

Nuclear Weapons and a Nation's Ontological Security

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intersection between nuclear weapons policy and the concept of ontological security. Ontological security — defined as the confidence in the continuity of self-identity and the constancy of one's social and material environment (Giddens, 1991) — has become an increasingly relevant concept in international relations theory. By exploring how nuclear arsenals serve not only as instruments of deterrence but also as symbolic anchors for state identity, the paper demonstrates that nuclear capabilities contribute to a nation's sense of existential stability. This study reviews foundational theoretical works, discusses empirical cases, and considers the policy implications of anchoring national identity in nuclear strength.

Keywords: *Inner Conflicts, battles within, conscience and morality, inner self, invisible facets of Human Persona*

Nuclear weapons have long been regarded as the ultimate guarantor of national security. Traditionally, debates surrounding these arsenals have centred on deterrence and the balance of power in an anarchic international system. However, in recent decades, scholars have begun to explore a more nuanced perspective: the role that nuclear weapons play in sustaining a nation's ontological security. Ontological security, in this context, refers to a state's need to maintain a stable identity and coherent narrative over time (Mitzen, 2006). As the international environment becomes increasingly complex and unpredictable, the possession of nuclear weapons transcends their utilitarian role as mere instruments of war; they also serve as powerful symbols that underpin a nation's self-perception and collective identity.

This paper investigates how nuclear weapons help states manage both external threats and internal identity crises by serving dual functions. On one level, nuclear arsenals offer tangible security through deterrence—a promise of mutually assured destruction that discourages adversaries from initiating conflict. On another level, and perhaps more subtly, they provide ontological security by reinforcing a narrative of national resilience and continuity. The dual nature of nuclear capabilities illustrates that, while the physical presence of these weapons contributes to strategic stability, their symbolic value is equally critical in shaping domestic and international perceptions of state strength.

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Drawing on the sociological foundations of ontological security as elaborated by Giddens (1991), modern theorists in international relations have applied these ideas to understand how states cope with existential uncertainties. Giddens argued that modernity, with its rapid social, political, and technological changes, threatens the continuity of self-identity. This disruption is not limited to individuals; it extends to nations, which, like individuals, require a stable and coherent identity to navigate uncertainty. Mitzen (2006) further adapts this concept to international politics by suggesting that states pursue narratives that assure their continued existence and self-worth. In this light, nuclear weapons are not just military assets but also symbols that embody a nation's capacity for survival and self-determination.

In many nuclear-armed states, the rhetoric of deterrence is inseparable from the narrative of national identity. Political leaders and policymakers often invoke the image of nuclear strength to signify not only military might but also historical continuity and sovereign legitimacy. This symbolic dimension is particularly salient in times of crisis or when a nation faces both external pressure and internal dissent. The presence of a nuclear arsenal can thus be seen as a form of psychological reassurance, providing a sense of permanence and stability amidst the flux of global politics. The belief that the nation will endure—anchored by its nuclear capabilities—can foster a collective confidence that extends well beyond the battlefield.

Moreover, the discourse surrounding nuclear weapons and ontological security also highlights the inherent tensions within national security policy. On the one hand, nuclear arsenals offer a deterrent effect that is underpinned by the logic of retaliation; on the other hand, this same logic can entrench a mindset of perpetual threat, where the state's identity becomes intertwined with an existential fear of annihilation. This paradox lies at the heart of contemporary security debates. While the assurance provided by nuclear weapons can consolidate national unity, it may also contribute to a cycle of insecurity—both domestically and internationally—where states continuously justify expansion or modernization of their arsenals as a safeguard for their very identity.

Further, the evolution of nuclear strategy reflects a broader shift in international relations theory from a purely realist interpretation towards a more constructivist approach. Realist scholars, such as Buzan (1991), have traditionally emphasized the material and coercive aspects of nuclear deterrence. In contrast, constructivist thinkers like Wendt (1999) underscore the importance of shared beliefs, cultural narratives, and identity in shaping state behaviour. By acknowledging the symbolic role of nuclear weapons, this paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how states secure both their physical and ontological existence in an era marked by uncertainty and rapid change.

In addition to reinforcing national identity, the ontological security derived from nuclear arsenals has practical implications for policy formulation and international diplomacy. The assurance that a state's core identity and values will endure can empower leaders to pursue bold strategic initiatives with greater confidence. At the same time, however, the intertwining of national identity with nuclear capability can complicate disarmament efforts, as relinquishing these weapons might be perceived not only as a loss of military power but also as a diminishment of the nation's very essence.

This investigation, therefore, seeks to expand our understanding of nuclear deterrence by examining the intersection of material power and symbolic security. It posits that nuclear weapons serve a dual function: they are both tools of statecraft and emblems of national

identity, intricately linked to the pursuit of ontological security. By exploring this interplay, the paper aims to shed light on the deeper, often overlooked, dimensions of nuclear strategy and its enduring impact on state behaviour.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of ontological security finds its roots in sociological and psychological theories, where it is primarily concerned with the stability of self-identity and the need for continuity amid a rapidly changing world. In his seminal work, Giddens (1991) argued that modernity is characterized by rapid change, uncertainty, and a pervasive sense of disorientation that challenges the continuity of self-identity. Giddens posited that the modern individual struggles to maintain a coherent narrative of self in the face of the complexities introduced by modern institutions and global forces. His insights have since been extended to the realm of international relations, where the stability of state identity is seen as equally vital.

In the international context, ontological security pertains to a state's need to sustain a stable sense of self and a coherent narrative of its past, present, and future. Mitzen (2006) was among the first scholars to adapt Giddens' ideas to world politics, arguing that states, much like individuals, seek assurances that their identity and existence remain stable amid global turbulence. According to Mitzen, states construct narratives and rely on routine practices that allow them to experience continuity, even in the face of unpredictable international events. This perspective shifts the focus from purely material considerations of power to the symbolic and identity-based underpinnings of state behaviour.

Steele (2008) further deepened this analysis by exploring the ways in which uncertainty and rapid change in the international system prompt states to seek out forms of ontological security. Steele argued that nuclear weapons, while traditionally analyzed as instruments of deterrence and power projection, also serve as existential symbols that reinforce a nation's narrative of resilience and permanence. In this sense, the possession of a nuclear arsenal is not simply a pragmatic military calculation; it is also a profound statement about a nation's self-perception and its commitment to ensuring continuity in its identity.

From a realist perspective, nuclear deterrence has long been understood in terms of military capability and strategic balance. Buzan (1991) provides a classical analysis of deterrence, emphasizing that nuclear weapons are primarily valued for their ability to prevent aggression through the threat of catastrophic retaliation. Realism focuses on the anarchic structure of the international system, where states rely on material capabilities to secure their survival. In this view, the primary function of nuclear arsenals is to provide a credible deterrent against potential adversaries, ensuring that any act of aggression is met with overwhelming force. This perspective is rooted in a zero-sum understanding of power politics, where the possession of nuclear weapons is equated with a guarantee of security.

However, the realist interpretation of nuclear deterrence has been challenged by constructivist approaches, which emphasize that security is as much about perception, identity, and symbolic power as it is about physical armaments. Wendt (1999) argued that the international system is socially constructed and that the identities and interests of states are not given but rather are shaped by historical and social processes. For constructivists, nuclear weapons are imbued with symbolic meaning that goes beyond their material destructive capacity. They serve as tangible symbols of state resilience, technological advancement, and sovereign autonomy. This symbolic dimension is critical in understanding

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why some states invest heavily in maintaining and modernizing their nuclear arsenals even when the strategic rationale may seem less compelling from a strictly realist perspective. This theoretical divergence is at the heart of debates over nuclear strategy. While realism stresses the importance of material power and tangible deterrence, constructivism highlights the significance of symbolic security. The latter perspective suggests that the maintenance of nuclear weapons can be as much about safeguarding national identity as it is about deterring aggression. Recent case studies support this argument by showing that nations with nuclear arsenals often invoke the rhetoric of survival, resilience, and continuity to legitimize their security policies. Skey (2007), for example, demonstrates how nuclear-armed states frequently incorporate the narrative of existential threat and national perseverance into their public discourse. This rhetoric serves to bolster national pride and create a shared understanding among citizens that the nuclear arsenal is an essential component of the nation's identity.

Beyond the dichotomy of realism and constructivism, scholars have increasingly recognized that the relationship between nuclear weapons and ontological security is multifaceted. On one hand, the deterrent value of nuclear weapons provides a clear material benefit in terms of strategic stability. On the other hand, the symbolic value of these weapons can create a sense of continuity and reassurance among citizens, which is particularly important in times of domestic political instability or international uncertainty. This dual function has significant policy implications. For example, when nuclear weapons are seen as integral to national identity, efforts to reduce or eliminate nuclear arsenals may be met with resistance not only on security grounds but also as a perceived threat to the nation's self-concept.

Moreover, the literature reveals that the ontological security afforded by nuclear weapons is often intertwined with historical narratives. Many nuclear states have long histories of external threat, conflict, or perceived encirclement, and their nuclear programs are frequently justified as legacies of past struggles for survival. These historical narratives serve as powerful tools in constructing a continuous national identity that transcends generational change. The case of countries like Israel and India, for instance, illustrates how nuclear weapons are framed as critical to preserving national autonomy and securing a future free from the existential anxieties of historical conflict. In these cases, nuclear weapons are not only instruments of deterrence but also potent symbols that evoke historical memory and foster a collective sense of destiny.

In addition to historical narratives, contemporary geopolitical dynamics also play a role in shaping the ontological security of nuclear states. The post–Cold War era has seen a reconfiguration of international alliances and a rise in non-traditional security threats, such as terrorism and cyber warfare. In this complex security environment, the symbolic value of nuclear weapons is increasingly significant. Leaders often emphasize that the maintenance of nuclear capability is essential not only for countering conventional military threats but also for upholding the nation's reputation as a formidable and resilient power. This symbolic reinforcement is crucial for domestic political cohesion, as it assures citizens that the state is prepared to face both old and new forms of danger.

The interplay between nuclear weapons and ontological security has also been the subject of empirical research, with scholars examining the specific narratives employed by nuclear-armed states. Studies have revealed that political elites in these states frequently draw on metaphors of survival, strength, and eternal vigilance when discussing their nuclear programs. This discourse not only reflects the underlying anxiety about potential external

threats but also reinforces a sense of national pride and unity. By linking the possession of nuclear weapons to a broader narrative of national identity, policymakers create a powerful ideological framework that helps to mitigate internal divisions and foster a shared sense of purpose.

The review of literature also suggests that the symbolic role of nuclear weapons can have a stabilizing effect on the international system. When nuclear weapons serve as markers of national identity, states may be less inclined to engage in aggressive behaviour that could disrupt the established narrative of survival and continuity. In this way, the ontological security provided by nuclear arsenals contributes to a form of strategic stability that goes beyond mere deterrence. It establishes a framework within which states understand that their nuclear capability is part of a larger story of national perseverance—a story that, if interrupted, could lead to a crisis of identity and legitimacy.

Nonetheless, the symbolic association between nuclear weapons and national identity is not without its critics. Some scholars argue that an overreliance on nuclear weapons as symbols of ontological security can create a self-perpetuating cycle of militarization and insecurity. This phenomenon, often referred to as the “nuclear identity trap,” suggests that states may become so deeply invested in the symbolic power of nuclear weapons that they overlook the risks and costs associated with maintaining such arsenals. Critics contend that this dynamic can hinder disarmament initiatives and perpetuate an arms race, as states continuously seek to reinforce their national identity through technological and military superiority.

To sum up, the literature on ontological security and nuclear weapons reveals a complex interplay between material capabilities and symbolic meaning. While traditional realist theories, as articulated by Buzan (1991), emphasize the material deterrence value of nuclear arsenals, constructivist approaches—championed by scholars like Wendt (1999) and further developed by Mitzen (2006) and Steele (2008)—underscore the importance of symbolic security in sustaining national identity. Recent empirical studies, such as those by Skey (2007), provide further evidence that nuclear weapons function as existential symbols, reinforcing narratives of resilience and continuity. This multifaceted role of nuclear weapons challenges conventional understandings of deterrence and compels policymakers to consider both the material and ideological dimensions of nuclear strategy.

As the international system continues to evolve, the relevance of ontological security in shaping state behaviour remains a critical area of inquiry. The dual nature of nuclear weapons—as both tools of military deterrence and emblems of national identity—suggests that any discussion of nuclear policy must account for the psychological and symbolic dimensions of security. Understanding these dynamics is essential for devising strategies that not only mitigate the risks of nuclear conflict but also address the deeper, identity-based motivations that drive state behaviour. Future research should explore how changing global conditions—such as technological advancements, shifts in geopolitical alliances, and the rise of non-traditional security threats—impact the ontological security of nuclear states, and whether new forms of symbolic capital can emerge in a post-nuclear world.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a qualitative, literature-based methodology to explore the dual role of nuclear weapons as both instruments of deterrence and symbols of ontological security. The approach is rooted in an in-depth analysis of scholarly texts, theoretical frameworks, and selected empirical case studies. By synthesizing insights from seminal works, the study

seeks to elucidate how nuclear arsenals contribute to state security on both material and symbolic levels.

At the core of the methodology is a comprehensive literature review. This involves collecting, organizing, and analyzing peer-reviewed academic publications, books, and policy documents that discuss the intersections of nuclear strategy, deterrence theory, and ontological security. Seminal texts by theorists such as Giddens (1991), Mitzen (2006), Steele (2008), Buzan (1991), and Wendt (1999) provide the theoretical foundation. These sources are critically examined to understand the evolution of ideas surrounding ontological security and their application to international relations. The literature review not only establishes the theoretical parameters but also identifies gaps and areas of convergence between realist and constructivist perspectives.

To further explore these themes, the paper incorporates select case studies of both nuclear and non-nuclear states. The case studies serve as a tool for comparative analysis, providing concrete examples of how different national narratives and security policies are shaped by the presence—or absence—of nuclear arsenals. The research scrutinizes state rhetoric, policy documents, and historical accounts to assess how nuclear weapons are framed within national identity discourses. For nuclear states, the analysis focuses on how these weapons are portrayed as essential guarantors of national survival and symbols of resilience. For non-nuclear states, the study examines alternative security paradigms and narratives that compensate for the lack of a nuclear deterrent, thereby offering a contrast that highlights the symbolic function of nuclear weapons in identity construction.

A qualitative content analysis is employed to interpret the data collected from the literature and case studies. This involves coding texts to identify recurring themes, metaphors, and discursive patterns that link nuclear weapons to notions of ontological security. Particular attention is given to the language and symbolism used by policymakers and scholars. For example, phrases such as “existential guarantee” or “symbol of continuity” are analyzed to reveal underlying assumptions about the relationship between military capability and national identity. This textual analysis allows the study to move beyond quantitative measures of military strength, focusing instead on the qualitative impact of nuclear weapons on state self-perception.

The comparative approach is central to the methodology. By juxtaposing the narratives of nuclear and non-nuclear states, the study highlights the differences in how national identity is constructed and maintained. This comparison is guided by criteria such as historical experience with external threats, the evolution of national security policies, and the role of cultural and ideological factors in shaping security perceptions. The aim is to discern whether nuclear possession contributes uniquely to a state’s sense of ontological security, or if alternative mechanisms can provide similar symbolic reassurance.

Lastly, the methodology involves iterative synthesis and theoretical reflection. Insights gained from the literature and case studies are continuously re-evaluated in light of emerging themes, ensuring that the analysis remains coherent and grounded in established theoretical frameworks. This reflective process enables the research to develop nuanced conclusions about the dual functions of nuclear weapons, emphasizing their role in both material deterrence and the maintenance of national identity in a rapidly changing international landscape.

Analysis

The possession of nuclear weapons confers upon states a dual security function that extends far beyond conventional deterrence. On one hand, nuclear arsenals provide tangible military security by deterring potential adversaries through the credible threat of overwhelming retaliation. On the other hand, they serve as potent symbols of ultimate power, continuity, and resilience that underpin a nation's sense of self. As Giddens (1991) noted, "ontological security refers to the deep-seated need to perceive oneself as being in a stable and continuous state" (p. 107). This need for stability is not solely about survival in the material sense; it is also a psychological imperative that shapes national identity. For many nuclear states, the nuclear weapon itself becomes a signifier of national strength, resilience, and permanence—a counterweight to the existential uncertainties that define the anarchic international system.

In the realm of material security, the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons is well documented. Realist theorists have long argued that nuclear arsenals act as an effective deterrent against conventional military aggression by establishing a balance of power where the costs of initiating conflict far outweigh any potential benefits. The doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD) epitomizes this logic; the mere possession of nuclear weapons ensures that any adversary contemplating an attack must confront the certainty of catastrophic retaliation. This concept, grounded in a zero-sum view of international relations, underscores the material value of nuclear weapons as indispensable tools of national survival (Buzan, 1991). However, this traditional perspective, while crucial, represents only one facet of the nuclear security paradigm.

Equally important is the symbolic function of nuclear weapons, which resonates with the concept of ontological security. Mitzen (2006) argues that states, much like individuals, are driven by the need to maintain a coherent and continuous narrative of self-identity. In the case of nuclear-armed nations, this narrative is often deeply intertwined with the notion of survival against insurmountable odds. The nuclear arsenal, therefore, becomes more than a strategic asset; it morphs into a symbol of national endurance and historical continuity. Leaders and policymakers invoke nuclear capability in their rhetoric, framing it as an existential guarantee that not only protects the state from external threats but also preserves the nation's historical identity and collective memory. This dual role—ensuring both physical and ontological security—reinforces a narrative in which the nation is portrayed as inherently resilient and impervious to both external aggression and internal disintegration.

Constructivist theorists, such as Wendt (1999), offer further insight into the symbolic dimensions of nuclear weapons. Wendt contends that international politics is not merely a struggle for material power but a contest of ideas, identities, and social constructs. According to this perspective, the meanings ascribed to nuclear weapons are not fixed; they are continuously constructed and reconstructed through social interaction and discourse. Nuclear weapons, then, contribute to a performative dimension of state identity. They are imbued with symbolic meanings that elevate the nation's claim to modernity, technological prowess, and ultimate survival. This symbolic resonance is evident in both public discourse and elite policymaking, where nuclear capability is often depicted as a guarantor of national honour, reinforcing a vision of the state as both powerful and enduring.

The interplay between material deterrence and symbolic representation gives rise to a paradox that lies at the heart of nuclear strategy. On the one hand, the possession of nuclear weapons is intended to instil confidence by deterring adversaries and ensuring national

security. On the other hand, this very reliance on nuclear arsenals can inadvertently perpetuate a state of perpetual insecurity. The logic of deterrence, anchored in the threat of mutual destruction, creates an environment where the absence of nuclear capability is equated with vulnerability. This paradox is captured in the rhetoric of many nuclear states, where the maintenance of an arsenal is justified not only as a defensive measure but also as a necessary affirmation of the nation's identity. In this sense, the nuclear arsenal functions as both shield and symbol—a tangible embodiment of a nation's commitment to its own survival and a critical component of its national narrative.

Moreover, the symbolic value of nuclear weapons often transcends the boundaries of strategic military considerations and enters the realm of cultural and historical identity. In many nuclear-armed countries, historical experiences of conflict and perceived existential threats have left an indelible mark on the collective psyche. The nuclear program is then framed as a logical extension of a nation's long-standing struggle for survival and self-determination. For instance, countries that have endured prolonged periods of insecurity or external aggression tend to view their nuclear capabilities as a continuation of their historical narrative—a means to secure a future free from the existential anxieties of the past. This historical continuity reinforces the notion that nuclear weapons are not only essential for current security but also a legacy of national resilience that spans generations.

The discursive construction of nuclear identity is further reinforced by the language and imagery employed by political elites. Terms such as “existential guarantee,” “ultimate deterrent,” and “symbol of national resilience” are commonly used to evoke a sense of unwavering security and continuity. Such metaphors serve to bridge the gap between abstract notions of identity and concrete military capabilities. They create a powerful narrative that links the possession of nuclear weapons with the broader project of nation-building, wherein the state is portrayed as a timeless entity capable of withstanding both internal divisions and external challenges. This discursive process, which blends strategic imperatives with symbolic expressions, lies at the core of how nuclear weapons contribute to a state's ontological security.

Yet, this symbolic association is not without its critics. Some scholars have cautioned against what has been termed the “nuclear identity trap,” where states become so invested in the symbolic power of their nuclear arsenals that they may neglect the broader risks and costs associated with proliferation and arms races. This overreliance on nuclear weapons for maintaining ontological security can foster an environment of militarization and heightened insecurity. The entrenchment of nuclear identity may limit the scope for disarmament and create resistance to arms control initiatives, as any move towards reduction or elimination of nuclear weapons could be perceived as a threat to the nation's very essence. Such critiques suggest that while the symbolic role of nuclear weapons offers significant psychological comfort and reinforces national identity, it can also contribute to a cycle of dependence that complicates efforts towards global nuclear disarmament and stability.

The integration of nuclear weapons into national identity narratives has implications for international diplomacy and security policy. When nuclear arsenals are seen as integral to a nation's self-conception, policy debates surrounding arms control, non-proliferation, and disarmament are inevitably charged with ideological significance. In such cases, concessions on nuclear capability are not merely technical or strategic decisions; they become existential dilemmas that challenge the continuity of national identity. This dynamic can result in a heightened resistance to international agreements that seek to limit or reduce nuclear

arsenals, as such agreements may be interpreted as undermining the symbolic foundation upon which national security is built.

In addition, the symbolic significance of nuclear weapons extends to how states engage with one another on the global stage. The possession of nuclear weapons often serves as a marker of modernity and technological sophistication, influencing the perceptions of other states and international organizations. Nuclear capability can enhance a state's standing in the international community, reinforcing its image as a formidable and resilient power. This, in turn, affects diplomatic interactions and strategic alliances, as nuclear states may leverage their symbolic capital to negotiate from a position of perceived strength. The interplay between material and symbolic power thus contributes to a form of strategic stability that is not solely reliant on deterrence but also on the mutual recognition of national identity and prestige.

In sum, the analysis of nuclear weapons through the lens of ontological security reveals a complex, multidimensional relationship between material capabilities and symbolic representation. The dual function of nuclear arsenals—as instruments of deterrence and emblems of national identity—highlights the inherent interplay between physical security and psychological reassurance. Giddens' (1991) concept of ontological security, as applied by Mitzen (2006) and further elaborated by constructivist theorists like Wendt (1999), underscores the notion that the maintenance of a stable self-identity is as crucial for state survival as is the ability to deter military aggression. Nuclear weapons, therefore, occupy a unique position in international relations, serving as both a practical deterrent against external threats and a powerful symbol of national continuity and resilience.

This dual role is further complicated by the inherent contradictions and potential risks associated with nuclear dependency. While the symbolic function of nuclear weapons provides states with a reassuring narrative of continuity and permanence, it simultaneously reinforces a state of perpetual insecurity by embedding a nation's identity in the maintenance of an ever-present threat. The tension between these two functions—material security versus symbolic identity—presents a critical challenge for policymakers and scholars alike. Future research must continue to unravel these complexities, exploring how evolving global dynamics, shifting alliances, and emerging security threats may reshape the interplay between nuclear capability and ontological security in an increasingly interconnected world.

Ultimately, the analysis underscores that nuclear weapons are far more than mere military assets. They are deeply intertwined with the psychological and cultural dimensions of statehood, playing a crucial role in the ongoing construction of national identity. Whether through the deterrent logic of mutually assured destruction or the evocative power of national narratives, nuclear weapons contribute significantly to a nation's ability to navigate the uncertainties of both the international system and its own internal dynamics. This understanding calls for a more nuanced approach to nuclear policy—one that recognizes and addresses the profound symbolic stakes at play in the discourse of national security.

CONCLUSION

Nuclear weapons fulfil a complex and multifaceted role in international relations, one that transcends the simplistic framework of conventional deterrence theory. They provide states not only with tangible military security by deterring potential adversaries through the threat of catastrophic retaliation but also offer a form of ontological assurance that acts as a

symbolic anchor reinforcing national identity and continuity. In essence, nuclear arsenals serve a dual function: they are both a physical deterrent and a powerful emblem of resilience, embodying the historical narrative and collective self-perception of a nation.

From a material perspective, the deterrence provided by nuclear weapons has long been central to strategic stability. The logic of mutually assured destruction (MAD) ensures that any potential aggression is met with an overwhelming response, thereby preserving the status quo of international power balances. This facet of nuclear strategy is grounded in realist theories that view security as a function of material capability and coercive power (Buzan, 1991). However, as this paper has demonstrated, the role of nuclear weapons cannot be confined to such a purely material interpretation.

On the symbolic side, nuclear arsenals carry significant weight in the national psyche. Drawing on the concept of ontological security as discussed by Giddens (1991), nuclear weapons are seen as affirmations of a nation's enduring identity. They help states to maintain a coherent narrative of self—a narrative steeped in historical continuity, self-reliance, and an enduring spirit of resistance against existential threats. As Mitzen (2006) argues, these weapons are woven into the fabric of national memory and collective identity, functioning as assurances that the state will survive, adapt, and thrive even in the face of radical external uncertainties.

This synthesis of realist and constructivist perspectives reveals that nuclear weapons are integral not only to the strategic calculus of national defence but also to the internal process of identity construction. Constructivist theorists, notably Wendt (1999), have emphasized that international politics is as much about shared beliefs and collective identities as it is about tangible power. In many nuclear-armed states, the rhetoric surrounding nuclear capability is imbued with language that elevates these weapons to symbols of national honour, modernity, and ultimate sovereignty. Political leaders and policymakers frequently invoke the symbolism of nuclear arsenals to project an image of indomitable strength and continuity, thereby reinforcing the internal narrative that the state is both powerful and perpetually secure.

The dual role of nuclear weapons is particularly significant in a rapidly changing global order where both material and symbolic securities are increasingly contested. As international challenges evolve—ranging from cyber threats to unconventional warfare—the symbolic dimension of security becomes ever more critical. The reassurance provided by a nuclear deterrent extends beyond the battlefield; it nurtures a collective confidence among citizens and serves to unite diverse segments of society under a common identity. This sense of unity and stability is vital for political cohesion, especially in times of domestic or international crisis.

Yet, the integration of nuclear weapons into the national identity is not without its complications. The very factors that make these arsenals effective symbols of ontological security can also contribute to an enduring state of anxiety and militarization. An overreliance on nuclear capability as a cornerstone of national identity may engender a “nuclear identity trap,” where the symbolic assurance provided by these weapons reinforces a perpetual state of readiness and distrust. This dynamic can hinder disarmament efforts and complicate diplomatic negotiations, as any attempt to reduce nuclear arsenals may be perceived as undermining the nation’s existential security and historical continuity.

Given these multifaceted dynamics, it is clear that any discussion of nuclear policy must account for both the material and symbolic functions of these weapons. Future research should delve deeper into the interplay between nuclear deterrence and ontological security, examining how evolving global threats and technological advancements might alter this balance. There is a need for empirical studies that trace how national narratives evolve in response to both internal political shifts and external pressures, and how these narratives influence strategic decisions about nuclear armament.

In conclusion, nuclear weapons are far more than mere tools of warfare. They are complex instruments that play a crucial role in shaping national identity, sustaining collective self-confidence, and ensuring the continuity of statehood in an uncertain international landscape. The dual function of nuclear arsenals—as both a deterrent against aggression and a symbolic guarantor of ontological security—underscores the importance of integrating material and ideational analyses in the study of international security. As the global order continues to shift, understanding the nuanced roles of nuclear weapons will be essential for crafting policies that address not only strategic stability but also the deeper, identity-based dimensions of national security.

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Conflict of Interest

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