Memory-Political Deterrence: Shielding Collective Memory and Ontological Security through Dissuasion

KARL GUSTAFSSON
Stockholm University, Sweden

AND

MARIA MÅLKSOO
University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Traditionally used within the context of hard military power in interstate relations, the concept of deterrence has progressively extended to non-state actors and new issue areas. While scholarship on the social aspects of deterrence has expanded our understanding of this core international security focus, the practice of existing research has largely remained on physical security. This article argues that there is a phenomenon in international politics that can be called memory-political deterrence. Memory-political deterrence refers to the ways in which states seek to dissuade other political actors from taking actions that threaten the collective memory narratives that underpin the ontological security of the deterring actor. Memory-political deterrence works, for example, through political rhetoric, declarations, diplomatic insults, commemorative practices, and punitive memory laws. We illustrate the article’s arguments through empirical examples from Russia’s and China’s recent memory-political deterrence efforts toward Ukraine and Japan, respectively. In doing so, we elucidate the ways in which memory politics is intertwined with geopolitics, underpinning wider world-ordering aspirations.

El concepto de disuasión, tradicionalmente utilizado en el contexto del poder militar duro en las relaciones interestatales, se ha extendido progresivamente a los agentes no estatales y a nuevas áreas temáticas. Si bien los estudios en materia de los aspectos sociales de la disuasión han ampliado nuestra comprensión de esta práctica básica en el campo de la seguridad internacional, la investigación existente se ha seguido centrándola, en gran medida, en la seguridad física. Este artículo argumenta que existe un fenómeno dentro de la política internacional que puede llamarse disuasión política de la memoria. La disuasión política de la memoria se refiere a las formas por las que los Estados buscan disuadir a otros agentes políticos de llevar a cabo acciones que amenacen las narrativas de la memoria colectiva que sustentan la seguridad ontológica del agente disuasorio. La disuasión política de la memoria funciona, por ejemplo, a través de la retórica política, de las declaraciones, de los insultos diplomáticos, de las prácticas conmemorativas y de las leyes punitivas referentes a la memoria. Ilustramos los argumentos de este artículo a través de ejemplos empíricos obtenidos de los recientes esfuerzos de disuasión política de la memoria por parte de Rusia y China hacia Ucrania y Japón, respectivamente. Al hacer esto, ponemos de relieve las formas en que la política de la memoria se entrelaza con la geopolítica, apuntalando, así, aspiraciones más amplias de ordenamiento mundial.

Traditionnellement utilisé dans le contexte de moyens militaires dans les relations interétatiques, le concept de dissuasion s’est progressivement élargi pour inclure les acteurs non étatiques et de nouveaux domaines problématiques. Bien que les travaux de recherche relatifs aux aspects sociaux de la disuasion aient enrichi notre compréhension de cette pratique clé en sécurité internationale, les recherches existantes se concentrent largement sur la sécurité physique. Cet article affirme qu’il existe un phénomène en politique internationale que l’on peut qualifier de « dissuasion politique Mémoire ». Celle-ci fait référence aux façons dont les États tentent de dissuader d’autres acteurs politiques de prendre des mesures qui menacent les récits de la mémoire collective qui sous-tendent la sécurité ontologique de l’auteur de la dissuasion. La dissuasion politique Mémoire fonctionne, par exemple, grâce à la réthorique politique, aux déclarations, aux insultes diplomatiques, aux pratiques commémoratives et aux lois punitives sur la mémoire. Nous illustrons les arguments contenus dans cet article par le biais d’exemples empiriques issus de récents efforts de dissuasion politique Mémoire de la Russie et de la Chine à l’égard de l’Ukraine et du Japon respectivement. En disant ça, nous clarifions l’enchêvement des politiques de mémoire avec la géopolitique, qui sous-tend les aspirations d’ordre mondial au sens large.

Introduction

The 2020 amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation warn that “diminishing the significance of the people’s heroism in defending the Fatherland is not permitted.” Other recently adopted Russian memory laws have attached explicit punishments to violations of Russia’s...
state-sanctioned memory. This policing of Russia’s preferred public narrative about the Second World War (WWII) is not limited to its domestic audience, as Russia’s countering of so-called “historical revisionism” well beyond its borders vividly demonstrates. Russia has, for example, introduced draft resolutions against the glorification of Nazism at the United Nations General Assembly and instrumentalized historically charged tropes of “denazification” and “genocide” to rationalize the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. As President Putin threatened in his National Interest article in commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of WWII: “Neglecting the lessons of history inevitably leads to a harsh payback” (Putin 2020b).

In the run-up to the seventieth anniversary of the end of WWII, Chinese representatives repeatedly warned Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō not to dilute previous prime ministers’ apology statements or otherwise downplay Japan’s wartime aggression against China in his long-anticipated commemorative speech. For example, in a speech said to indicate that “Beijing is closely watching Abe’s planned 70th-anniversary statement,” Chinese President Xi Jinping reportedly warned “against attempts to distort or whitewash Japan’s history of aggression” (Renminwang 2015). Similarly, Chinese ambassador to Japan Cheng Yonghua warned Abe “not to backtrack on previous government statements” (Reuters 2015).

The Russian memory laws and the threat made by Putin, as well as the Chinese warnings to Japan, exemplify the main argument of this article: There is a phenomenon in international politics that can be called memory-political deterrence. Memory-political deterrence refers to the ways in which states seek to dissuade other political actors from taking actions that threaten the collective memory narratives underpinning the ontological security of the deterring actor. As with traditionally understood deterrence in international politics, efforts at memory-political deterrence can inflame tensions.

Research on deterrence has long occupied a central role in international relations (IR). Traditionally used primarily within the context of hard military power in interstate relations, the concept has increasingly been applied both to non-state actors and to new issue areas, ranging from terrorism to cyber and hybrid warfare (Gearson 2012; Stevens 2012; Nye 2016/2017; Osinga and Sweis 2021; Wigell 2021). Another stream of research has begun to explore the social, discursive, and ritualistic aspects of deterrence (e.g., Lupovici 2010, 2019; Vuori 2016; Mälksoo 2021a). While such scholarship has expanded our understandings of both the issue areas in which deterrence is practiced, as well as how it is practiced, the focus has nonetheless largely remained on physical security. This article argues that expanding the application of deterrence beyond the realm of physical security and applying it also to ontological security, and more specifically to mnemonic security—a subcategory of ontological security—is a fruitful endeavor that brings together and develops several topical research agendas.

Having a consistent biographical narrative, based on collective memory, is considered one of the main sources of ontological security (Steele 2008; Subotić 2016). Earlier scholarship has demonstrated that states seek to protect and defend the memories that provide them with ontological security (Zarakol 2010; Gustafsson 2014; Mälksoo 2015; Bachleitner 2021). Such actions have often resulted in bilateral conflict over divergent understandings of the past (Budryte 2018; Belavusau, Giszczynska-Grabias, and Mälksoo 2021; Malinova 2021). Introducing the notion of deterrence into the study of ontological security expands our understanding of how states deal with their self-defined ontological security threats. Existing research has highlighted responses such as securitization and identity change (Rumellili 2015; Browning and Joenniemi 2017; Gustafsson 2022). Deterrence is a hitherto unexplored possibility within the context of ontological security management.

In the realm of memory politics, scholars have investigated how collective memory influences foreign policy, causes bilateral disputes, and acts as an obstacle to international cooperation, alongside the historical, political, and legal intricacies of instrumentalizing the past for the purposes of the present (e.g., Berger 2012; Khoury 2018; Weiss-Wendt 2021). But the role of memory politics in the broader edifice of attempts to dissuade other actors from taking an unwanted action of some sort has not been systematically examined in IR thus far. The concept of deterrence enables us to theorize memory politics along an escalation ladder containing various memory-political measures, ranging from diplomatic warnings and threats to explicitly punitive memory laws with extraterritorial appeal. International memory politics entails both direct and extended deterrence moves, meaning that states’ memory-political actions are not just in the service of nationalized memory regimes, but can also be considered as ways of strengthening alliances to deter others from undertaking unwanted actions as well as signaling a preferred international order by setting out to preemptively defend its normative, mnemonic component.

Since delineating the phenomenon of memory-political deterrence in international politics is the main aim of this article, we follow Lupovici’s (2021) suggestion to focus primarily on the adoption, rather than success, of deterrence. Focusing on adoption is useful for comparative purposes, both between cases and over time within cases. We illustrate the argument with examples from two empirical contexts: (i) Russia’s memory-political deterrence efforts, in particular through its openly extraterritorial memory laws, most recently toward Ukraine; and (ii) China’s memory-political deterrence messaging vis-à-vis Japan, including its attempts to establish international memory alliances and an international memory order based on the memory of WWII. While the actions taken by these states may be seen as part of domestic consumption and for deterring domestic audiences from diverging from the official state-sanctioned line on collective memory, here we primarily elucidate their international ramifications. Both our cases constitute enduring international rivalries over state-endorsed collective memory. Russia and China are useful cases for exploring the phenomenon in focus since authoritarian states can be assumed to use a wider range of memory-political deterrence measures in their “governing mythology” (Bell 2003, 66) because they operate under lesser constraints to the ruling elites compared to democracies. Observing comparatively the adoption and employment of memory-political deterrence strategies over time in Russia and China further provides an indication of what some of the ideological content of an alternative Sino-Russian world order might look like. In such an international order where memory-political deterrence is central, memory takes on a normative function that defines roles, relationships, and related obligations between former wartime allies: those who made the greatest contribution to victory, those seen as having an obligation to be grateful for wartime assistance, and those who should be sorry for their wartime aggression (compare Gustafsson and Hall 2021; Mälksoo 2021b).
The next section surveys the literature on deterrence in both strategic and legal studies, which have traditionally been siloed. Consequently, we develop our conceptualization of memory-political deterrence, outlining how it is related to ontological security, and important analytical distinctions that help identify different ways in which memory-political deterrence may be practiced. The ensuing two sections contain the empirical illustrations. The first of these focuses on Russia’s ambitions toward controlling the broader post-Soviet space via memory-political deterrence attempts, primarily through memory laws. The second illustration zooms in on China’s memory-political deterrence efforts toward Japan. In the final section, we draw out the broader ramifications of our argument and provide suggestions for future research on deterrence, ontological security, and international memory politics.

What’s in a Name? That Which We Call Deterrence

Deterrence is a key concept in both IR and strategic studies (Jervis 1979; Lupovici 2010), criminology (Braga, Weisburd, and Turchan 2018), and transitional justice (Lebow 2005). With its etymological roots in the Latin verb deterre, deterrence broadly stands for preventing (someone) from taking action through the fear of consequences. In the early criminological use of the term, the effect of deterrence was produced by the prospect of a future punishment (Vuori 2016, 27–8). The historiography of deterrence scholarship in IR speaks of four waves of deterrence research. The first wave emerged shortly after the end of WWI, when the onset of the nuclear age made war avoidance a priority and deterrence a central strategic concept. This first wave was followed by a second one in the 1950s and 1960s, which approached nuclear strategy through game theory. In the third wave, which emerged in the 1970s, statistical and case study methods were used to test deterrence theory, primarily in the context of conventional deterrence. All three waves were characterized by a focus on traditional interstate conflict. The fourth wave supposedly began to emerge in the second half of the 1990s, but really took off following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Through its focus on asymmetrical threats, this wave has opened up the study of deterrence to non-state actors and new issue areas such as terrorism, cyber and hybrid warfare, and ethnic conflict (Knopf 2010; Lupovici 2010; Gerson 2012; Stevens 2012; Nye 2016/2017; Osinga and Sweiks 2021; Wigell 2021).

Accordingly, a vast literature now exists on the subject in strategic studies and IR. Within traditionally conceived international security politics, deterrence refers to the ability of an actor to persuade another not to take a specific action because its prospective costs would outweigh the anticipated benefits (Morgan 2003). Early poststructuralist and constructivist critics of conventional deterrence theory have investigated deterrence as a politically consequential strategy and practice, treating it as an elaborate social institution sustained by and deeply embedded in powerful discourses and practices (Klein 1994; Gusterson 1996; Tannenwald 2007). Others working in this broadly interpretivist vein have approached deterrence using securitization, ontological security, speech act theory, and ritual theory frameworks (Chilton 1985; Lupovici 2016, 2019; Vuori 2016; Mälksoo 2021a). Such scholarship has expanded our understandings of the issue areas in which deterrence is practiced as well as how it is practiced, but the focus has nonetheless largely remained on deterrence against threats to physical security.

Linking the different literatures on deterrence, we suggest, can advance deterrence scholarship in IR. Noteworthy for the purposes of this article, in international criminal law and transitional justice, remembering is considered central to avoiding future human rights violations (e.g., Jelin 1994). Scholars thus contemplate what kind of remembering and memory politics best deters the dark legacies of the past from rising again (Meral 2012; David 2020). International criminal law has extensively debated the deterrent effects of holding senior perpetrators, planners, or instigators of past mass atrocities accountable in order to dissuade future would-be gross violations (McEvoy 2007, 438). Meanwhile, domestic criminal law signifies—and can consequently also be used to signal to various audiences—a society’s authoritative moral values (Kahan 1999, 422). As we will show below, domestic memory laws can do similar signaling toward international memory orders.

Importantly, even though they use the same concept, the scholarship on deterrence in IR has developed with limited interaction with the literature on deterrence in legal studies and transitional justice. Both in strategic studies and criminal justice, deterrence is used to convey an understanding of acceptable and unacceptable behavior in a community (Morgan 2011, 141). Deterrence research in criminology and international criminal law maintains that there is a link between the certainty of punishment and crime rates (Holtermann 2010; de Hoon 2017; Heller 2021). In legal studies, deterrence thus broadly refers to the consequentialist theory that depicts punishment as a policy designed to create effective behavioral incentives. The efficiency of a punishment is typically assessed for its contribution both to “general deterrence” (or the effect that punishing a particular offender has on the behavior of the population generally) and to “specific deterrence” (that is, the impact of a punishment on the offender’s own behavior) (Kahan 1999, 425; Drumbl 2005; Cronin-Furman 2013; Snead 2011, 1257; López 2015, 589). Similarly, in transitional justice, the purpose of trials for human rights violations is not only to punish perpetrators but also to use accountability to deter future violations. Consequently, increases in the probability of prosecution should be expected to diminish human rights violations and repression (Kim and Sikkink 2010, 940; compare “prosecutorial” and “social deterrence,” Jo and Simmons 2016).

To some extent, the groundwork for our theoretical move has already been laid in earlier research by connecting deterrence and securitization theory, even though the implications have not been made explicit. Making them explicit, however, opens the possibility of applying deterrence to other issues than traditional, physical security matters. If deterrence occurs through speech acts, there is no reason to think that it only applies to traditional, hard security issues. Opening it up to other issue areas, and other understandings of security, makes it possible to further develop deterrence theory and launch a fifth wave of deterrence research.

Our extension of deterrence to memory politics not only combines insights from strategic and legal studies on deterrence, but also goes beyond them by expanding the application of deterrence outside the realm of physical security to ontological security, and more specifically to human rights and international law. 

1Compare Rid (2012) for an earlier engagement of “the other deterrence debate” in the sociology of law and criminology.

2There is already research on how immigration policies are used to deter migrants from entering the country by making life hard for them (compare Kent, Norman, and Tennis 2020).
mnemonical security-seeking. Doing so makes it possible to expand our understanding of how states address their self-defined threats to ontological security and to develop a novel approach to international memory politics.

**Memory-Political Deterrence**

Our conceptualization of memory-political deterrence builds on a speech act theory-prompted reading of deterrence (Vuori 2016; compare Austin 1962; Sbișă 2007), and the understanding of deterrence as a securitizing move (Lupovici 2019; compare Buzan, Waever, and De Wilde 1998). We also bring in insights from the legal scholarship on deterrence, along with extending the strategic studies vocabulary on deterrence to memory politics. Delineating the links between deterrence, ontological security, and collective memory, or the “state story” thereof (compare Dixon 2018), is central to our theorization effort.

Lupovici (2016) has already linked ontological security and deterrence by theorizing the consequences of an actor having a strong deterrer identity. Deterrence is then not just a rational strategy for increasing security but also an identity feature. As a result, an inability to deter becomes not only a physical threat but also a threat to the actor’s identity and ontological security. Our theorization differs from Lupovici’s. We highlight the centrality of memory-political deterrence for states’ international struggles for ontological security—the consistency, continuity, and international recognition of their selves of which a guarded “state story” constitutes a temporal backbone (Dixon 2018). We consider collective memory, or the narratives that collectives and the states that represent them weave about key episodes in their pasts, to be essential to their ontological security because such biographical narratives make them what they are (Steele 2008; Berenskoetter 2014; Subotic 2016). These stories typically revolve around the heroic struggles of the nation/community, providing its current members with a sense of continuity, accounts of glories to take pride in, as well as a moral to the story or a lesson to be learned (compare Mälksoo 2015; Gustafsson 2020). This is not to suggest that collective memory authentically reflects what actually happened in the past, that it is monolithic within a collective or a state, or that it is not domestically contested. Recent work in ontological security studies points to the importance of paying attention to whose ontological security is being discussed and the ethical aspects related to how the national self is often being constructed in ways that foreclose contestation (Mälksoo 2015; Browning and Joenniemi 2017; Kinnvall, Manners, and Mitzen 2018; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020). Indeed, as Bell (2003) suggests, the construction of collective memory is a form of myth-making. While collective contestation over collective memory, or different myths about the nation’s past, is a key aspect of domestic memory politics (with memory laws playing a central role also in the domestic deterrence of contesting accounts, for example), our main focus in this article is on the international dimensions of memory-political deterrence. We have therefore bracketed domestic memory politics and instead focused primarily on the memory-political deterrence activities of the ruling elites. This undoubtedly simplifies the picture and obfuscates domestic dynamics, which we leave for future research.

The episodes that are central to collective memory often relate to conflicts with other collectives. Since “state stories” about past events are typically constructed in ways that allow members of the said political community to take pride in them, they tend to downplay one’s own negative actions and behavior at the expense of one’s positive legacy. As a result, the collective memory narratives of two distinct collectives may be incompatible. This means that the narratives, statements, and memory-related actions of representatives of a state may threaten those of another state (Gustafsson 2014, 2020; Mälksoo 2015) or further rub against the established international normative expectations about ethical memory (Mälksoo 2019). For example, Russia’s official line on the Baltic states having joined the USSR voluntarily in 1940 constitutes a misrecognition of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as legally continuous states with their respective prewar republics. For the Baltic states, it is an open denial of their state identities as anything beyond post-Soviet and thereby an outright challenge of their constitutive “state stories.” We argue, against this background, that actors may seek to deter other actors from taking action that would threaten the deterring actor’s collective memory and, by extension, its state-defined ontological security. Hence, we view deterrence practices as a way of protecting the collective memory that is central to a polity’s ontological security. This differs from Lupovici’s (2016) account, where the practice of deterrence may become central to an actor’s identity per se, creating a deterrer identity that, as long as deterrence appears to be working, provides the actor with ontological security. Our theorization thus seeks to open up the application of deterrence to defend ontological security more broadly, regardless of what exactly is central to the deterring actor’s ontological security and identity.

There is already research on how actors strategically seek to target an opponent’s ontological security in order to influence its behavior. Steele (2010) focuses on how powerful actors’ subjectivity can be targeted to induce moments of insecurity that force them to perform particular actions in order to regain ontological security. Bolton (2021a) offers an argument about how information warfare can be used to manipulate or undermine an actor’s subjectivity. While Steele and Bolton show that ontological (in)security might be strategically pinpointed for instrumental purposes, we suggest that actors might also conversely seek to deter others from targeting their ontological security or the sources thereof.

Three sets of subcategories in deterrence scholarship are particularly relevant for memory politics: (i) the concepts of direct and extended deterrence, (ii) deterrence by punishment and by denial, and (iii) a speech-act theory-based reading of deterrence as a performative practice.

First, direct deterrence helps understanding actors’ mutual dissuasion attempts in bilateral “memory wars.” If direct deterrence in physical security politics entails efforts by a state to prevent attacks on its own territory, then its memory-political equivalent refers to attempts to dissuade targeted challenges to a state’s preferred biographical narrative. Direct memory-political deterrence can work, for example, through public challenging and/or shaming of a concrete opponent.

Extended traditional deterrence involves dissuading military attacks against other states, typically against an ally. Extended deterrence in memory politics puts the spotlight on broader, regional, transnational, and/or international endeavors to defend other actors’ memory narratives, as well as to build and counter memory-political alliances.

Memory narratives may partly be shared between communities, for example, in cases where they used to be allies against a shared enemy in a past war. A corollary of such

---

<sup>3</sup>Compare with recent work on how ontological security influences alliance politics, including balancing (Bolton 2021b).
memory-political deterrence is the politics of maintaining or revising particular memory orders—that is, configurations of hegemonic narratives of important past events that constitute and organize identities and moral values in a given community in the present (compare Malksoo 2021b, 491–3, and Bolton 2023). Consequently, extended memory-political deterrence entails strategic discouragement of challenges to the sedimented transnational memory orders and particular positions therein. This may be done by individual states, attempting to preemptively thwart challenges to certain transnational memory regimes or by multinational institutions, such as the Council of Europe and the European Union. Extended memory-political deterrence may also be displayed via joint diplomatic activities, such as commemorative events, statements, and museum exhibitions. Whereas extended memory-political deterrence is standardly evoked in the name of a cosmopolitan memory order of some sort, direct memory-political deterrence is not exclusively in the service of nationalized memory regimes either, as the Russian case evocatively shows (compare Soroka and Krawatzek 2021).

Second, in the military sphere, deterrence by punishment involves the threat and capacity to inflict punishment on a potential aggressor. The idea is that an adversary would be deterred from attacking because doing so would lead to the attacker being punished. This punishment would need to be of such a magnitude that it would influence the adversary’s calculation of potential costs. Deterrence by denial, by contrast, involves deterring through the possession of capabilities that would have a credible chance to deny the adversary the ability to achieve military objectives, such as making territorial gains. Deterrence by denial could be achieved through deploying sufficient defensive measures, not only through threatening to use them. Importantly, the use of punishment and denial capabilities is not considered mutually exclusive (Snyder 1961, 14–6).

In the memory-political sphere, deterrence by punishment may involve signals that are meant to persuade the potential aggressor that what it might achieve through its aggressive actions will not be worth it because the price it will pay when it is punished will be too high. Memory-political deterrence by denial would involve having memory-political capabilities that would prevent the potential aggressor from achieving its objectives, even if it were to carry out the actions that the deterring actor seeks to thwart. It could entail, for example, communicating to the adversary that “because our memory is so firmly established and/or internationally recognized through the various capabilities we possess, your attempts to challenge or change the way the past is remembered are bound to fail, so you might as well stop.” Such statements might be backed up by and refer to defensive measures that seek to secure a particular memory narrative, including education, the construction of museums, recognition by international bodies such as UNESCO through its Memory of the World (MoW) program, and so on. In the memory-political realm, such defensive measures constitute the capabilities that are meant to make the potential aggressor understand that it lacks the capacity to achieve its purported objectives.

Third, from a speech-act theory-based reading, the language of deterrence is not just representational and communicative but also performative (that is, it is enacting of deterrence in the first place). The gist of speech act theory holds that language does more than just convey information: It can also be used to make a claim, warn, threaten, thank, and declare war (Searle and Vanderveken 1985). Transposed to the memory-political context, we can view the various statements made by state actors as speech acts that do memory-political deterrence. This may, for example, involve threats of a specific action if the targeted actor performs an action seen as threatening a particular collective memory (narrative). For example, memory laws, being authoritative legal texts, can also be considered speech acts. Thus understood, the legislative devices of memory politics can serve as conduits of “declarative deterrentification” by which an artifact, practice, or policy is made a deterrent (Vuori 2016, 23, 37, 39).

A useful methodological starting point for examining memory-political deterrence in action is Juha Vuori’s (2016, 25) account, which suggests that the study of deterrentification, or deterrence as speech acts, should explore questions such as who (what actors) can deterrentify through the use of what (artifacts, practices, and policies), for whom (what is to be protected), why (perlocutionary intentions/how causality), with what kind of effects (interunit relations, domestic politics, and other audiences), and under what conditions (facilitation/impediment factors). Applied to our study of memory-political deterrence, we primarily see state actors (who) seeking to deter other actors, although there is nothing that suggests that non-state actors cannot seek to practice memory-political deterrence. These actors use a range of statements, practices, and policies (what) to deter. They do this to protect the salient collective memory (whom) of those they represent. They do this because collective memory is central to ontological security (why). This has various consequences (effects) for interunit relations (direct deterrence), as the target might respond either in accordance with the wishes of the actor seeking to deter or in other ways that might trigger escalation. It also has consequences (effects) for other audiences, for example, through the potential construction and consolidation of memory-political alliances, that is, informal or formal associations formed on the basis of a shared understanding of the past (extended deterrence), as well as regional and international order. These deterrence attempts take place within a broader setting in which they may be facilitated and impeded by broadly accepted preexisting discourses, narratives, and norms (conditions).

Memory-Political Deterrence Continuum

Alike to other types of deterrence strategies, communicating threats is at the core of memory-political deterrence. Memory-political deterrentifications vary in the explicitness and timing of the threat to hurt the opponent (e.g., whether the threat is generally stated or aimed at a specific challenger; whether or not there is a clear articulation of a “red line” and a specification of punishment in the threat issued) (compare Lupovici 2021, 1682–5). The traditional distinction between general and immediate deterrence thus likewise applies to the memory-political realm: with general memory-political deterrence aimed at unspecified hypothetical threats by a persistent effort to prevent unwanted actions by discouraging unnamed actors from ever considering becoming “would-be” challengers over the long term, and immediate memory-political deterrence issuing a specific threat in response to an urgent challenge or a pressing crisis (Huth and Russell 1993).

The toolbox of memory-political deterrents includes various means for communicating one’s memory-political

---

4 Compare with the attacks on third parties, such as allies or partners, in the traditional security-political understanding of deterrence.

intent, aimed at political influencing of another (or others) by dissuasion and intimidation. A threat delineates a concrete commitment to a certain action, for example, through the stipulation of specific punishments in response to the discouraged action (compare Jervis 1970, 81; Schelling 1980).

The continuum of memory-political deterrence spans from stigmatizing political rhetoric, diplomatic insults, and targeted messaging to explicit legal restrictions and communications by deed. The repertoires of memory-political deterrence, direct and extended alike, entail pertinent narratives, behavioral acts (such as commemorative practices defying the opponent’s—be it historical victim’s or perpetrator’s—expectation of acceptable behavior, challenging particular past narratives and/or norms of a given memory order), implicitly prescriptive and explicitly prescriptive norms. Together, the distinct memory-political deterrent devices seek to influence one’s opponent’s intentions by making one’s own intentions persuasive (compare Schelling 1966, 55). Punitive memory laws are among the most explicit devices in the continuum of signalizing and enacting memory-political deterrence. Proscribing memory laws work by making explicit verbal threats, that is, conditional statements designed to signal the capacity and intention to inflict punishment in case of violating the said prohibition (Stein 2013). The pertinent if-then statements along the lines of “remember as I say, or else” specify the “else” to varying degrees, since memory laws may stipulate concrete punishments or just vaguely condemn a particular memory-political practice or conduct. As with standard deterrence signaling, the credibility of the threats issued lies in the eye of the recipient. As Schelling (2006, 3) maintains:

> persuasiveness has two dimensions that may be called “potency” and “credibility.” Potency refers to the (manifest) ability of the person making the promise or the threat to carry it out on a scale sufficient to make compliance attractive. Credibility refers to the respondent’s belief that what is promised or threatened will indeed be carried out. Commitment refers to credibility.

Since virtually all the related thresholds are “fundamentally matters of beliefs and expectations” (Schelling 1966, 158), the repertoires of memory-political deterrence need to be studied in context, paying close attention to both the issuer and the intended recipient of the memory-political threat or public pledge to defend a particular memory order. The practical efficiency of credible commitment lies in the opponent’s estimate of the coerger’s future behavior. For a memory-political signal to do its intended deterrent work, the message must be believed (Kaufmann 1956, 17–20; Rhodes 1989, 127–8).

As with traditional deterrence signaling, communicating the credibility of intent is more challenging in the case of extended memory-political deterrence. Rational deterrence theory in IR underscores the role of “costly signals” in making the communication of a defender’s resolve credible vis-à-vis its allied protégés and interests. Costly signals in memory politics refer to the actions and statements that increase the costs of backing down from a deterrent threat, thus exposing the level of commitment of a state to defend itself against a feared mnemonic challenge. Since the costliness of memory-political signals of dissuasion is heavily context-dependent, their political resonance and adequate analytical reading assume deep cultural competence.

Compared with nuclear deterrence, less is at stake in memory-political deterrence. This is not to say that the latter is thus unimportant. Memory-political deterrence matters greatly as it provides meaning and ontological security to collective actors in search thereof. However, less is at stake in that even if the deterrent acts and carries out the memory-political threat, for example, in case of the opponent’s insufficient compliance, the action does not directly lead to annihilation through mutually assured destruction. The upshot of this is that we may get a dynamic where the detrerrer not only threatens the target by signaling that “if you do x I shall do y to you,” but also that the detrerrer acts on those threats and thereby signals that “if you do x again, I shall do y to you again.” This way of teaching the opponent a lesson is the gist of cumulative deterrence, a concept that has been previously used to refer to the dynamics of cyber and conventional deterrence over an extended time period, with an aim to limit and moderate the opponent’s undesirable behavior rather than to prevent it completely (Rid 2012, 142; Tor 2017, 102–3). Cumulative deterrence resonates closely with the continuous dynamics of memory-political deterrence. Such punishing actions can be a way of increasing credibility and reducing ambiguity by clarifying to the target state the exact demand made by the detrerrer (compare George and Smoke 1974, 562; Schelling 1980).

Memory-political deterrence is highly contextual. Together with our adaptation of Vuori’s framework for the study of deterrentifications to the memory-political realm, the highlighted analytical distinctions between direct and extended deterrence, deterrence by punishment and by denial, and general and immediate deterrence provide a context-sensitive analytical toolbox that can be used for identifying the memory-political deterrence repertoires of different actors and for analyzing how these repertoires are used and with what consequences. Understanding memory politics through a deterrence lens allows us to interpret actions in the memory-political sphere in novel ways, revealing, for example, that such actions may not only lead relations to deteriorate, but can also prevent such deterioration from happening.

Our empirical illustrations show that the adoption of memory-political deterrence may manifest in vastly different forms, with different actors using distinct memory-political repertoires. These repertoires are not necessarily static; the measures used may evolve over time, at times following an escalatory logic. We contend that even though different measures are used in Russia’s and China’s memory-political deterrentifications, the function of these measures in both cases is to deter the opponent from taking actions that would threaten one’s own mnemonical, and more generally ontological, security.

**Memory-Political Deterrence in Eastern Europe**

Vladimir Putin’s return to Russia’s presidency in 2012 marked the crystallization of Russian memory politics as targeted against the “ falsification of history” (Weiss-Wendt 2021). Both direct and extended memory-political deterrence have been an essential part of the Russian campaigns against the Baltic states, Poland, and Ukraine, on the one hand, and in Russia’s struggle for the sustenance of the post-1945 global memory order, on the other hand. These bilaterally, regionally, and globally targeted memory-political deterrence attempts have unfolded via a panoply of means, ranging from political declarations and the ebbing and flowing public diatribe to direct interference in the “monument wars” in the former Soviet space, along with legalizing the “correct” frames of historical remembrance. Combined, they have sought to safeguard a notably selective “state story”
of the Soviet Union and the heroic memory of WWII as a source of modern Russia’s ontological security.

Punitive memory laws have become a trademark of Russia’s memory-political deterrence edifice, evocatively illustrating the securitizing speech act dynamic of such devices of political signaling. By providing state-sponsored interpretations of historical events and the commemoration of crucial figures for the polity in question, memory laws embody the gist of deterrence: They seek to manage public discourse, delimiting what can and cannot be said (Kahan 1999, 146, 435). Besides defining acceptable and (un)desirable boundaries of political subjectivities and communities, punitive memory laws do performative work by signaling political intent to defend a particular “state story” of the past internationally. Their deterrent potential is entailed in varyingly tempered warnings about punishments that possible future acts can bring about. Thereby, they can be part and parcel of hybrid engagement strategies of a state’s domestic and foreign opponents, just as “memory wars” can demarcate the antecedent phase of a kinetic conflict, as Russia’s current war in Ukraine poignantly exemplifies (compare Fedor et al. 2017). Together with wider memory-political rhetoric and state’s legislative action at courts, memory laws as devices of deterrence can be used to justify, burden, or prevent political moves (compare Lupovici 2019, 723), serving various instrumental goals in broader political mobilization for state’s ontological security cause. In combining the gist of a speech act and a securitizing zeal, memory laws that criminalize certain versions of the past deemed incompatible with the preferred state identity feature as a distinct version of political deterrence, where the strategic goal of dissuading someone from challenging the said state identity is targeted with symbolically charged normative means. Russian memory-political determentifications have become a central feature among the other coercive means in the country’s diplomatic arsenal targeted at the “reflexive control” of its various opponents (compare Giles, Sherr, and Seaboyer 2018).

Russia’s memory-political legislation efforts have run parallel to its conflict with Ukraine, and particularly intensified after Russia’s annexation of Crimea and intervention in Donbas in 2014. In the spring of 2014, the Russian Duma adopted a memory law (the so-called Yarovaya Act), which introduced a prison term for the “denial of facts” and the “dissemination of deliberately false information about the activities of the USSR during the Second World War [and] about veterans of the Great Patriotic War”—that is, Article 354–1 entitled “Rehabilitation of Nazism” in the Russian Criminal Code (for discussion, see Koposov 2017, 238–99). The law criminalized the denial of “the facts established by the verdict of the International Military Tribunal for the trial and punishment of major war criminals of the European Axis countries,” clearly signaling deterrent intent by punishment both vis-à-vis the potential violators within the domestic borders of the Russian Federation as well as indicating a commitment to defend the global memory-political order, which left the war crimes of the Soviet Union as one of the victorious powers in WWII unaddressed and unaccounted for in the post-1945 world at large.8 The said amendment to the Russian penal code does its memory-political deterrence work by tacitly criminalizing the Baltic and Ukrainian historiographies that have sought to rehabilitate groups that have fought for the independence of the respective nations, at times collaborating with Nazi Germany for the purpose during WWII. The law further potentially penalizes historical research offering evidence of the crimes not mentioned in the Nuremberg trials—namely, the Soviet-German crimes against peace and the war crimes by the Soviet army in the occupied territories that the Soviet Union, as a victorious power in WWII and one of the four countries of the prosecution, was never held accountable for at Nuremberg. These include the secret protocols to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939 (or the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact that determined the conquest of Poland and the Baltic states and the division of Eastern Europe into the Soviet and Nazi spheres of influence), the invasion of Poland in 1939 and the annexation of the Baltic states in 1940, and the mass repressions that followed therein. Whereas the memory-political amendments to Russia’s Criminal Code stipulate concrete punishments, their broader deterrent message—as also the clause on the protection of “historical truth” added to the Russian Constitution in 2020 further attests to—transpires beyond the domestic jurisdiction of the Russian Federation.

The extraterritorial memory-political warning is made explicit in Article 243.4, introduced to the Russian Criminal Code in spring 2020. Accordingly, it is a punishable offense to damage military graves, monuments, memorial plaques, obelisks, or other memorial structures or objects that are dedicated to Russia’s military glory, the defense of Russia’s fatherland, or its interests (including memorial museums or commemorative signs at the sites of hostilities)—irrespective of their location within or outside of the Russian Federation. Such deterrent intent has been put into action, for example, by Russia’s opening of a criminal investigation after the Czech authorities dismantled the statue of the Soviet WWII Marshal Ivan Konev in Prague in the spring of 2020 (The Guardian 2020) and the unfolding of a felony case against those who tried to stop the removal of Soviet Marshal Zvenigorodskii in Kharkiv, Ukraine, in April 2022, based on the argument that “These criminal actions are directed against Russia’s interests in the field of preserving historical memory of the activities of the USSR during the Second World War and the decisive role in the victory over fascism.”8

Russia’s 2020 constitutional amendments further extended the list of deterrent clauses in the country’s arsenal of memory laws. The amended Article 67.1, paragraph 3, of the Constitution declares that the Russian Federation “honours the memory of the defenders of the Fatherland and ensures defence of the historical truth. Diminishing the significance of the heroism of the people in defence of the Fatherland will not be permitted” (emphasis added). This general memory-political deterrence signal has been concretized in numerous “history lectures” by President Putin (e.g., 2019, 2020a, 2020b), together with the state media’s incessant propaganda machine. In symptomatic illustration of the close combining of direct and extended memory-political deterrence messaging, the Russian State Duma introduced a bill attaching fines and prison sentences to the 2021 law banning “any public attempt to equate the aims and actions of

---


---

the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany during World War II, as well as to deny the decisive role of the Soviet people in the victory over fascism,” just two days before the Russian full-on invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Hirsch 2022). The deterrent nub of this legislation is directed against the instances like the European Parliament’s (2019) Resolution on the Importance of European Remembrance for the Future of Europe. The resolution underscored the co-responsibility of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany for the outbreak of WWII, and called for “a common culture of remembrance that rejects the crimes of fascist, Stalinist, and other totalitarian and authoritarian regimes of the past as a way of fostering resilience against modern threats to democracy” (European Parliament’s 2019).

Taken together, besides the prospect of sanctions against potential violators, the legalization of an emphatically selective and self-defensive official narrative in conjunction with Russia’s aggressive foreign policy rhetoric and projection of power abroad is designed to send a chilling message to anyone in and beyond the state to refrain from challenging Russia’s state-sanctioned version of “historical truth.” Both the promise of legal punishment and an aspiration to influence the broader social milieu are in play here (compare Jo and Simmons 2016). Embedded in the broader political discourse, operating the tropes of “Nazism,” “genocide,” and “liberation” in an exceedingly convoluted manner for instrumental state gains (e.g., Putin 2021, 2022; Karaganov 2022), Russia’s memory laws appear as potent declarative deterrencifications in the contested remembrance of Russia’s political predecessor’s—the Soviet Union’s—role in WWII and its broadly condemned political legacy in Central and Eastern European (CEE) states. By deterring “nationalist” memories in the former Soviet space and policing the boundaries of its own imperial/Soviet memory narrative, Russia’s self-exculpatory memory laws have emerged as international, not just domestic memory-political dissuasion devices in the ongoing contestations over the legitimate political memory of WWII and the broader Soviet legacy. Whereas the CEE states have called for the consideration of the Soviet legacy on par with the Nazi regime, Russia’s countering of all attempts to critically probe its role in and after WWII has now become congealed in the country’s legislative memory-political deterrencifications, aimed at harvesting out the inconvenient chapters of Russia’s WWII experience. The contemporary Russian regime’s vision of its self-designated memory-political authority and consequent deterrencification moves reach well beyond the nominal boundaries of the Russian Federation. The internal safeguard against dissent at home doubles as a memory-political deterrence by denial strategy internationally, signaling that “external efforts to attack our historical memory will not work because it is foolproofed against challengers.” Russia’s aggression against Ukraine could be read as memory-political deterrence by punishment in action with the threat to use force materialized inter alia for defending the Russian “state story.”

Memory-Political Deterrence in East Asia

Memory-political controversies related to Japanese colonialism and wartime aggression have long disturbed relations between Japan and its neighbors, in particular China and South Korea. This section focuses on the evolving Chinese deterrence efforts related to visits by Japanese prime ministers to the Yasukuni Shrine, ranging from direct to extended deterrence and deterrence by punishment as well as by denial. Since 1978, fourteen convicted Class A war criminals have been enshrined at Yasukuni, along with 2.5 million Japanese war dead. Yasukuni visits are particularly threatening to Chinese war memory and ontological security because official Chinese narratives about the war ascribe responsibility to the top Japanese militarists, that is, the Class A war criminals enshrined at Yasukuni. Prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni are seen in China as honoring the Class A war criminals and therefore as negating Chinese war memory.

On August 15, 1985, the fortieth Japanese anniversary of the end of the Asia-Pacific War, or WWII in Asia, Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro made an official visit to the Yasukuni Shrine. China repeatedly condemned the visit for hurting the feelings of the people of various Asian countries (e.g., Renmin Ribao 1985). The Chinese government initially allowed student protests against Japan in several major cities. The student protests clearly put additional pressure on Japanese prime ministers to stay away from Yasukuni (compare Weiss 2014), thereby underscoring the Chinese memory-political deterrence signals communicated through official statements.

The Japanese side seemingly got the message. Nakasone canceled another planned visit, and on October 18, he stated in the Japanese Diet that the Chinese side viewed Yasukuni visits as “hurting the feelings of not only the Chinese but also other Asian peoples” (Nakasone 1985). Following Nakasone’s decision not to visit the shrine, no Japanese prime minister visited until July 29, 1996, when Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryūtarō paid what he described as a private visit. China again criticized it for “seriously injuring the feelings of the people of Asian countries that suffered deeply from Japanese militarism, including in China” (Renmin Ribao 1996). After expressing intentions to visit again in October, Chinese criticism intensified, and Hashimoto eventually indicated he would not visit again while in office (Asahi Shimbun 1996).

Hashimoto’s two immediate successors refrained from visiting Yasukuni, but during the Liberal Democratic Party’s internal election campaign, Koizumi Junichirō, who became prime minister in 2001, promised a Japanese veterans’ group that he would visit the shrine annually. Despite Chinese attempts to deter him from visiting—including by canceling bilateral summits, allowing large-scale anti-Japanese demonstrations, and condemning his visits—Koizumi was not deterred. He visited every year until he resigned in 2006. Once it was time to appoint Koizumi’s successor, the Chinese side made clear that the improvement of relations post-Koizumi would require the next prime minister not to visit Yasukuni (Yomiuri Shimbun 2006). Even though Koizumi had not been deterred from visiting, the clear Chinese cumulative deterrence signaling during his tenure could be interpreted as facilitating successful deterrence for years thereafter, as the following six prime ministers refrained from visiting. Even Abe Shinzō—who had visited the shrine numerous times prior to assuming office for the first time in 2006 and whose self-professed views suggest that he harbored a strong desire for actions and statements understood in China as downplaying Japanese aggression in order to depict and turn Japan into a “beautiful country” (Abe 2006)—appeared deterred and did not visit during the year he was prime minister.

These episodes show that from the 1980s to the 2000s, China adopted both direct and extended, as well as cumulative, memory-political deterrence measures. China both threatened to punish Japan directly and often presented

---

“...The denial of crimes committed inter alia by totalitarian communist regimes has been criminalized in Czechia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.”
itself as defending not only Chinese memory but also that of various Asian countries, who were thereby depicted as memory-political allies, even though joint deterrence activities were not conducted. However, after Abe became prime minister again in December 2012, Chinese extended memory-political deterrence measures intensified. On May 26, 2013, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited the site of the Potsdam Conference, where in 1945, the allies signed the Potsdam declaration, which called for Japan’s surrender. After touring the site, Li described the victory in WWII as an “important underpinning of the world order,” and, in a clear warning to Japan, stated: “The Chinese people will not accept any comments or actions that seek to deny or glorify the history of fascist aggression; nor are these acceptable to the forces of justice elsewhere that value peace. China would like to work with all peace-loving people to uphold the post-war order and safeguard world peace and prosperity” (Li 2013). While Li’s statement did not specify how China would punish Japan if it were to do anything that would threaten China’s mnemonic security, that the statement was delivered at such a high-profile international site, and that it linked China to “all peace-loving people,” thereby invoking an international memory-political alliance, nonetheless seems to suggest that Japan would be punished through international shaming.

Importantly, Abe had expressed regret for not having visited Yasukuni during his first spell as prime minister, indicating that not visiting negatively impacted his, and arguably other Japanese conservatives’, ontological security. This is likely why, on December 26, 2013, Abe defied the Chinese warning and visited Yasukuni. On the day of his visit, Abe released a statement, seemingly to preempt criticism, saying that he only visited to pray for peace and for the souls of the war dead (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2013). China, however, dismissed Abe’s explanation and acted on its earlier warning by launching a comprehensive international campaign involving several international deterrence measures that it previously had not used.

To begin with, in January 2014, Chinese ambassadors published op-eds in high-profile newspapers, including The Daily Telegraph, The Washington Post, Harare Times, and The Globe and Mail. The op-eds all conveyed the same basic message, as exemplified by the Chinese Ambassador to Canada’s article: It described Abe’s Yasukuni visit as a “challenge to the postwar international order,” and emphasized that China and Canada had both been on “the winning side of the Second World War, sacrificing tremendously in the fight against fascism.” As such, China and Canada, “share a common responsibility to oppose efforts to nullify its outcome” (Zhang 2014). Similar messages were delivered on January 29, 2014, when the Chinese, South Korean, and North Korean ambassadors presented a united front at a United Nations Security Council open debate. The Chinese Ambassador described Abe’s visit as “a challenge to the victorious outcome of the war against fascism and a challenge to the post-war international order based on the UN Charter” (People’s Daily Online 2014). Another indication of the emerging Sino-Korean memory alliance is the opening, also in January 2014, of a memorial hall to An Jung-geun at the Harbin railway station, where in 1909 An assassinated Ito Hirobumi, the first Japanese resident-general of Korea and Japan’s first prime minister. While in Korea An is considered a national hero and freedom fighter, the Japanese government protested, labeling him a terrorist. The conservative Japanese newspaper Yomiuri Shim bun (2014) commented that “China is showing its intention to put pressure on Japan over the history issue by strengthening cooperation with Korea.”

Several Japanese ambassadors responded by publishing op-eds of their own saying Abe did not visit to honor the Class A War criminals or hurt the feelings of the Chinese or Korean people. They also emphasized Japan’s commitment to democracy, human rights, and the values of the UN Charter and suggested that it was China, not Japan, that challenged regional security and international order (e.g., Hayashi 2014; Sasae 2014). Despite Japan’s efforts, the Chinese deterrence actions continued to escalate. In late February 2014, the Chinese National People’s Congress ratified two new national memorial days. Such proposals had reportedly been submitted without being approved since 2005. September 3 was ratified as the official Victory Day in the War of Resistance against Japan, and December 13 as the Memorial Day for the victims of the Nanjing Massacre (Jin 2014).

Furthermore, China submitted a nomination for the inscription of documents related to the 1937 Nanjing massacre into UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register. Preparations for the application had reportedly begun already in 2009, but it was not submitted until March 2014. Despite Japanese protests, the documents were inscribed in October 2015. The Chinese state-operated news agency Xinhua hailed the inscription as “international recognition and consensus,” and Zhu Chengshan, curator of the Memorial Hall of the Victims in the Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders, the main archival institution behind the nomination, commented that “From now on any act of denial will be intolerable” (Xinhua 2015), thus portraying the inscription as deterrence by denial; by showcasing its tremendous memory-political capabilities, China was signaling to Abe and other Japanese conservatives that their efforts would be futile.

In 2015, China’s extended deterrence measures were further escalated as the memorial days established in the previous year were used to perform memory-political alliances. On September 3, 2015, China held a military parade to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the victory against Japan. While big military parades have usually been reserved for commemorating the 1949 founding of the People’s Republic of China, now such a parade was held to celebrate the victory against Japan. By putting weapons, including advanced missiles, on display at a victory parade in which 947 soldiers from seventeen different countries, as well as high-profile foreign politicians such as Russian President Vladimir Putin, South Korean President Park Geun-hye, and United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon took part, China mixed traditional military and memory-political extended deterrence (People’s Daily Online 2015). Chinese President Xi Jinping stated in a speech: “The Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War were a decisive battle between justice and evil, between light and darkness, and between progress and reaction.” Xi described China’s war against Japan as a “huge national sacrifice” and “major contribution” to the “World Anti-Fascist War,” and repeated that “all countries should jointly uphold the international order and system underpinned by the purposes of the UN Charter” (Xi 2015).

The Chinese criticism of Abe’s visit as a threat not only to the memory of the war and its outcome, but also to the postwar international order—described as an outcome of WWII—suggests that China was seeking to establish a memory-political international order, and thereby strengthen its memory-political deterrence against Japan as well as its ontological security. These extended
memory-political deterrence acts involved not only threats of deterrence by punishment, but also deterrence by denial (Snyder 1961, 14–6). Arguably, China sought to signal that any attempts to challenge its memory of WWII were bound to fail for several reasons: because of China’s tremendous memory-political capabilities, its memory-political allies, and last but not least, its collective memory’s firm establishment not just in China but also internationally. Abe never visited Yasukuni again until he resigned in September 2020. None of his successors have restored the practice either.

Conclusion

This article has argued for expanding the study of deterrence to ontological and mnemonical security. In doing so, we have sought to push the boundaries of deterrence scholarship and contribute novel insights to the empirical research on collective memory in IR. More specifically, the article has argued that there is a phenomenon in international politics that can be labeled memory-political deterrence. It has outlined what memory-political deterrence is and how it is linked to ontological security. It has thus focused on the adoption of deterrence rather than on its success (compare Lupovici 2021). The empirical illustrations clearly show that both Russia and China have adopted memory-political deterrence. While some of the empirical analysis suggests that the deterrence efforts have been at least partly successful, more in-depth analysis is necessary in order to clearly establish the extent of success.

Focusing on the adoption of memory-political deterrence is useful for comparative purposes, both for comparing the memory-political deterrence policies and repertoires of different actors and for comparing changes in the deterrence adoption of actors over time (Lupovici 2021, 1686–8). The analysis has thus shown that China has progressively adapted and escalated its memory-political deterrence. In the mid-1980s, it responded to Nakasone’s shrine visit through official protests and by allowing student demonstrations, thereby seemingly deterring Japanese prime ministers from additional shrine visits. In the early to mid-2000s, canceling summits did not deter Koizumi but certainly his successors. In the mid-2010s, the combination of deterrence by denial through China’s demonstration of its overwhelming memory-political capabilities and extended deterrence through memory-political alliances, together with the promise of additional punishment, seemingly deterred Abe from additional visits. While much research on international memory politics in East Asia has focused on how such issues have disturbed international relations in the region, inter alia by preventing cooperation, adopting a deterrence perspective arguably suggests that things could have been much worse had it not been for successful deterrence. Even though clearly not completely successful from beginning to end, China’s deterrence efforts seem to have prevented the Japanese conservative dream of normalizing Yasukuni visits, something that surely would have damaged bilateral relations even more. To the extent that China has successfully deterred Japan, it has arguably strengthened Chinese ontological security while weakening Japanese ontological security, or at least that of Japanese conservatives. This relationship between being deterred and increased ontological insecurity helps understand the recurrence of Yasukuni visits and the related escalatory dynamic over time in the East Asian case.

In the East European context, we see an even stronger escalatory dynamic over time where memory laws criminalizing unwanted versions of the past and thereby arguably occupying the highest level of the memory-political escalation ladder have played a central role. The case of Russia illustrates how memory-political deterrence feeds from sustaining a confrontational relationship pattern vis-à-vis one’s mnemonical “other(s)” (compare Mitzen 2006).

While this article has primarily presented an argument about the existence of memory-political deterrence as a phenomenon, this move suggests a future research agenda focused on this phenomenon and more broadly deterrence of threats to ontological security. Opening up this research agenda raises a range of questions for further research: While the focus here has been on the international aspects of the phenomenon, how does it play out domestically? How is memory-political deterrence related to regime type? What are the effects of memory-political deterrence attempts on those targeted? How durable are memory-political alliances, especially in cases where conflicting memories exist over other episodes than the ones bonded over? What other memory-political deterrence measures than the ones identified here can be found in other cases? What happens if the attempted deterrence by memory-political means fails or when the respective repertoires have been exhausted? Could the failure of deterrence by memory-political means lead to increased risks that other deterrence or punitive actions will be taken next? The current Russian war against Ukraine and its memory-political entanglements call for more granular empirical research in that regard.

References


