

## MORAL INJURY TO THE STATE

### US Security Policy and Great Power Competition

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The United States has pivoted its foreign policy focus from a fight against global terrorism to great power competition with China. One interpretation for this recent shift is an experience of national moral injury. Drawing from the fields of psychology and international relations, this article advances the argument that the global war on terrorism—specifically the instances of strategic failure in Iraq and Afghanistan—has caused the United States moral injury. Accordingly, the United States seeks to reduce the resulting anxiety through avoidance behavior and the reinforcement of US state identity by seeking a concrete object of fear in the form of China. Acknowledging the potential effects of moral injury on the United States is important for making national security decisions unencumbered by a potentially inflated fear of China and a flawed view of US state identity.

The United States first made its strategic “pivot to the Pacific” in 2011 under the Obama administration, the same year that the US military withdrew from Iraq.<sup>1</sup> While some proclaimed the pivot “dead” during the Trump administration, now, post-Afghanistan, the strategic focus on the Indo-Pacific region and emphasis on China as the “pacing threat” for the United States have never been stronger.<sup>2</sup> The focus on threats from peer and near-peer competitors, particularly China, risks compromising the United States’ role as a world power with global, rather than regional, interests.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Christopher Woody, “The US Military Is Planning for a ‘Transformative’ Year in Asia as Tensions with China Continue to Rise,” *Business Insider*, December 22, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/>.

2. Aaron Mehta, “‘Pivot to the Pacific’ Is Over, Senior U.S. Diplomat Says,” *Defense News*, March 14, 2017, <https://www.defensenews.com/>; Woody, “‘Transformative’ Year”; Jim Garamone, “Official Talks DOD Policy Role in Chinese Pacing Threat, Integrated Deterrence,” DoD, June 2, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/>; Joseph R. Biden Jr., *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, October 2022); and Lloyd J. Austin III, 2022 *National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, October 2022).

3. Richard Fontaine, “What the New China Focus Gets Wrong,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 2, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

This hyperfocus on one region abdicates a necessary global perspective. Additionally, making more of the threat of China than it is risks overreaction, which often leads to increasing, rather than easing, tensions.<sup>4</sup> Publicly exaggerating the threat China poses to the United States also provides China power.<sup>5</sup> This may be a form of power derived from fear, but it is influential nonetheless. Each of these issues erodes US power and political capital, and increases risk vis-à-vis China and other nations.

Given the dramatic swing from fighting a protracted global war on terrorism to this return to great power competition subsequent to US strategic failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, an examination of the US psyche—or state identity—post-Iraq and Afghanistan, and subsequent motives for foreign policy decisions is in order. Whereas China is clearly a global competitor of the United States, the threat China poses to the United States and its interests may be overstated.

The concept of moral injury applied to the US experience in Iraq and Afghanistan helps to explain this foreign policy shift and provides insight into potentially irrational and damaging US behavior directed toward China or other actors on the international stage. The results of moral injury may lead the United States to exaggerate the threat posed by China and act in ways that increase rather than decrease that threat, resulting in a security dilemma. This dilemma suggests that when states act to ensure their own security, such behavior automatically threatens other states that cannot know the difference between offensive or defensive security measures. Other states then respond to increase their own security, creating a spiral of events that neither state intended.<sup>6</sup>

A significant impetus for the increased US fear of China has been China's rapid economic and military rise, its increased flexing of its economic and military might in the Pacific region, and its expanded involvement in South America, Africa, and even the Arctic. Yet this assessment is incomplete without an evaluation of US interests and motivations for its security policies.

American policymakers should reflect on the perception that a renewed and intense focus on China after a disastrous withdrawal from America's longest war might be motivated in part—consciously or subconsciously—by moral injury suffered by the nation after fighting two simultaneous counterinsurgencies and failing. The dramatic success in the 1991 Gulf War was key in healing the US psyche after the failure of Vietnam, at least for foreign policymakers and the Department of Defense.<sup>7</sup> Consideration should be given to the notion that another such palliative is desired and being sought with current foreign policy and national defense decisions.

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4. Michael E. O' Hanlon, "Getting China Right: Resoluteness without Overreaction," Brookings (website), June 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

5. See for example Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 62.

6. See Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, 30, no. 2 (January 1978).

7. "George H. W. Bush Proclaims a Cure for the Vietnam Syndrome," *Voices and Visions* (blog), March 1, 1991, <http://vandyreader.org/>; and see also E. J. Dionne, "Kicking the 'Vietnam Syndrome,'" *Washington Post*, March 4, 1991, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

This article is not intended in any way to diminish the very real effects of moral injury on military veterans at the individual level. The resultant effects of such injury are as much or more damaging to the individual and those close to them, and recovery is certainly difficult. This article will defer to a previous issue of the journal to define in depth the concept of moral injury and address important related aspects in greater detail. Instead, this article will address the significant potential effects of moral injury to the psyche and identity of a nation, and how those damaging effects might impact future foreign policy choices in the form of national strategies. While a nation suffering collective moral injury may desire to heal, the behaviors that result from that injury, particularly, the creation or exaggeration of a threat, are actually obstacles to healing.

## **Moral Injury Defined**

Concisely put, moral injury “is the distressing psychological, behavioral, social, and sometimes spiritual aftermath of exposure” to traumatic events.<sup>8</sup> Moral injury often results from an act of commission or omission which “goes against an individual’s values and moral beliefs.”<sup>9</sup> It is important here to understand that moral injury itself is the actual “distress that individuals feel when they perpetrate, witness or fail to prevent an act that transgresses their core ethical beliefs.”<sup>10</sup> As one international relations study notes, “At its core, moral injury is the consequence of a profound loss of control.”<sup>11</sup> The focus herein is less on the traumatic events causing the moral injury and more on the actual distress felt by a state as a collective of individuals—here, the United States—and the potential attendant behaviors and foreign policy responses that follow such injury.

## **State Susceptibility to Moral Injury**

International relations scholarship commonly recognizes and treats states as unitary actors.<sup>12</sup> The focus of these scholars is not in proving this claim, but in relying on that assumption in order to advance propositions about choices states make. This model for state characteristics and behavior, though not perfect, has demonstrated durability in political science. States as a collective of individuals

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8. Sonya B. Norman and Shira Maguen, “Moral Injury,” PTSD: National Center for PTSD, US Department of Veteran Affairs, July 26, 2021, <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/>.

9. Norman and Maguen.

10. Edgar Jones, “Moral Injury in a Context of Trauma,” *British Journal of Psychiatry* 216, no. 3 (March 2020): 127, <https://doi.org/>.

11. Jelena Subotic and Brent J. Steele, “Moral Injury in International Relations,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 3, no. 4 (October 1, 2018): 390, <https://doi.org/>.

12. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press Inc., 1979); Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992); Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton University Press, 2005); and Alexander Wendt, “The State as Person in International Theory,” *Review of International Studies* 30, no. 2 (2004).

more or less exhibit the characteristics of individuals. Additionally, “state actions in the foreign policy realm are constrained and empowered by prevailing social practices at home and abroad.”<sup>13</sup>

Thus, it is possible to extend moral injury theory and resultant behaviors to the national and international environments: “The ‘state as person’ has heuristic value insofar as it indexes real aspects of the ways in which states operate in world politics.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed scholars and commentators today theorize the state and/or its collective population can suffer moral injury—knowingly or unknowingly—in a manner similar to that of an individual, and subsequently may manifest behaviors at the national and international level that have been observed in individuals who have suffered moral injury, such as avoidance and creation or exaggeration of a threat, leading away from anxiety and toward fear.<sup>15</sup> And, much like the effects of moral injury on an individual, moral injury can be unintended and even unidentified. Moreover, moral injury thus leads to an identity crisis of sorts for the state.

Ultimately, the potential effects of moral injury at the national scale are worthy of close scrutiny. Such effects of moral injury impact subsequent foreign policy decisions.

It is therefore reasonable to maintain that the United States, suffering from the effects of moral injury as a result of military and strategic failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, and desiring to alleviate the resulting anxiety, would intentionally attempt to produce an international structure that would allow it to be successful in the future. Evidence of collective moral injury includes the rapid strategic shift away from the Global War on Terror, including the sudden elimination of much of the counterinsurgency literature and focus from professional military education curricula. If the United States shifts from a focus on global terrorism toward a structure defined by great power competition, the international structure, insofar as it pertains to US perceptions of and actions within that structure, will better conform to its historical strengths.

## State Identity and Ontological Security

The concept of state identity entails a state’s deeply held ontological beliefs upon which it bases its interests in international politics. In a constructivist understanding of state identity, states—as actors or agents—and international structures

13. Ted Hopf, “The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory,” *International Security* 23, no. 1 (1998): 179.

14. Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma,” *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (September 2006): 352, <https://doi.org/>.

15. Subotic and Steele, “Moral Injury”; Rita Nakashima Brock and Kelly Brown Douglas, “Can We Heal the Moral Injury of Our Nation?,” *Hill* (blog), January 8, 2022, <https://thehill.com/>; and Daniel Rothenberg, “Moral Injury and the Lived Experience of Political Violence,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 36, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/>.

“are produced or reproduced by what actors do.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, state identity is socially constructed and informs the state’s view of itself in terms of other actors.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, a state will act in accordance with its perceived identity, role, and status in the international community.<sup>18</sup>

In line with this constructivist framework, state identity plays a key role in determining state interests.<sup>19</sup> These perceived interests guide foreign policy choices as states act in ways that are “appropriate” to the current situation and state-to-state relationships based on a given identity.<sup>20</sup> This identity is theorized to be essential for providing predictability and order in international relationships.<sup>21</sup> In turn, the identity-based need for predictability and order can affect the behaviors—that is, foreign policies—of a state when it is disrupted by moral injury.

A concept closely related to state identity is that of ontological security. State identity is important not only for defining state interests, but also in defining the state’s own perception of itself and its appropriate role in the world. Ontological security is defined as “security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice.”<sup>22</sup> Some scholars posit states seek ontological security in addition to physical security, and some also argue some states pursue physical security to ensure ontological security.<sup>23</sup>

A state seeks ontological security to provide stability and continuity over time.<sup>24</sup> A state may even seek the routinization of security dilemmas—perhaps manifesting as arms races—not only because it seeks physical security, but also because it desires ontological security, manifested in the stability of state identity vis-à-vis another state, which reduces uncertainty.<sup>25</sup> A state may also establish narratives as part of these routinization efforts in order to regain a perception of control.<sup>26</sup>

The wars in which the United States had been involved for the last two decades had a particularly notable impact on the incidence of moral injury among the US population,

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16. Alexander Wendt, “Collective Identity Formation and the International State,” *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 2 (1994): 390.

17. Wendt, “Anarchy,” 396–97.

18. Brent A. Lawnczak, *Confronting the Myth of Soft Power in US Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022), 33–35.

19. Wendt, “Anarchy,” 398.

20. James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, “The Logic of Appropriateness,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science*, ed. Robert Goodin (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011).

21. Hopf, “Promise of Constructivism,” 174.

22. Mitzen, “Ontological Security,” 344; and see also Bill McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests: A Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

23. Mitzen, “Ontological Security,” 342; and Nina C. Krickel-Choi, “The Embodied State: Why and How Physical Security Matters for Ontological Security,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 25, no. 1 (2022).

24. Mitzen, 344.

25. Mitzen, 361.

26. Subotic and Steele, “Moral Injury,” 391.

particularly members of the military.<sup>27</sup> Applying a constructivist framework, one can argue the United States has endured moral injury following the strategic failures of the US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In addition to the negative military, political, and sociological effects that have resulted from the counterinsurgency and nation-building wars the United States fought in those places, the very fact that the United States started the war in Iraq, unlike many wars it has successfully fought in the past, adds to the potential for moral injury on a national scale. Its break with long-standing, if unwritten, national policy of not beginning offensive wars—which is also contradictory to the norms that characterize US state identity—is likely a key element in setting the country up for moral injury.<sup>28</sup>

The ambiguity of US strategy in Afghanistan, the fact that it was the longest war in the history of the country, and the rapid manner in which the Taliban reestablished control, all likely have similar implications for moral injury to the nation. These include avoidance behavior, which manifested in the rapid exit from Afghanistan and a policy shift away from counterinsurgency and nation-building. Moral injury also manifests in the need to alleviate anxiety through the creation or exaggeration of a concrete source of fear in the form of China.

Yet, rather than bending its identity and ensuing interests to suit a changing global dynamic, can a powerful state like the United States instead attempt to shift the global playing field back toward one in which it previously experienced most of its perceived success? A quest for ontological security would suggest this as a plausible course of action for a United States suffering from moral injury. The concept of ontological security holds that the security of a state's identity is threatened by uncertainty more than fear.<sup>29</sup> Further, “such uncertainty can make it difficult to act, which frustrates the action-identity dynamic and makes it difficult to sustain a self-conception.”<sup>30</sup>

Uncertainty can create anxiety, something that causes a state to struggle and seek certainty, a common behavior resulting from moral injury. Outward aggression is not an automatic outcome of a national quest for ontological security. Whether a state reacts aggressively toward a perceived threat or retreats from that threat and takes up an isolationist posture will depend on the state identity that manifests as a result of the interaction with the threatening state or other relevant states.<sup>31</sup>

27. Brett T. Litz et al., “Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 29, no. 8 (December 2009): 697, <https://doi.org/>.

28. Robert Jervis, “Understanding the Bush Doctrine,” *Political Science Quarterly* 118, no. 3 (2003); and Frontline PBS, “Analyses: Assessing The Bush Doctrine – The War Behind Closed Doors,” accessed January 7, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/>.

29. Mitzen, “Ontological Security,” 342.

30. Mitzen, 345.

31. See Brent Steele, “Ontological Security and the Power of Self-Identity: British Neutrality and the American Civil War,” *Review of International Studies* 31, no. 3 (2005).

## Resultant Behaviors Associated with Moral Injury

There are multiple forms of behavior that are thought to result from individual moral injury. Some of these include problems trusting others, avoidance behaviors, “feelings of shame and guilt,” “alterations in cognitions and beliefs,” and “[other] maladaptive coping responses.”<sup>32</sup> It is theorized that some individuals experience an existential crisis—questioning their deeply held identity—as a result of moral injury.<sup>33</sup>

Because the state is a corporation of individuals, it is likely that state behaviors subsequent to moral injury differ in content and scope from individuals’ in terms of specific outcomes. Still, there are at least two forms of individual response to moral injury that may directly relate to state behavior. First, policy choices of a state suffering moral injury can often be indicative of avoidance behavior. Second, because moral injury can lead to a perceived loss of control resulting in anxiety, the state will seek to retain or reclaim its long-standing role in international relations regarding its enduring identity.<sup>34</sup> Policy choices and reestablishing long-standing roles in international relations are state-level attempts to reestablish control.

First, it is important to distinguish the concepts of fear and anxiety, as understood in international relations theory, to demonstrate the motivations behind these responses to moral injury. Fear is normally described in concrete terms, such as the fear of a rising state power which can threaten one’s own power and position in the world, or the fear of an adversary’s use of force.<sup>35</sup> Anxiety is defined as “a more ambiguous state of unease, an affect that arises when identity is challenged or in flux.”<sup>36</sup> A state’s desire to have a perception of control over events, stemming from its need to reduce anxiety, may result in a quest to regain that control and a subsequent congruence between actions and identity.

It has been further hypothesized that as “applied to states,” a quest for “ontological security can conflict with physical security.” It is argued that “even a harmful or self-defeating relationship can provide ontological security, which means states can become attached to conflict.”<sup>37</sup> In the simplest of terms, fear is perceived to be more acceptable for the state than anxiety.

This leads to a discussion of the potential response the United States has undertaken after suffering moral injury that has resulted in a state identity crisis. That is,

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32. Victoria Williamson et al., “Moral Injury: The Effect on Mental Health and Implications for Treatment,” *Lancet Psychiatry* 8, no. 6 (June 2021): 453, <https://doi.org/>; and “Moral Injury,” DAV [Disabled American Veterans], accessed January 9, 2023, <https://www.dav.org/>.

33. Williamson et al., 454.

34. Subotic and Steele, “Moral Injury,” 390.

35. Subotic and Steele, 388; Shiping Tang, “Fear in International Politics: Two Positions,” *International Studies Review* 10, no. 3 (2008); and Waltz, *International Politics*, 103.

36. Brent Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (London: Routledge, 2008), 51, as cited in Subotic and Steele, “Moral Injury,” 388.

37. Mitzen, “Ontological Security,” 342; and see also Nina C. Krickel-Choi, “State Personhood and Ontological Security as a Framework of Existence: Moving beyond Identity, Discovering Sovereignty,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, August 9, 2022, <https://doi.org/>.

in seeking to reduce anxiety through avoidance behavior, America has turned away from a more extensive postwar examination of the potential lessons that could be learned from two decades of counterinsurgency and nation-building and reverted to the relative stability and predictability of great power competition, thus replacing anxiety with fear. This does not mean that the pursuit of physical security is always and entirely selfish, egotistical, and illegitimate as suggested by pacifist critics. Yet the repercussions of moral injury to the state, including avoidance behavior and the tendency to exaggerate fear in order to alleviate anxiety, must be considered when making foreign policy decisions related to a threat that arises subsequent to that moral injury elsewhere.

## Source and Effect of US Moral Injury

The long campaign against global terrorism, particularly the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, has created an identity crisis for the United States.<sup>38</sup> The shifting or ambiguous strategic goals of the campaign, along with many other domestic and global factors, have called into question the ability of the United States to win wars. Additionally, these wars and strategic failures destabilize the perception of “US exceptionalism and benevolent hegemony,” which serve as central features of US state identity.<sup>39</sup> Such “deep insecurity renders the [state’s] identity insecure.”<sup>40</sup>

As discussed above, one result of this moral injury is avoidance behavior. Therefore, moral injury suffered by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan can arguably be considered as a reason for the dramatic—and some would argue, myopic—shift to China as the main threat to US and international security. Due to anxiety resulting from the perception it cannot win wars and its compromised identity based in benevolent hegemony and exceptionalism, the United States has been “motivated to create cognitive and behavioral certainty . . . by establishing routines.”<sup>41</sup> One routine that fosters stability of US identity is great power competition, in this case with China.

Moral injury to the identity of the United States, likely not the sole reason for such a significant foreign policy shift to great power competition with China, should be carefully considered as a potentially destructive influence on foreign policy. As noted, moral injury leads to the avoidance of issues that require attention but that the injured may desire to eschew. More significantly, perhaps, is the tendency for the injured to exaggerate threats in the attempt to alleviate anxiety by focusing on a concrete source of fear.

38. Subotic and Steele, “Moral Injury,” 387.

39. Subotic and Steele, 387; see also G. John Ikenberry, “Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of American Postwar Order,” *International Security* 23, no. 3 (1999), <http://www.mitpressjournals.org/>; Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, new ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); and Robert Kagan, “The Benevolent Empire,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 111 (1998), <https://doi.org/>.

40. Mitzen, “Ontological Security,” 342.

41. Mitzen, 342.



These effects of moral injury suffered as a result of national strategic failures in the Global War on Terror create a difficult situation for the United States. Policymakers may perceive the need to select one of two basic options: a change in the state's perception of the strategic environment or a change in its deeply held state identity. In the present case, due to the anxiety resulting from national moral injury, the United States has returned to a well-known paradigm of state-on-state competition. The focus on a near-peer state actor provides US policymakers with a shift in the strategic environment toward a well-understood strategic dynamic in which the United States has previously been successful, if not dominant. This focus also avoids the difficult work of altering the US national identity.

The shift back to great power competition, and viewing China as a threat in particular, provides the United States ontological security and a more predictable international environment; moreover, this move ensures a desirable state identity. Rather than seeking to understand or change the rules of the game being played—global war on terrorism, counterinsurgency, nation-building—a game that has resulted in national moral injury, the United States has determined to change the game itself. The one at which it has succeeded is that of state-on-state conflict—hence, the United States has decided to return to the well-established international game with its return to great power competition.

One scholar has advanced the potential of the “Thucydides Trap” in terms of US–China relations.<sup>42</sup> Simply put, conflict or war between two great powers is inevitable for no other reason than each party views the other as a potential enemy. Because one views the other as an enemy, it treats it as such, creating a security dilemma in which the actions of the other state create fear in one's own state. When it comes to moral injury, “agents develop . . . narratives as routines to gain some sense of control over themselves and within their environment.”<sup>43</sup>

Rather than great power competition being a symptom of the global environment and the rise of China, through narratives—routines—the United States is unwittingly entering a Thucydides Trap: viewing and treating China as an enemy makes China respond as an enemy. This will increase fear, but by placing China in position as the pacing threat, it also reduces anxiety for the United States by identifying a clear and recognizable adversary rather than coping with the intangible nature of global terrorism.

Reducing anxiety is most relevant for one who suffers from moral injury even at the expense of increasing fear. Accepting the premise of this trap and cementing it in US foreign policy also has the additional benefit of impacting the “agency of others . . . in predictable ways,” which is also theorized as an important response to moral injury.<sup>44</sup> In this case, the desired effect is to influence China to behave in the ways predicted by

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42. Graham Allison, “The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?,” *Atlantic*, September 24, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/>; and John J. Mearsheimer, “China's Unpeaceful Rise,” *Current History* 105, no. 690 (2006): 160–62, <https://doi.org/>.

43. Subotic and Steele, “Moral Injury,” 391.

44. Subotic and Steele, 391.

the theory and expected by the United States, responding appropriately as a competitor and threat.

Many authors have drawn direct connections between the behavior of Russia of late and the potential of a rising China in the near future.<sup>45</sup> The potentially exaggerated emphasis on and theoretical overextension of the Russian war in Ukraine to a China–Taiwan scenario enable US policymakers to point to Russia and claim that its actions are indicative of the return to great power competition. That is, the real threat to national security is only from other great powers.

Yet, if Russia is a great power—a debatable proposition, nuclear weapons notwithstanding—it is a threat only to lesser powers. It is thought that these supposed great powers are the only ones that can truly challenge national sovereignty and are thus to be the focus on national strategic thinking from now on. While Russia is not as feared by the United States as is China, its overt military aggression in Ukraine is used as supporting evidence that great power competition is alive and well in the world. Moreover, China, having a more powerful economy and possibly military, is seen as an even greater threat than Russia. Russia’s willingness to act aggressively is possibly being used as evidence by some that China will follow with even worse results for the United States.

The US amplification of the Russian threat based on Russia’s war in Ukraine likely serves a purpose in addition to the defense and promotion of democracy and self-determination largely proclaimed by the press, pundits, and policymakers in the United States. Certainly, the Russian aggression in Ukraine was not a US invention to aid it in dealing with moral injury incurred in Iraq or Afghanistan. Yet the potential for exaggerating the threat to the level of one existential to the United States should be considered. In the context of moral injury to the United States, the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the tendency of some policymakers to assert similarities to US-China relations serve as evidence to justify a shift away from the failures that cause anxiety by creating a target of fear that alleviates that anxiety.

## **A Bipolar, Fear-Led World**

The United States is shaping a world and national identity with which, some would say, it is better positioned to lead and potentially dominate. The world defined largely by a Global War on Terror has proven to be unpredictable. Great power competition, specifically near-peer global competition with China, provides predictability that assuages the anxiety from an experience of national moral injury: “States might actually come to prefer their ongoing, certain conflict to the unsettling condition of deep

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45. Parth Satam, “Defeat Russia In Ukraine to Deter China in Taiwan: Former NATO Boss Says Don’t Repeat Putin’s Mistake with Xi Jinping,” *EurAsian Times*, January 8, 2023, <https://eurasianimes.com/>; Agence France-Presse, “China Attacking Taiwan Would Be ‘Mistake’ Like Russia’s in Ukraine, US General Says,” *VOA [Voice of America]*, November 16, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/>; and C. Todd Lopez, “China May Draw Lessons from Russian Failures in Ukraine,” *DoD*, September 8, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/>.

uncertainty as to . . . one's own identity."<sup>46</sup> The United States can revitalize US exceptionalism and benevolent hegemony and heal its moral injury by countering a rising and aggressive China.

As mentioned, a state's preference for ontological security causes it to enter into long-lasting rivalries or persistent conflict.<sup>47</sup> This overwhelming desire to seek stability—stronger than the desire for cooperation or peace, even in relationships characterized by persistent conflict—makes it difficult to foster change.<sup>48</sup> Given this understanding, it is reasonable to expect that a United States that has suffered moral injury and seeks to avoid anxiety in international relationships would be willing to accept—possibly even create—an international environment characterized by competition and conflict with China.

Kenneth Waltz has posited that a bipolar international system is the most stable.<sup>49</sup> Yet it is not stable because it reduces fear, but because it reduces unpredictability and anxiety. A bipolar international system, consisting of just two great powers, makes clear “who is a danger to whom.”<sup>50</sup> The US perception of its primacy as the sole superpower is slipping in a post-Iraq/Afghanistan world; it is therefore creating or reverting to a bipolar system. The United States does this not because it is the best way to reduce fear, but because it enables it to deal with the moral injury and resulting anxiety and perceived damage to its state identity.

It has also been postulated that one consequence of this avoidance behavior, rooted in the moral injury to the United States resulting from its loss in Iraq, is the rise of “dominance politics, derived from the [US] failures to win and fueled by the need to avoid future humiliations.”<sup>51</sup> These dominance politics have led to “particularly forceful measures,” including US withdrawal from international climate change and Iranian nuclear disarmament treaties, renegotiation of trade relationships, and renegotiation of financial and military commitments to NATO.<sup>52</sup>

The list should also include the intense focus on China as the main threat to the United States. China as a threat provides “certainty as an expression of control” that is sought by the nation in order to reduce the malign effects of moral injury.<sup>53</sup> The need to end the resulting anxiety requires some level of control and certainty. This sense of control can be regained by placing the future in one's own hands even if that certainty

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46. Mitzen, “Ontological Security,” 342.

47. Mitzen, 373; and see also Ian Mannes, “European [Security] Union: From Existential Threat to Ontological Security,” Copenhagen Peace Research Institute, 2002, <https://lucris.lub.lu.se/>.

48. Mitzen, 343.

49. Waltz, *International Politics*, 161.

50. Waltz, 170.

51. Subotic and Steele, “Moral Injury,” 395.

52. Subotic and Steele, 395.

53. Subotic and Steele, 395; and see also Alan Collins, “Escaping a Security Dilemma: Anarchy, Certainty and Embedded Norms,” *International Politics* 51, no. 5 (September 2014), <https://doi.org/>.

“that the other is a true aggressor” is misplaced.<sup>54</sup> How better to gain that control and reduce national anxiety than to simply change the game being played to one in which the United States has previously been successful, even dominant?

## Implications of Moral Injury for National Security Policy

The impact of moral injury to the United States following the failures in Iraq and Afghanistan may not result in consciously malign foreign policy decisions. The injury itself might not even be recognized by policymakers, especially given the turnover of the commander in chief every four to eight years. Moral injury, as a psychological effect, is likely the result of the interaction of strategic failure over a lengthy period, coupled with the enduring characteristics of US identity and relationships in world affairs. Yet as unintentional as a response such as avoidance or replacement of anxiety for fear may be, the United States must recognize the potential that moral injury exists and can affect foreign policy decisions in significant and potentially negative ways.

An alternate view is that the US reaction to supposed strategic failures can be viewed as intentional. The US withdrawal from a “peripheral interest . . . enables a US (and Western) strategic reset of its foreign policy.”<sup>55</sup> The return to great power competition—if it previously ended—may have been inevitable.<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps neorealists are right, and after all is said and done, all interstate relationships boil down to physical security. Yet if that were the case, the symptoms, behaviors, and policies that result from moral injury—such as avoidance, anxiety, the quest for ontological insecurity, and the compulsion to behave in ways appropriate to a deeply ingrained state identity—would not manifest in the empirical record. If moral injury were not a factor in foreign policymaking, neorealist-based tracing of state interests to security needs would be rather simple. It is not.

Intentional or unintentional, conscious or subconscious, the behaviors triggered by moral injury provide the potential for a “cognitive cocoon” in which the state resorts to a familiar environment that affords stability, reduces anxiety, and provides some level of predictability.<sup>57</sup> This article has proposed that the United States is creating more of a formidable enemy of China than it is in reality. Such action is an attempt to create a world congruent with a preferred US identity, which decreases anxiety, even in the face of what is proclaimed to be an existential threat.

The routine of interstate competition has characterized international relations for centuries. It is entirely plausible that the post-9/11 break from this routine may only

54. Subotic and Steele, 395; and Jennifer Mitzen and Randall L. Schweller, “Knowing the Unknown Unknowns: Misplaced Certainty and the Onset of War,” *Security Studies* 20, no. 1 (March 21, 2011): 19, <https://doi.org/>.

55. Graeme Herd, “The Causes and the Consequences of Strategic Failure in Afghanistan?,” George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, August 2021, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/>.

56. Thomas Wright, “The Return to Great-Power Rivalry Was Inevitable,” *Brookings* (blog), September 12, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

57. Mitzen, “Ontological Security,” 346.

have increased anxiety during the global war on terrorism.<sup>58</sup> The United States knows and understands a world of great power competition. It became one of the world's greatest powers in the wake of massive interstate conflict at the end of World War II. It reigned as the world's single superpower after the end of the Cold War. Shifting interests back to this familiar ground provides a perception of healing from the moral injury suffered with the failures of Iraq and Afghanistan.

## **Conclusion**

The result of the national moral injury suffered by the United States due to the Global War on Terror has two important implications. First, the important lessons that might be learned from Iraq and Afghanistan will likely be overlooked due to avoidance behavior and a rapid shift of policy focus toward a potentially exaggerated threat. Yet, even in failure, there are valuable lessons regarding the use of force, stabilization efforts, preemptive war, nation-building, international relations, and myriad other topics.

Second, and perhaps more important, China's role as the pacing threat is often overstated. This has already led to a nearly myopic focus of US policies, military planning, force development, and strategies on China. This is to the detriment of many other significant threats the nation faces and areas of interest outside of the Indo-Pacific region.

Moreover, a nearly singular focus on China is shortsighted in terms of national global strategy requisite of a world superpower. Ironically, a warning of such a myopic approach came several years ago from Chinese military analysts: "When a military [puts] excessive focus on dealing with a certain specified type of enemy this can possibly result in their being attacked and defeated by another enemy outside of their field of vision."<sup>59</sup>

US foreign policymakers would be wise to be introspective when determining all of the significant causes of the return to great power competition, including that it at least partially derives from national moral injury. Yet such a level of self-reflection is not likely in the current domestic political environment within the United States. China's malign activities in the Western Pacific certainly do not aid the US development of a response that is unprejudiced by recent moral injury experienced as a result of the Global War on Terror. Even so, US policymakers must simultaneously learn from and deal with the strategic impacts of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and certainly approach other threats only for what they are, but no more.

Scholars may aid policymakers through additional examinations of the causes and effects of moral injury to the state. Scholars should then study carefully the cases of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Vietnam as events likely to have resulted in moral injury to the

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58. See Mitzen, 347.

59. David Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020), 209.

United States. Such research should then identify and analyze the significant swings in foreign policy direction following these conflicts. Some shifts may be viewed positively, as they typically are with Vietnam. Yet shifts can also be detrimental to both the short- and long-term interests of the United States, as proposed here regarding the inflation of a threat from China.

Furthermore, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait provided an opportunity for the United States to project power against a malign state actor and both recover international credibility and ease the effects of moral injury suffered from Vietnam. But the long-term impacts of a decades-long US involvement in Iraq show that there are unknown consequences even when the policy choices that were influenced by previous moral injury seem rational, morally sound, and aligned with state identity at the time.

A detailed analysis of the rationale policymakers provided in these cases to justify foreign policy choices is then needed. Examining what policymakers say to various audiences to gain support for policy shifts is critical to understanding the impact of moral injury as one of several key variables in the calculus of foreign policymaking.

The result of the moral injury of Iraq and Afghanistan has been a resistance to learning about those failures by turning immediately to a different, though familiar, threat. This allows the United States to forget the recent conflicts that caused the injury, and also to decrease the anxiety of a world that proffered little success for the nation on the world stage. Recognition of this moral injury and its influence on subsequent foreign policy decisions is essential in terms of allowing the United States to approach the future with clear eyes. **Æ**

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