about "security […] of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice".[38] Initially designed to understand the psychological needs of individuals, the concept has been applied to collectives such as states.[39] Like individuals, collectives are expected to experience

[33] Pew Research Center, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries," *Pew Research Center*, 6 October 2020, *https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/.*

[34] Geoff Raby, "Time to Ground Australia's China Fear in Facts," *Australian Financial Review*, 29 October 2018.

[35] Suich, "How Australia Got Badly Out in Front on China."

[36] Myriam Robin, "Our China Lightning Rod," *Australian Financial Review*, 15 February 2020; Justin O'Connor, "Driving in the Dark in Our Conflict with China," *Pearls and Irritations*, 18 September 2020, *https://johnmenadue.com/driving-in-the-dark-in-our-conflict-with-china/.*

[37] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 243, 53.

[38] Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol 12, 3 (2006), p. 344.

[39] Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics,"; Brent J. Steele, "Ontological Security and the Power of Self-Identity: British Neutrality and the American Civil War," *Review of international studies*, Vol 31, 3 (2005), pp. 519–40.

ontological security when their identity and the environment in which they exist appear to be stable, predictable, and reliable.

Two points regarding ontological security are particularly pertinent to the context of this article. First, since identity is not a pre-existing, objective thing, it needs to be constantly "constructed" and "secured" through everyday routines meant to bring about a degree of certainty, stability, and predictability.[40] Such routines consist primarily of discursive practices. Since identity is discursively constructed, there is no better way of securing identity than through "contiguous and stable narratives of selfhood".[41]

Second, insofar as identity is inherently relational, it tends to be defined in contrast to difference or who one is not. Therefore, routinised narratives of Otherness are part and parcel of the strategy to secure the ontology of the self. In particular, the securitisation of a *threatening* Other can mitigate anxieties by evoking fear.[42] Unlike anxiety, fear has "a *definite* object"[43] and therefore helps crystallise what the self *is* by identifying more clearly what it is *against*. Moreover, identity is relational also in the sense that it needs to be *recognised* in social relations. Central to ontological security is some degree of consistency between the self's identity narratives and their recognition by others.[44] To maximise the opportunity of such recognition, narratives about self and Other need to be routinely and consistently communicated to target audiences.

The existing literature has deepened our understanding of how the politics of ontological security is practised and how a quest for ontological security can help explain states' policies. However, it has some weaknesses. One is a tendency to reify the state as a product of scaling a psychological phenomenon at the individual level to the state level.[45] There is an implicit assumption that the state is a unitary and unproblematic actor when it comes to ontological (in)security, as if the state and its citizens were one.[46] But in reality, state identities are "fluid and fractured, incoherent and incomplete".[47] It is thus necessary to reckon with the fact that actors within a state can experience ontological (in)security differently.

Another problem is an insufficient attention to the questions of when and why ontological insecurities arise. Scholars of ontological security have generally noted the importance of "critical situations" in this regard.[48] However, having highlighted the

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[40] Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, "Anxiety, Fear, and Ontological Security in World Politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens," *International Theory*, Vol 12, 2 (2020), p. 245; Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics," p. 342.

[41] Chris Rossdale, "Enclosing Critique: The Limits of Ontological Security," *International Political Sociology*, Vol 9, 4 (2015), p. 369.

[42] On the political economy of fear in the construction of China's rise as a threat, see Chengxin Pan, *Knowledge, Desire and Power in Global Politics: Western Representations of China's Rise* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2012).

[43] Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*, p. 43, (emphases added).

[44] Christopher S. Browning, "Nation Branding, National Self-Esteem, and the Constitution of Subjectivity in Late Modernity," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol 11, 2 (2015), p. 204.

[45] Alanna Krolikowski, "State Personhood in Ontological Security Theories of International Relations and Chinese Nationalism: A Sceptical View," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol 2, 1 (2008), pp. 109–33.

[46] Guangyi Pan and Alexander Korolev, "The Struggle for Certainty: Ontological Security, the Rise of Nationalism, and Australia–China Tensions after COVID-19," *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol 26, 1 (2021), pp. 119–20.

[47] Linus Hagström, "Great Power Narcissism and Ontological (In)Security: The Narrative Mediation of Greatness and Weakness in International Politics," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol 65, 2 (2021), p. 332.

[48] Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), p. 61.

"critical situations" concept himself, Giddens concedes that his concern is "not with analysing the social origins of such circumstances but with their psychological consequences".[49] As such, critical situations either tend to be treated as unspecified backgrounds,[50] or reduced to reified classes of events, in the forms, for example, of "power transitions".[51] That would make critical situations rather indistinguishable from "external shocks" in realism, and China becoming a critical situation for Australia would again hardly require any further explanation.[52] Apart from power transitions, "increased communication, global financial crises, transnational migration, mobility of labor, unemployment, and the emergence of global criminal and other networks" have all been described as likely to provide fertile ground for anxieties and increased ontological insecurity.[53] How exactly these occurrences are understood to threaten identity alone or in combination, however, is not pregiven. Hence, critical situations cannot be separated from the narratives through which they are constructed as such. Some seemingly inherently traumatic events (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic) may not be narratively constructed as such, and the reverse may also be true.[54] Furthermore, Pan and Korolev attribute the main source of such insecurity to the China-induced "changing power distribution and the trend of power transition at the *systemic* level".[55] In doing so, they see such systemic-level events as matter-of-factly inducing ontological insecurities while failing to adequately explore why unit-level responses may vary. Arguing that the framework of ontological security tells only part of the story, this article aims to strengthen its explanatory power by calling for its cross-fertilisation with other concepts such as state transformation and neoliberal governmentality.

Ontological (In)Security and Neoliberal Governmentality in State Transformation

State transformation studies deal with the changing nature of the state under conditions of globalisation, whereas scholarship on neoliberal governmentality examines how a particular form of state transformation, that is, neoliberalisation, both gives rise to risks and anxieties *and* uses them to rationalise governance.[56] Together, their insights may help to fill some of the aforementioned gaps in the existing ontological security literature and shed light on the complex political dynamism in which ontological (in)security is enacted.

The state transformation perspective emerges in the context of the globalisation debate between two opposing positions: the retreat of the state under conditions of hyperglobalisation versus continued state-centrism. A transformationalist approach strikes a middle ground, arguing that globalisation neither renders the state obsolete nor

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[49] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, p. 61.
[50] Exceptions include Catarina Kinnvall, *Globalization and Religious Nationalism in India: The Search for Ontological Security* (London: Routledge, 2006).
[51] Jakub Eberle, "Narrative, Desire, Ontological Security, Transgression: Fantasy as a Factor in International Politics," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol 22, 1 (2019), pp. 243–68.
[52] Hagström, "Great Power Narcissism and Ontological (In)Security," p. 333; Pan and Korolev, "The Struggle for Certainty."
[53] Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security and Conflict: The Dynamics of Crisis and the Constitution of Community," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol 21, 4 (2018), p. 828.
[54] Stuart Croft, *Culture, Crisis and America's War on Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[55] *Ibid*., p. 123 (emphasis added).
[56] Martin Shaw, "The State of Globalization: Towards a Theory of State Transformation," *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol 4, 3 (1997), pp. 497–51; Jim Marlow, "Governmentality, Ontological Security and Ideational Stability."

leaves it fully intact. Rather, it transforms the state in important ways and through various processes such as denationalisation, deterritorialisation, internationalisation, decentralisation, and fragmentation.[57] One predominant trend in state transformation in the past few decades has been neoliberalisation, even though it is rather a bundle of trends that varies with different national contexts.[58] Comprising privatisation, deregulation, marketisation, and trade and investment liberalisation, the neoliberal state transformation involves complex reconfigurations and a rescaling of authority structures and power relations. But to put it simply, neoliberalisation can be understood as a particular response, by way of strengthening national competitiveness in the global market, to the perceived challenge of economic globalisation to state survival. According to Stephen Gill, neoliberalisation "seeks to separate economic policies from broad political accountability in order to make governments more responsive to the discipline of market forces and correspondingly less responsible to popular-democratic forces and processes".[59]

It is against this backdrop that neoliberal state transformation meets ontological security. Such transformations disrupt and challenge the routinised practices that were associated with the previous welfare state, giving rise to new kinds of challenges, risks, and uncertainties as well as opportunities both at the aggregated state level and at various scales within and beyond the state. To a large extent, it is such a dynamic context of neoliberal state transformation in which a growing sense of ontological insecurity can be observed in late modernity.

The rise of ontological insecurities in this transformative process calls for new practices and technologies of governance in the interrelated attempts to manage such insecurities especially among those most disenfranchised, and to ensure the continued cohesion and legitimacy of the otherwise fragmented neoliberal state (and its various stakeholders). Such practices and technologies are called neoliberal governmentality, with the Foucauldian term *governmentality* meaning a "conduct of conduct".[60] Central to neoliberal governmentality is the construction of a neoliberal subjectivity of personal responsibility, self-discipline, and self-help among citizens.[61] In doing so, neoliberalism is able to "dismantle[s] governmental and welfare support placing responsibility for risk and survival directly on the individual".[62]

In neoliberal governmentality, risk and precarity are not just challenges to be managed and governed, but the "emphasis is […] on how risk is used to govern".[63]

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[57] Shaw, "The State of Globalization"; Jamie Peck, "Neoliberalising States: Thin Policies/Hard Outcomes," *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol 25, 3 (2001), pp. 445–55; Georg Sørensen, "The Transformation of the State," in *The State: Theories and Issues*, eds, Colin Hay, Michael Lister, and David Marsh (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 190–208.

[58] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 87.

[59] Stephen Gill, "European Governance and New Constitutionalism: Economic and Monetary Union and Alternatives to Disciplinary Neoliberalism in Europe," *New Political Economy*, Vol 3, 1 (1998), p. 5.

[60] Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds, Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 87–105.

[61] Danny MacKinnon, "Reinventing the State: Neoliberalism, State Transformation, and Economic Governance," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Economic Geography*, eds, Trevor J. Barnes, Jamie Peck, and Eric Sheppard (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 351.

[62] Denise Blake, Jay Marlowe, and David Johnston, "Get Prepared: Discourse for the Privileged?" *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, Vol 25 (October 2017), p. 284.

[63] Shahar Hameiri, "State Transformation, Territorial Politics and the Management of Transnational Risk," *International Relations*, Vol 25, 3 (2011), p. 382.

There are at least three closely linked ways of neoliberal governmentality. First, governance through risk involves the elevation of the role and authority in society of experts and professionals in private consulting firms, semi-independent think tanks, and media outlets, to which certain functions and responsibilities of risk governance can be outsourced. A second governmentality strategy rests on the promotion of discourses of resilience as "an alternative rationality for governing complexity and uncertainty".[64] A more resilient citizenry can better cope with the ontological insecurities brought about by the neoliberal state. A third one entails the diversion of domestic anxieties and ontological insecurities through the narrative construction or securitisation of Otherness and foreign threat.[65] As all such governing strategies illustrate, neoliberal governmentality is strongly linked to routinised discursive strategies that aim to secure identities that have been destabilised in the process of state transformation.

It is worth noting that the deployment of these discursive strategies of neoliberal governmentality often goes hand in hand with the (re)production of the national security state. By "national security state", we mean a type of state that has "institutionalized the provision of security and prioritized it over all other functions of state".[66] Harold Lasswell also calls it "the garrison state", in which "the specialists on violence are the most powerful group in society".[67] According to Hasian Jr., Lawson, and McFarlane, "national security states have complex rhetorical functions and structures" and "the production of a national security state is a *communicative* achievement, where technical, political, and cultural arguments are marshaled together".[68] Originating in and strengthened by the Cold War, the national security state par excellence, the United States, did not end with the Cold War's end or the intensification of neoliberal globalisation.[69] Seen as "not only a benefit but also a 'security problem'",[70] economic globalisation, though often marked by the retreat of the state from the economic realm, further demands the expansion of the state's role in both defining and managing security.[71] Indeed, the "hidden hand" of neoliberal globalisation "will never work without a hidden fist".[72] In this sense, the national security state is both produced and strengthened by neoliberal governmentality and further underpins the project of the otherwise deregulated, decentralised neoliberal state.

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[64] Simin Davoudi, "Resilience and Governmentality of Unknowns," in *Governmentality after Neoliberalism*, ed., Mark Bevir (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 153.
[65] Jutta Weldes, *et al*., eds, *Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities, and the Production of Danger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Burke, *Fear of Security*; Pan, *Knowledge, Desire and Power in Global Politics*.
[66] Norrin Ripsman and T. V. Paul, *Globalization and the National Security State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 12.
[67] Harold D. Lasswell, "The Garrison State," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol 46, 4 (1941), p. 455.
[68] Marouf Hasian Jr., Sean Lawson, and Megan D. McFarlane, *The Rhetorical Invention of America's National Security State* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), p. 2 (emphasis in original).
[69] Anna Kasten Nelson, "The Evolution of the National Security State: Ubiquitous and Endless," in *The Long War: A New History of U.S. National Security Policy Since World War II*, ed., Andrew J. Bacevich (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 265.
[70] Richard Higgott, "After Neoliberal Globalization: The 'Securitization' of U.S. Foreign Economic Policy in East Asia," *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol 36, 3 (2004), p. 425.
[71] Christian Fjäder, "The Nation-State, National Security and Resilience in the Age of Globalisation," *Resilience*, Vol 2, 2 (2014), p. 117.
[72] Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 373.

Australia's Neoliberal State Transformation and Its Attempts to Govern Ontological Insecurities

To understand how ontological insecurities are at play in the rise of Australia's China emergency narrative, we first scrutinise the socio-historical context of Australia's neoliberal state transformation. In the 1970s, the crisis of the Keynesian welfare state model in Australia, Canada, and Western Europe provided a catalyst for the ascendancy of neoliberal discourses and practices that sought to restore the primacy of the market and to prioritise capital over government and labour. Against this backdrop, the Australian welfare state found itself swept up in the rising neoliberal tide. Under the newly elected Labor government in 1983,[73] Australia began to implement "a Thatcherite programme of economic growth based on the deregulation of the economy, the privatisation of common wealth and the commodification of everything".[74] Its privatisation, "impressive in both the scale and scope",[75] saw major public assets such as the Commonwealth Bank of Australia, Qantas, and Telstra going into private hands in the 1990s.

This neoliberal transformation has arguably "modernised" the Australian economy, opened local markets to global competition, and produced generations of neoliberal subjects (e.g. in the form of John Howard's "aspirational citizen"). Meanwhile, it has also hollowed out the state's capacity and led to social dislocation, uncertainty, and upheaval. With factories closing down and manufacturing jobs moving overseas, job insecurity and precarious employment have been on the rise. The strong backlash against the Howard government's Work Choices legislation in the 2007 federal election testifies to the scope and intensity of insecurities and anger already created by the preceding reforms.[76] In a society that often prides itself on egalitarianism, the gap between rich and poor has reached unprecedented levels, with devastating consequences for many. As Erik Paul puts it, "[t]he neoliberal state turns citizens into victims and victimisers, and high rates of crime, alcoholism and mental illness — all pathologies of inequality and alienation — are hallmarks of a neoliberal Darwinian form of capitalism".[77] On top of such deeply entrenched social problems, climate change, natural disasters, and now the pandemic have exacerbated existing uncertainties and anxieties for disadvantaged citizens and added new ones. In a pre-COVID-19 survey, trust in government in Australia sank to its lowest point on record, with only one in four saying they had confidence in their political leaders and democratic institutions.[78]

In response, the state has developed a range of technologies of neoliberal governmentality to mitigate risks and manage social anxiety and electoral backlash. But

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[73] On how then Prime Minister Bob Hawke's embrace of neoliberalism was influenced by the United States, see C. J. Coventry, "The 'Eloquence' of Robert J. Hawke: United States Informer, 1973-79," *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol 67, 1 (2021), pp. 67–87.

[74] Erik Paul, *Neoliberal Australia and US Imperialism in East Asia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 1.

[75] Chris Aulich and Janine O'Flynn, "From Public to Private: The Australian Experience of Privatisation," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration*, Vol 29, 2 (2007), p. 154.

[76] Dale Tweedie, "Precarious Work and Australian Labour Norms," *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, Vol 24, 3 (2013), pp. 297–315.

[77] Paul, *Neoliberal Australia and US Imperialism in East Asia*, p. 3.

[78] Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, *The 2019 Australian Federal Election Results from the Australian Election Study* (Australian National University, 2019), *https://australianelectionstudy.org/wp-content/uploads/The-2019-Australian-Federal-Election-Results-from-the-Australian-Election-Study.pdf.*

as mentioned above, most of the governmentality technologies, now increasingly outsourced to "consultants", think thanks, and neoliberal corporate lobbying networks, thrive on using risk and anxiety as *means* to govern rather than trying to identify long-term solutions to such social ailments *per se*. Neoliberal governmentality thus places much emphasis on *discursive* strategies through which the subject can be shaped towards a certain normality, identity, or disposition.[79] As mentioned, one of the preferred dispositions is the character of *resilience* in the face of adversity. On the tenth anniversary of the 2002 Bali bombing, then Opposition leader Tony Abbott used examples of Gallipoli and the Kokoda Track — battles fought by the Australian Army in world wars — to project an identity of the Australian nation as "tough, fair, and resilient through experiences of trauma".[80] In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government renamed the Darwin Howard Springs quarantine facility as the "Centre of National Resilience".

Other discursive strategies hark back on routinised nationalist mythologies of the past and the certitudes of (neo)conservative values of morality, law and order, and the family, which "provided the broader sense of values, character and purpose that neo-liberalism required in order to counter its potential to generate social alienation, anomie and disunity".[81] Closely associated with the neoconservative strategy are the conduct of culture wars and the co-optation of xenophobic populism in Australia. The purpose of such efforts to shape the "conduct of conduct" is to displace "resentment and anxiety away from neo-liberal economics onto 'special interests' […] [and] a series of 'others'",[82] such as political correctness, leftists, ethnic and religious minorities, illegal immigrants, eco-terrorists, trade unions, and even universities.

Just as 9/11 gave George W. Bush "a kind of certainty that perhaps eluded him before",[83] the terrorist attacks (especially those closer to home) also afforded the Australian government a sense of certainty and purpose, as well as an opportunity to preoccupy the public with feel-good patriotism. After the 9/11 attacks, Prime Minister John Howard was quick to emphasise that a terrorist attack on Australia was a certainty because "[w]e are essentially a target for terrorists because of who we are rather than what we've done".[84] Likewise, the media portrayal of asylum seekers as "economic migrants" "trying their luck across the Indian Ocean" helped to remind disfranchised sections of the community that Australia remains a lucky country.[85] However, discursive techniques of neoliberal governmentality can only go so far. In fact, as

[79] Ronnie D. Lipschutz, "Global Civil Society and Global Governmentality: Or, the Search for Politics and the State Amidst the Capillaries of Social Power," in *Power in Global Governance*, eds, Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 237.
[80] Charlotte Heath-Kelly, "Securing through the Failure to Secure? The Ambiguity of Resilience at the Bombsite," *Security Dialogue*, Vol 46, 1 (2015), pp. 69–85.
[81] Sean Hosking, "The Aspirational Citizen and Neo-liberal Hegemony: A Discourse Theory Analysis" (PhD diss., University of New South Wales, 2011), p. 139.
[82] Damien C. Cahill, "The Radical Neo-liberal Movement as a Hegemonic Force in Australia" (PhD diss., University of Wollongong, 2004), p. 187.
[83] Frank Bruni, "For Bush, a Mission and a Defining Moment," *The New York Times*, 22 September 2001, *http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/22/national/22MEMO.html.*
[84] Christopher Michaelsen, "Antiterrorism Legislation in Australia: A Proportionate Response to the Terrorist Threat?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol 28, 4 (2005), p. 330.
[85] Kerstin Lueck, Clemence Due, and Martha Augoustinos, "Neoliberalism and Nationalism: Representations of Asylum Seekers in the Australian Mainstream News Media," *Discourse & Society*, Vol 26, 5 (2015), p. 621.

Marlow argues, "modern Western governance […] *contributes to*, rather than alleviates, the generalized sense of existential anxiety".[86] For example, the US-led "war on terror" in the Middle East exacerbated the threats of terrorism, and the ensuing conflict and instability then fuelled refugee crises. In the United States, the heartland of neoliberalism, the unbridled liberalisation, and financialisation also led to the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2007–08, whose disproportionate impact on the working class set the scene for the rise of populism in the United States, in Britain, and elsewhere.

As neoliberalisation continued to stir up anxieties for many Australians, the narratives on terrorism and asylum seekers reached their use-by dates around 2016–17, when the "war on terror" was winding down, and the boat arrivals had largely stopped. It is in this context that the government and its national security agencies began to turn to China as their favoured technique for transforming this general malaise into a more tangible object of fear. By then, the neoliberal hope of remaking China in the Western image through trade and "constructive engagement" had appeared increasingly naïve.[87] Uncomfortable and sometimes emotive debates on the implications of China's rise compelled Australian policymakers, for the first time in history, to "contemplate living in a region not dominated by a culturally similar ally".[88] The election of Donald Trump in late 2016 added more uncertainty to an already battered "liberal international order", and cast doubt on the 2016 Australian Defence White Paper's upbeat assessment that the United States "will remain the pre-eminent global military power" into the foreseeable future.[89] Apprehensive that the longstanding "fear of abandonment" by its "great and powerful friends" was becoming ever more real,[90] Australian intelligence agencies concluded that the country's "strategic outlook is more uncertain than at any time since 1942".[91]

Meanwhile, both neoliberal state transformation and the "war on terror" have solidified Australia as "a national security state",[92] much like its American model.[93] In the name of fighting terrorism, national security agencies have proliferated. Befitting Lasswell's description of "the garrison state", national security institutions have increasingly occupied a centre-stage in Canberra's foreign policy-making process, sometimes at the expense of other departments such as the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.[94] Three of the four most recent Governor Generals of Australia are military generals. In response to maritime arrivals of asylum seekers, Australia's

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[86] Marlow, "Governmentality, Ontological Security and Ideational Stability," p. 246 (emphasis in original).

[87] Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, "The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 97, 2 (2018), pp. 60–70.

[88] Michael Wesley, "Pivot to Chaos," *Australian Foreign Affairs*, No 2 (February 2018), p. 21.

[89] Department of Defence, *2016 Defence White Paper* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2016), p. 41.

[90] Allan Gyngell, *Fear of Abandonment: Australia in the World since 1942* (Carlton, Vic.: Black Inc., 2017).

[91] Patrick Waters, "Spies, China and Megabytes: Inside the Overhaul of Australia's Intelligence Agencies," *Australian Foreign Affairs*, No 4 (October 2018), p. 29.

[92] Brian Toohey, *Secret: The Making of Australia's Security State* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Publishing, 2019). See particularly Chapter 43. With Australia as a settler colony founded on military operations, it can be argued that the Australian national security state goes back much further than the "war on terror".

[93] Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Political and Economic Brinkmanship," *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol 14, 3 (2007), p. 477.

[94] Former Prime Minister Paul Keating, for example, complained that security agencies such as ASIO were running Australia's foreign policy. David Wroe and Dana McCauley, "Sack 'Nutter' Spy Chiefs to Fix Relations with Beijing, Paul Keating Urges," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 May 2019.

refugee policy has been turned into the military-led Operation Sovereign Borders. Even the National COVID Vaccine Taskforce, code-named Operation COVID Shield, is headed by a Lieutenant General. Powerful positions in the intelligence agencies and related to big-spending defence procurement are routinely being filled with former military officers, particularly from the Army.[95] A growing list of retired military personnel, senior defence and intelligence officials, and politicians then go on to take up positions in weapons-making and security-related corporations.[96]

Australia's transformation into a national security state has been aided by the Parliament, which has become one of "the Western world's powerhouses for the production of new national security laws".[97] An incomplete count of national security and counter-terrorism laws passed since 9/11 puts the number at seventy-five, even outdoing its UK and US allies.[98] ASIO's staff numbers nearly quadrupled in the years after 9/11, from just over 500 in 2001 to about 2,000 in 2018. "Are you sure you don't want more" was a question intelligence chiefs were often asked at meetings of the National Security Committee.[99] This has given Australia's national security establishment unprecedented and far-reaching power.[100] ASIO's 2018–19 annual report "perplexed some foreign affairs experts and economists" because of its revelation of the organisation's expanding interest in "foreign investment, joint ventures for foreign entities to acquire intellectual property, commercial partnerships with foreign players, relationships with university academics and technology sharing", all labelled potential threats.[101]

Yet, the post-9/11 golden era for the national security agencies looked increasingly uncertain by the early 2010s, when its main missions of fighting non-traditional threats, such as terrorism and illegal migration began to lose their relevance. In the wake of the GFC, and haunted by the concerns over debt and deficit, the departments of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Treasury, and Finance came to the view that more budget discipline should apply even to the intelligence agencies, thus putting the core of the national security state in an ontologically insecure position. The shift of strategic attention to the "Indo-Pacific" in general and China in particular also called into question the capacity or even relevance of the existing national security agencies, which were the subject of the 2017 Independent Intelligence Review.[102] "If there are no plausible threats, what is the purpose of the NSS [National Security Strategy]? If imagined threats are selective and domestic, why continue to expand military

[95] Andrew Greene, "The Army's Creeping Takeover of Australia's National Security," *ABC News*, 26 May 2019, *https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-05-26/armys-creeping-takeover-of-australias-national-security/11145906.*

[96] Michelle Fahy, "Brothers-in-Arms: The High-Rotation Revolving Door Between the Australian Government and Arms Merchants," *MichaelWestMedia*, 11 March 2020, *https://www.michaelwest.com.au/brothers-in-arms-the-high-rotation-revolving-door-between-the-australian-government-and-arms-merchants/.*

[97] Greene, "Chinese Spying Allegations."

[98] George Williams, "Australia Is a World-Beater in the Secrecy Olympics," *The Australian*, 10 June 2019.

[99] Waters, "Spies, China and Megabytes," p. 34.

[100] Sharri Markson and Kylar Loussikian, "ASIO Issues Alert to Universities over China Links," *The Australian*, 25 August 2020.

[101] John Kehoe, "The Division in Canberra over China," *Australian Financial Review*, 2 December 2019. See also David Uren, "Hostile Takeover: ASIO's New Role as Investment Gatekeeper," *Australian Foreign Affairs*, Vol 7 (October 2019), pp. 75–98.

[102] Waters, "Spies, China and Megabytes," pp. 28, 33, 36–40.

capabilities? And if individuals are more concerned about themselves than their society, how can support for security policy be mobilized?"[103] Although these questions were raised about the US national security state, they became equally applicable to Australia. It is not surprising, then, that the China emergency began to take hold. The China emergency narrative killed two birds with one stone, as it were: it not only helped turn abstract neoliberal anxieties into concrete fears, but also energise the national security state as a continually relevant component in neoliberal governmentality.

The China Emergency as Neoliberal Governmentality

Australia's China emergency narrative is a specific example of routinised Othering in the quest for ontological security. By the time Canberra started its "China reset" around 2017,[104] concerns about China's behaviour in the South China Sea and anecdotal evidence about its foreign influence operations also started to emerge. In June 2017, the national broadcaster, the ABC's flagship investigative journalism programme *Four Corners* started broadcasting a series of programmes focussing on Chinese "Power and Influence" in Australia, and since then headlines featuring something like "China's Long Arm", "Inside China's Vast Operation Network", "China's Operation Australia: Payments, Power and Our Politicians", "Australia Is Losing the Battle against China's 'Citizen Spies'", "ASIO Flags Manchurian Candidate", "CSIRO Scientist's Link to China Influence Group", and "Campus Freedom of Speech Gagged by Chinese Money" have become almost daily occurrence in the print and online media. Then the darkened media mood has predictably helped transform Australian public opinion in short order: the 2021 Lowy Institute Poll found that 63 per cent of Australians now see China as "more of a security threat", a dramatic jump from 12 per cent just three years ago.[105]

Against this backdrop, it seems hard to argue that there is no truth at all about China's alleged influence activities. Yet, the "emergency" response from Australia has prompted some to label it Australia's "China panic", and the "solidly bipartisan pro-American stance that informs Australian policy today makes it hard to imagine that Beijing has made much headway in infiltrating the nation's political system".[106] Even by former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's own admission, his government's decision to ban Huawei's participation in Australia's 5G networks was not because Huawei was actually interfering with Australia's telecommunication networks; rather, it was "a hedge against a future threat".[107]

It is neither the business of this article, nor within our capacity, to confirm or deny the existence of Chinese foreign influence operations in Australia. What is not in dispute, however, is that such allegations have produced the effect of a China emergency and provided a clear object of fears against which the Australian self can be reproduced and the national security state can continue to develop even in times of

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[103] Ronnie D. Lipschutz, *After Authority: War, Peace, and Global Politics in the 21st Century* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 48.
[104] John Garnaut, "Australia's China Reset," *The Monthly*, August 2018, *https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2018/august/1533045600/john-garnaut/australia-s-china-reset#mtr.*
[105] Michelle Grattan, "Australians Fear China-US military Conflict But Want to Stay Neutral: Lowy 2021 Poll," *The Conversation*, 22 June 2021, *https://theconversation.com/australians-fear-china-us-military-conflict-but-want-to-stay-neutral-lowy-2021-poll-163182.*
[106] Brophy, *China Panic*.
[107] Malcolm Turnbull, *A Bigger Picture* (Richmond, Vic.: Hardie Grant, 2020).

strategic drift and budget constraints. The centrality of ontological security is on full display in the Australian *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, whose entire first chapter is dedicated to the now familiar narratives of "Australia's values", such as "political, economic and religious freedom, liberal democracy, the rule of law, racial and gender equality and mutual respect" and "a strong and resilient Australia".[108] As soon as those values are codified to define what Australia is, it becomes obvious what it is not, which in turn can be readily symbolised by China.[109]

As a form of routinised practice, these narratives are performative in that it helps (re) construct, project, and solidify a venerable Australian identity that is familiar, reassuring, vulnerable, but resilient. As Reilly argues, the emphasis on values in Australian foreign policy "draws upon our own history as one of the world's longest continuous democracies, and illuminates well-grounded distinctions between how democracies and autocracies behave in international affairs".[110] Indeed the word "distinctions" captures the essence of what the narratives are all about. For example, *The Sydney Morning Herald* quotes "experts" in describing China's BRI in the region as "an illiberal system based on power and national interest which is very much not a level playing field". This then "stood in contrast to a rules-based, liberal international order that creates a level playing field".[111] Former Fairfax China correspondent John Garnaut juxtaposes a powerful and ruthless China with an innocent and vulnerable Australia, insisting that "Australia is the canary in the coal mine of Chinese Communist Party interference […]. Nobody knows what happens when a mid-sized, open, multicultural nation stands its ground against a rising authoritarian super-power".[112] Yet, this looming Manichaean struggle also offers a perfect backdrop for Prime Minister Scott Morrison to project an Australia that is reassuringly defiant: "The government is absolutely determined to ensure that nobody interferes with Australia's activities. We won't cop it. We are a resilient people. We will stand up to it and we will take action".[113]

The popular narrative of Australia as "a canary in the coalmine" for democracies not only furnishes a heroic image of Australia in the "David versus Goliath" battle, but also promotes a distinctively Australian brand among its democratic allies and partners. Given that nation-branding and international recognition (in this case by "like-minded democracies") are important dimensions of ontological security,[114] it is no surprise that Australia's China narrative has been frequently communicated at international meetings and in leaders' speeches and foreign policy statements. And judging by its Western allies' routine praises of Australia's "standing up for democratic values and the rule of law" in the face of "intense, continued coercive pressure" from Beijing, that international branding exercise has paid off.[115] The recognition and moral support have

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[108] Australian Government, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* (Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017), p. 11.
[109] Chengxin Pan, "Identity Politics and the Poverty of Diplomacy: China in Australia's 2017 *Foreign Policy White Paper*," *Security Challenges*, Vol 14, 1 (2018), p. 14.
[110] Benjamin Reilly, "The Return of Values in Australian Foreign Policy," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol 74, 2 (2019), p. 116.
[111] Wroe, "China challenge."
[112] John Garnaut, "How China Interferes in Australia," *Foreign Affairs*, 9 March 2018, *https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-03-09/how-china-interferes-australia.*
[113] Peter Hartcher, "Our China Spy Law Bares Its Teeth with Raid on Labor MP," *The Age*, 26 June 2020.
[114] Browning, "Nation Branding, National Self-Esteem," pp. 195–214.
[115] "US Praises Australia for Not 'Bowing' to China," *SBS News*, 29 July 2020, *https://www.sbs.com.au/news/us-praises-australia-for-not-bowing-to-china.*

provided Australia with much-needed comfort and certainty. According to Trade Minister Dan Tehan, "all Australians should be reassured by the fact that the Americans have come out and said that they've got our back, and they won't leave us alone on the playing field".[116]

The fear of a clearly identifiable target on the outside not only helps alleviate ontological insecurities produced in the process of neoliberal state transformation, but also has disciplinary effects in that it can frighten the public into compliance and submission. Intelligence officials have told the public that foreign interference from China, when left unchecked, can become "highly corrosive": "Almost every sector of our community was a potential target, particularly Australian parliamentarians and their staff; government officials; the media and opinion-makers; business leaders; and the university community".[117] The dire warning of a "whole-of-society threat" and the introduction of the Foreign Influence Transparency Register have already had an impact on compliance, for example, from the university sector. The Universities of Sydney, New South Wales, Monash, and Queensland have all hired former government adviser John Garnaut through consultancy firm McGrathNicol (which specialises in governance, risk, and compliance) to help them detect and mitigate foreign interference risks. Garnaut, whose classified 2017 report was the main reason the government wanted to pass its foreign interference legislation,[118] now saw his booming consultancy business as a sign that Australian universities have already started "building resilience" to foreign interference.[119]

The operation of disciplinary power can be more or less subtle. By providing a contrast between an authoritarian and repressive China and a free and democratic Australia, such discourses convey an implicit message that Australians should accept and indeed be proud of who they are and where they belong. China's repressive and brutal governance serves as a reminder that Australians are free, democratic, and lucky. As ABC China Correspondent Bill Birtles puts it when he landed in Australia amidst heightened tensions with China, "it's a relief to be back in a country with a genuine rule of law".[120] In this way, domestic discontent against the state can be more easily managed because "[t]hose who cross the boundary by choosing the 'wrong' side are […] met with an ontological threat".[121] For instance, those who criticise Australia's China policy and call for "nuanced" diplomacy and pragmatism have been routinely branded as part of the "China lobby", and accused of undermining "Team Australia" or "selling soul" for "Chinese money".[122]

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[116] Nour Haydar, "The US Has 'Got Our Back' on Chinese Diplomatic Disputes, Says Australian Trade Minister Dan Tehan," *ABC News*, 20 March 2021, *https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-20/us-has-our-back-says-trade-minister-dan-tehan-on-china-relations/100019392.*

[117] Paul Malone, "ASIO Doublespeak," *Pearls and Irritations*, 18 September 2020, *https://johnmenadue.com/paul-malone-asio-doublespeak/.*

[118] Tom Uren, "Declassify the Garnaut ASIO Report," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, 27 June 2018, *https://www.aspi.org.au/opinion/declassify-garnaut-asio-report.*

[119] Nick Bonyhady, "Former Turnbull Security Adviser Auditing Universities' Foreign Interference Risks," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 April 2021.

[120] Matthew Doran and Stephen Dziedzic, "Australian Correspondents Bill Birtles and Mike Smith Pulled Out of China after Five-Day Diplomatic Standoff over National Security Case," *ABC News*, 8 September 2020, *https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-08/bill-birtles-mike-smith-evacuated-china-safety-concerns/12638786.*

[121] Linus Hagström and Chengxin Pan, "Traversing the Soft/Hard Power Binary: The Case of the Sino-Japanese Territorial Dispute," *Review of International Studies*, Vol 46, 1 (2020), p. 46.

[122] Fergus Ryan, "How the China Lobby Is Building a Great Wall of Influence," *The Australian*, 5 May 2014; Eleni Courea, "Don't Sell Your Soul to China, Trade Adviser Tells Businesses," *The Australian*, 28 July 2021.

Even more importantly, perhaps, the China narrative directly helps strengthen the regulatory power of the neoliberal state in general and the national security apparatus in particular. The talk of "Chinese influence" and "foreign interference", for example, conveys a scenario of China's invasion of the Australian body politic. Just as terms such as "illegal arrivals", "boat people", and "queue jumpers" portray foreigners as violating Australia's border and lead to calls for tough border protection measures, "Chinese influence" on "an unprecedented scale" justifies the urgency of defending and policing the geopolitical and ontological border between the peaceful liberal democracy that defines Australia, and the assertive authoritarianism that is China. As then Australian Ambassador to Washington Joe Hockey put it, China's influence "represents a threat to what many Australians fought and died for and that's a free and transparent, open democracy".[123]

Not surprisingly, even in the middle of a devastating pandemic and mounting government debt, the Morrison government, with Labor's support, committed $270 billion to military spending over ten years to prepare for a "poorer, more dangerous and more disorderly" post-COVID-19 world. This came after Canberra made the largest ever "investment" in cyber security, with the Australian Signals Directorate and the Australian Cyber Security Centre receiving $1.35 billion over ten years.[124] Announced in the 2021–22 budget, an extra $1.3 billion over ten years would go to the ASIO to counter foreign security threats. The funding came "on top of already record funding" for the domestic spy agency.[125]

Australian national security agencies have also demanded even greater legislated power and authority. Thanks to the China emergency imperative, their wish was promptly answered by the Turnbull government's introduction of two new bills in 2017: the Espionage and Foreign Interference Bill and the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme (FITS) Bill. Both were passed into law in 2018. In December 2020, a new Foreign Relations Bill was passed by the Parliament "with breakneck speed",[126] giving the federal government more power to veto international agreements struck by state and local governments, as well as universities. Morrison said this legislation would ensure all Australian governments "speak with one voice and act in accordance with one plan".[127] Unlike the FITS legislation, which did not issue a single transparency notice during its first two years, this new law was invoked, as soon as the initial three-month declaration period had ended, to scrap the Victorian government's BRI agreement with China. Coming barely one year after US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's warning of "disconnect" from Australia over this BRI deal, the decision was both regulatory and performative, designed to "demonstrate to the Australian public, the Chinese

[123] Caitlyn Gribbin and Henry Belot, "North Korea: Joe Hockey Warns Against 'Tickling the Tummy' of Kim Jong-un," *ABC News*, 9 December 2017, *https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-08/joe-hockey-warns-against-tickling-tummy-of-north-korea/9241690.*

[124] Prime Minister, Minister for Home Affairs, Minister for Defence, "Nation's Largest Ever Investment in Cyber Security," *Media Release*, 30 June 2020, *https://www.pm.gov.au/media/nations-largest-ever-investment-cyber-security.*

[125] Daniel Hurst, "ASIO to Get $1.3bn over 10 Years as Federal Budget Puts $1.9bn Price Tag on National Security," *The Guardian*, 11 May 2021, *https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/may/11/federal-budget-2021-australia-spy-agency-asio-national-cyber-security-intelligence-defence-law-enforcement-coalition-china.*

[126] Stephen Dziedzic, "The Federal Government's New Foreign Relations Laws Have Passed Parliament. Here's What that Means," *ABC News*, 8 December 2020, *https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-12-08/what-are-the-governments-new-foreign-relations-laws-about/12947590.*

[127] Dziedzic, "The Federal Government's New Foreign Relations Laws."

leadership, and Australia's allies that Canberra is holding firm in its 'push back' against Beijing".[128]

It is clear that the China narrative contributes directly to Australia's quest for ontological security as a neoliberal and national security state through its various performative, disciplinary, and regulatory functions. The China narrative is also self-productive; hence by constituting Australian policy on China, it indirectly contributes to China's policy responses to Australia, which then further validate the initial China narrative, thus allowing it to be more routinely and more credibly deployed as a matter of fact. For example, the initial "Chinese influence" narrative, through its China policy consequences and China's trade retaliation, has produced the fact of China's economic coercion, even though what Canberra says and does cannot entirely explain how Beijing, with its own agency and perhaps ontological insecurity concerns, has chosen to respond to Australia. In this sense, the China emergency narrative has the power to (re)produce at least to a certain extent the emergency it purports to describe.

Conclusions and Implications

This article has outlined an alternative and understudied perspective on Australia's China emergency puzzle. It argues that the China narrative forms part of the neoliberal governmentality techniques that are designed to cope with ontological insecurities brought about by emerging risks, anxieties, and uncertainties in Australia's neoliberal state transformation process as well as its global strategic environment. But instead of dealing with the root causes of those socio-economic issues, neoliberal governmentality is characterised primarily by discursive strategies of using risks and threats to construct and maintain a particular subjectivity and identity that befits and sustains the state in its neoliberal and national security incarnations.

This explanation offers a more dynamic and historically grounded way of viewing Australia's China emergency, connecting this phenomenon with the broad and complex context of Australia's neoliberal state transformation. At the same time, we acknowledge that this is not the only structural factor; indeed, the China emergency puzzle contains several pieces. Therefore, this particular explanation does not exhaust all the possible and potential factors at play, nor does it aim to replace other existing explanations, all of which have their own merits. But one of the unique strengths of our approach is that it speaks to other existing perspectives. For example, the reference to the disciplinary power of neoliberal governmentality is compatible with the "domestic politics" explanation. The importance of nation-branding and recognition in ontological security can incorporate the idea that Australia's China emergency narrative is linked to the US alliance. The concepts of narrative and routinised practice can be linked to the historical and cultural explanation of the China emergency. And finally, the ontological security and state transformation lens can also be used to explain China's changing foreign policy behaviour.

The significance of this approach lies in its critical potential in evaluating the security dilemma associated with the quest for ontological security. Due to the lack of space, the article has only hinted at the dangerous consequences of the elusive quest for ontological security, defined by a rigid and exclusive national identity, but as Mitzen points out,

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[128] Michael Clarke, "Why Scrap Victoria's 'Meaningless' Belt and Road Deal? Because It Sends a Powerful Message to Beijing," *The Conversation*, 22 April 2021, *https://theconversation.com/why-scrap-victorias-meaningless-belt-and-road-deal-because-it-sends-a-powerful-message-to-beijing-159536.*

> ontological security can conflict with physical security. Even a harmful or self-defeating relationship can provide ontological security, which means states can become attached to conflict. That is, states might actually come to prefer their ongoing, certain conflict to the unsettling condition of deep uncertainty as to the other's and one's own identity.[129]

Such a security dilemma seems to be precisely where the China emergency narrative is now headed, as the recent "beating drums of war" rhetoric has clearly demonstrated. While critics of the rhetoric have largely focussed on individuals, the ontological security lens can point to its deeper roots and broader socio-economic as well as geopolitical contexts, which, in the final analysis, may hold the key not only to understanding but also defusing the China emergency as a self-fulfilling prophecy. In this sense, this analysis can also help put the study of Australia–China relations in closer touch with an important literature in critical security studies (especially its Australian franchise), which has offered less conventional and state-centric, and more inclusive and sustainable paths towards security in the diverse, fragile, and fluid post-COVID world, where the ontological conditions of complexities, differences, and uncertainties are not to be feared or excluded, but to be understood and embraced.[130]

[129] Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics," p. 342.

[130] See, for example, Ken Booth, ed., *Critical Security Studies and World Politics* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2005); Burke, *Fear of Security*; Anthony Burke and Matt McDonald, eds, *Critical Security in the Asia-Pacific* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Shannon Brincat, Laura Lima, and João Nunes, eds, *Critical Theory in International Relations and Security Studies* (London: Routledge, 2012); Anthony Burke, Katrina Lee-Koo, and Matt McDonald, *Ethics and Global Security* (London: Routledge, 2014); Dennis Altman, *et al*., eds, *Why Human Security Matters: Rethinking Australian Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2020).