

Spatial Context of Ontological Security in Foreign Policy Analysis: The Case of Türkiye's Blue Homeland Policy

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Abstract

The concept of ontological security in foreign policy analysis (FPA) and International Relations highlights that states seek not only physical but also existential security. States, like individuals, aim to perceive themselves as meaningful entities and create stable identities through consistent routines and biographical narratives. These narratives are formed from collective memories and help the state maintain historical continuity and identity. However, FPA studies often overlook the importance of space, a crucial factor emphasized in psychological studies on individual ontological security. Space contributes to feelings of consistency, control, status, autonomy, and identity. This study explores the significance of space for a state's ontological security in foreign policy, using Türkiye's "Blue Homeland" (Mavi Vatan) policy as a case study. Türkiye's ambitious maritime policy, involving activities like natural gas exploration and military exercises, reflects its quest for physical and ontological security. The Blue Homeland policy not only addresses physical security but also Türkiye's need for ontological security through its discourses, symbols, and narratives. This study aims to introduce the spatial dimension into FPA's ontological security approach and analyze Türkiye's Blue Homeland policy through this new lens.

Keywords: Space, Home, Quest for Status, Autonomy, Turkish Foreign Policy

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Introduction

In the past few decades, the ontological security theory has evolved into a significant concept across various disciplines, from individual psychology to political science. Initially introduced by David R. Laing in the field of psychiatry, the theory was later adapted by Anthony Giddens to society, where it gained depth in sociology and became a crucial framework for understanding not only individuals' sense of security but also states' domestic and foreign policies. Despite its theoretical development, ontological security lacks a unified definition or clear framework, due to its conceptual breadth and complexity.

Numerous studies have applied the theory at the political level, focusing on different aspects of ontological security, with most examining its social dimensions. Giddens (1990) described ontological security as the sense of continuity an individual experiences within their

social and material environment. While Giddens' work primarily addresses the individual and societal levels, many political analyses (Ringmar 1996; Huysmans 1998; Rumelili 2015; Subotic 2016; Browning and Joenniemi 2017; Croft and Vaughan-Williams 2017) extend the theory into political contexts, emphasizing the role of social elements such as identity, biographical narratives, and daily routines in constructing security at the state level.

In contrast, some studies focusing on ontological security at the individual level provide a more materialist framework, highlighting the importance of physical spaces in maintaining ontological security. Among the most crucial of these material elements is the home. According to these studies, the home is a physical environment where individuals can reconstruct their identity, establish daily routines, and secure autonomy. The significance of the material environment in shaping ontological security is underlined, but surprisingly, the impact of these elements at the political level has been largely overlooked.

Kinnvall (2004; 2006) explored the role of material factors, such as religion and nationalism, as elements of ontological security, conceptualizing them as "sheltered areas" for communities in times of rapid social change. Kinnvall's work emphasized the parallels between the material importance of the home at the individual level and the functions of religion and nationalism as stabilizing forces for communities. Similarly, Ejodus (2021) highlighted the role of symbolic locations, such as specific national or religious sites, in the ontological security of societies. He argued that these places are essential in maintaining societal identity and continuity amidst change.

The most notable works that address the material aspects of ontological security at the political level are by Mitzen (2006; 2018), who argues that the home concept, significant at the individual level, is also relevant to the state. Mitzen's research empirically examines how the idea of "home" plays a role in the ontological security of states, particularly through the European Union's (EU) internal policy practices. While Mitzen (2018) briefly touches on foreign policy, her primary focus was on how the notion of homeland serves as a central material structure that maintains the EU's ontological security. Krickel-Choi (2022) extended this concept, conceptualizing the homeland not merely as a symbolic notion akin to home but as an embodied structure integral to the state's ontological security.

This study aims to reconstruct ontological security theory at the national level by integrating its social and material dimensions, applying it to the context of foreign policy. Unlike previous works, this study explains how a state constructs a territorial area as an ontological entity at the national level, reinforcing this through foreign policy practices. The material dimension of ontological security at the individual level—the home—will be elevated to the political level as the concept of homeland, while other material elements of the theory will be excluded. The study will first address the social dimensions of ontological security, then focus on the home's role in the individual ontological security system. The final section will empirically test this theoretical model by examining Türkiye's Blue Homeland policy, analyzing how the concept of territorial space is instrumentalized in the construction of a state's ontological security and foreign policy.

Ontological Security from the Individual to the State Level

The concept of ontological security, introduced by David R. Laing in the 1960s to explain schizophrenia, refers to an individual's ability to develop a meaningful life strategy and a secure sense of self-identity in the face of death. Laing (1990: 39) defined it as the feeling of existing "in the world as a real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person." Anthony Giddens later adapted this concept to the societal level, emphasizing its sociological implications. An individual's ontological security arises from early interactions, shaping their perception of reality and forming a biographical narrative, which helps them navigate the physical world through trust, routines, and reflexive monitoring (Giddens 1991).

Existential anxiety plays a key role in constructing ontological security. Life's chaos creates disorganization, inducing anxiety about one's own continuity, others, and objects. Reflexive monitoring helps project a future and guide actions, with anxiety acting as a tool for liberation, as Kierkegaard (1981) suggests. In this context, agency is internal, arising from the individual rather than external forces. As constructivists like Wendt argue, if agency were severely constrained, anxiety would lose its purpose, and this internal process of agency would be undermined (Steele 2008: 33).

The complexity of anxiety increases when transitioning from individuals to states (Croft and Vaughan-Williams 2017: 19). A state's anxiety encompasses that of its citizens, society, and political elite. Like individuals, states use anxiety as a tool for autonomy, navigating the anarchic international system by evaluating alternatives and choosing optimal actions. Anxiety helps states anticipate the future, take precautions, and assert agency, reducing structural constraints. Routines alleviate existential anxieties by creating continuity and order. They act as habitual responses to life's stimuli, helping individuals maintain cognitive control over threats (Mitzen 2006: 273). Routines sustain a coherent and predictable world, providing practical "answers" to existential uncertainties (Giddens 1991: 37).

States, like individuals, depend on regularities to mitigate uncertainties and ensure predictability (Bull 1977). These routines, shaped by societal habits and institutional structures, are central to maintaining state identity and stability. As Mitzen (2006: 271) argues, states' identities are defined not by material capacities but by their habits, which underpin domestic and foreign policies to manage future uncertainties.

Routines that soothe anxieties at individual and state levels emerge through biographical narratives, establishing identity and providing continuity between past, present, and future. These narratives help maintain individual consistency over time (Giddens 1991: 53) and create coherence by transforming scattered events into meaningful wholes (Wertsch 2000: 515). States provide ontological security by offering predictability through shared identities (Zarakol 2017: 49), and failing to address existential questions risks undermining their legitimacy (Steele 2008: 34). To unite citizens, states rely on narratives that define "us" and distinguish "others."

States use narratives to pursue interests and gain international recognition and acceptance, showing their identity and actions (Subotic 2016: 616). Narratives create continuity

and reinforce positive self-perceptions, with some arguing that nation-states are constituted through these narratives (Berenskoetter 2014: 264). Societal and state justifications derive from memory schemas, with history defining collective identity and shaping future actions (Schlesinger 1992: 45-46). Political actors highlight memories like traumas or victories to align collective identity with policy goals (Kinnvall 2004: 755; Subotic 2016: 612).

Ontological security requires a strong narrative and effective routines to address existential anxieties (Flockhart 2016). States, like individuals, must see their actions as self-originating and competent. This sense of agency is reinforced when others accept these actions. Foreign policy thus becomes a critical arena for states to embody their narratives, align actions with their identities, and gain recognition.

Space as a Source of Ontological Security

Giddens (1990) links ontological security to continuity in self-identity within private spaces, with social psychology emphasizing the material environment's crucial role. Space is central to an actor's security, and home ownership fosters a sense of being (Manzo 2003: 48). Over time, a house becomes a socially constructed home, beyond its physical security function (Dupuis and Thorns 1998: 31). Home symbolizes ontological bonds, with spatial commitment offering a foundation (Manzo 2003: 49). Homes support ontological security by enabling identity construction, continuity, routines, and autonomy (Dupuis and Thorns 1998: 29). This aligns with Proshansky's (1978) view that physical interaction shapes self-identity, emphasized by Keene, Smoyer, and Blankenship (2018). Baldwin, Smith, and Jacobson (2017: 38) argue that place attachment includes an emotional dimension, shaping identity through memories and experiences, influencing decisions like where to live or work.

Padgett (2007: 1932) found that homeownership aids in constructing or repairing identity, as temporary housing lacks the continuity needed for ontological security. Similarly, Dupuis and Thorns (1998: 37) emphasized that owning property symbolizes independence and plays a vital role in self-identity. Territoriality influences identity by fostering status, recognition, and self-image (Gold 1982: 48) while differentiating oneself, enhancing self-esteem, and supporting self-efficacy (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996).

The relationship between an actor and a place is reciprocal: places shape identity, and actors reflect their identities onto spaces. People modify spaces to align with their self-concept (Manzo 2003: 54). The narratives individuals assign to a place's past are crucial for attachment. Historical sites foster connections with the past and identity. Lewicka (2008: 211) found that those emotionally attached to a place show greater interest in its history. However, these narratives are often selective and subjective, shaped by bias (Lewicka 2008: 213). An actor develops continuity in time and space through selective memory, which is vital for ontological security. Historical narratives about a place connect the past, present, and future, enhancing belonging and linking individuals to their ancestors (Scannell and Gifford 2017: 362). Home, where "rites and rituals" occur, ties a family's past to its future, strengthening historical continuity (Dupuis and Thorns 1998: 34).

Home also fosters “psychological and emotional feelings of personal continuity” (Mitzen 2018: 1376), supporting routines essential to ontological security. Owning a home reduces uncertainties, enhancing predictability (Padgett 2007: 1932). As Tuan (1975: 154) notes, home anchors routines, providing stability in a changing world: dwelling is being (Lewicka 2011: 209). McNaughton and Sanders (2007) show that a stable home is vital for psychological, emotional, and physical security. Similarly, Stonehouse, Threlkeld, and Theobald (2021: 1057) found that frequent relocations and lack of belonging lead to instability and poor mental health. Homeless individuals often experience insecurity, instability, and restricted agency (Stonehouse, Threlkeld, and Theobald 2021: 1061-1062). Without a stable place, individuals lose temporal continuity, the ability to foresee the future, and their autonomy of action. Rosenberg et al. (2021) highlight that those in communal living spaces are forced into routines dictated by others, undermining their autonomy and disrupting ontological security.

Browning and Joenniemi (2017: 43-44), drawing on Heidegger, critique Giddens’ emphasis on routines as “inauthentic,” arguing that ontological security requires confronting existential questions. However, Giddens (1991: 40) cautions against blind adherence to routines, viewing healthy existence as the ability to adapt and create new routines when needed. Thus, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and Giddens share similar views: routines hinder authentic existence only when followed compulsively. Otherwise, macro routines do not prevent meaningful existence.

Laing (1990) highlights the link between autonomy and ontological security, where greater autonomy enhances agency, strengthening security (Giddens 1991). A controlled, owned space is crucial for autonomy and ontological security (Scannell and Gifford 2017: 363). While Hiscock et al. (2001) find homeownership insufficient for security, they stress its role in providing autonomy and shelter. Dupuis and Thorns (1998: 35-36) emphasize that the home offers immunity from external interventions, granting control over one’s life. Saunders (1989: 186-187) highlights autonomy as a key advantage of homeownership, with tenants often feeling limited due to a lack of control. Shared spaces with surveillance and limited privacy hinder ontological security (Rosenberg et al. 2021). Homeownership provides pride and enhances social status, with Kearns and colleagues (2000) demonstrating this in West Central Scotland. Homeowners, typically aligned with the middle class, are seen as belonging to a higher status than tenants (Marcuse 1975: 194).

Homeownership fosters ontological security by offering control, routines, privacy, and identity construction, while allowing reflection on past struggles and prospects (Padgett 2007: 1933). On a collective level, homeland connects territory with national identity and ontological security. The nation-state uses territoriality to legitimize itself, unify citizens, and distinguish itself externally (Anderson 1986: 219; Schiller, Glick, and Fouron 2001: 18). Territory provides continuity, reasserted through selective remembrance shaped by needs and goals (Nora 1989). During crises, nations emphasize symbols and narratives to restore identity (Smith 1992: 450). Competition over symbolic territories can lead to political struggles (Penrose 2002: 280). States, like individuals, derive ontological security through routines, historical continuity, and a sense of self. By transforming territories into homelands, states assert their uniqueness and continuity in the global order (Smith 1999: 64; Mitzen 2018: 1375).

Within the framework of ontological security studies, spatial configurations such as land and sea carry distinct implications for identity, routine, and continuity. Land space is typically bounded, administratively governed, and historically sedimented as the primary referent of statehood and national identity. In contrast, maritime space is fluid, borderless, and often legally ambiguous, governed by overlapping regimes such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea (UNCLOS). While land is associated with rootedness, settlement, and fixed boundaries, the sea symbolizes movement, openness, and contestation. This distinction matters from an ontological security perspective because states must work harder to construct a sense of routine, identity, and stability in maritime environments lacking land territories' natural solidity and permanence.

Blue Homeland and Türkiye's Ontological Security

In March 2006, two geographers from the University of Seville, Juan Luis Suarez de Vivero and Juan Carlos Rodriguez Mateos, published an article showing the exclusive economic zones of EU member states in the seas (Deriziotis 2021: 13). The map presented in the article, later known as the "Seville Map," depicted approaches in favor of Greece and Republic of Cyprus¹ in the Eastern Mediterranean.

This map was met with reactions from the Turkish political and public spheres. In this context, at a symposium held in Ankara in 2006, a Turkish Navy admiral, Cem Gürdeniz, expressed that Türkiye should have a broader area of authority in the seas. Gürdeniz (2019) defined the sea areas surrounding Türkiye, where he argued for the establishment of an extensive jurisdiction, as the "Blue Homeland" (*Mavi Vatan* in Turkish).

Türkiye's Ontological Insecurity and Meaning of the Blue Homeland

The concept of the Blue Homeland emerged in the 2000s when the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was firmly in power. During this period, Türkiye's foreign policy focused mainly on EU membership, with the "zero problems with neighbors" policy, put forward by Ahmet Davutoğlu, also forming a key part of the framework. The Blue Homeland concept, introduced by Gürdeniz and later embraced by nationalist officers, was sidelined mainly due to the focus on EU integration and neighborly relations.

Starting from 2011, when Erdoğan began his third term in power, Turkish foreign policy entered a new phase. During the Arab Spring, Türkiye often found itself on different fronts from its Western allies. This shift in alignment was notably marked by Türkiye's increasing divergence from Western powers, as discussed by Kutlay and Öniş (2021b: 3056), who highlight the changing dynamics of Turkish foreign policy during this period. Additionally, the 2013 Gezi Park protests, reminiscent of the Arab Spring and believed by some to be backed

1 The term "Republic of Cyprus" is used here in accordance with international practice. This does not imply any stance on the part of the Republic of Türkiye, which officially designates the entity as the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus and recognizes only the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

by Western powers, further influenced Türkiye's foreign policy vision, demonstrating a shift in its identity and response to external pressures.

Furthermore, rising issues in the EU membership process, coupled with tensions with NATO and the United States (US), especially concerning Türkiye's exclusion from the F-35 project and its inability to acquire the Patriot missile defense system, prompted Türkiye to reassess its relations with the West. These defense-related setbacks significantly altered Türkiye's foreign policy outlook, pushing it to seek greater strategic autonomy and explore new alignments outside traditional Western frameworks (Kutlay and Öniş 2021a).

Even more significantly, the attempted coup on 15 July 2016, by a group led by Fethullah Gülen, a religious community influential in critical points of Türkiye's bureaucracy and with whom Prime Minister Erdoğan had initially allied but later entered into a power struggle, marked an apparent and unofficial rupture between Türkiye and the West. The US seemed to take a neutral stance, balancing between the coup plotters and Türkiye's democratically elected leadership (Aktürk 2021: 103). Moreover, Erdoğan and his team believed that Western actors, particularly the US, were behind the coup attempt and frequently emphasized this belief (Euronews 2017). All these events and their perceptions in Turkish public opinion and politics created an "existential insecurity" among Turkish political elites (Akkoyunlu and Öktem 2016: 518).

This existential crisis among the elites governing Türkiye coincided with the ongoing shift and transformation in the international system's power dynamics. As discussions of the decline of Western power and the rise of the non-Western world pointed towards a new international order, Türkiye's pursuit of a new position and status on the global stage was reflected in the significant change in its national role conception during the second decade of AKP rule (Kutlay and Öniş 2021a: 1085). President Erdoğan frequently emphasized this by declaring, "the world is bigger than five," indicating that Türkiye no longer wanted to be under the influence of the great powers on issues concerning itself (Anadolu Agency 2023).

The existential crisis among Turkish political elites, marked by blurred "us-other" definitions and the ambiguity of their status, disrupted Türkiye's ontological security system. Erdoğan and his team tackled this insecurity through various domestic and foreign policy measures, notably by prioritizing the Blue Homeland concept. As Rumelili and Sofuoğlu (2025: 103) suggest, ontological insecurity drives states to adopt nationalistic frameworks to stabilize their identity. Türkiye seeks to overcome its ontological insecurity through identity assertion and sovereignty by instrumentalizing territorial space, particularly in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean.

According to Cem Gürdeniz (2020), the father of the concept, the Blue Homeland "encompasses all of Türkiye's declared or undeclared maritime jurisdiction areas (internal waters, territorial waters, continental shelf, Exclusive Economic Zone), as well as rivers and lakes." Beyond its conceptual dimension, the Blue Homeland, according to Gürdeniz, can offer new opportunities to strengthen Türkiye's geopolitical control over the Eastern Mediterranean, the Aegean, the Black Sea, and the Straits in an evolving international system shifting from

unipolarity to multipolarity. In this context, the Blue Homeland, with its independent foreign and security policy framework, is a part of Türkiye’s “Grand Strategy” (Gürdeniz 2020).

Despite the growing visibility of homeland-based strategic narratives in Türkiye—especially the Blue Homeland (*Mavi Vatan*) doctrine—there is a notable absence of systematic engagement with this subject within Turkish International Relations literature. This gap is not merely a matter of neglect. It may be attributed to the politicized and securitized nature of the doctrine, which emerged from within the Turkish military bureaucracy. Framed and promoted primarily by retired naval officers and closely linked with nationalist political discourse, *Mavi Vatan* has remained mainly within strategic and military circles. As a result, it has not attracted significant scholarly attention in peer-reviewed academic platforms. This study addresses this void by bridging strategic practice and theoretical inquiry, employing the lens of ontological security to offer a conceptual framework for understanding *Mavi Vatan* as a foreign policy instrument rooted in constructing material and symbolic homeland.

The Blue Homeland as a Space of Historical Continuity and Routine through a Selective Biographical Narrative

One of the most significant elements underlying the grand strategy that Türkiye redefined after 2016, which has led to geopolitical competition in the Eastern Mediterranean maritime areas, is the emergence of existential anxiety, which undermined ontological security. As Adısonmez and Onursal (2020: 299-301) point out, Türkiye’s post-2016 policy shifts, particularly its move toward a more assertive stance, reflect the anxiety surrounding survival, which is deeply rooted in the collective historical experience of the state. Both political and intellectual elites have made this existential anxiety visible for Türkiye by emphasizing the main elements of the ontological security mechanism: biographical narrative, selective memory, historical continuity, and routines.

Rumelili and Sofuoglu (2025: 95) elaborate on how historical traumas, such as the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, have been integrated into Türkiye’s contemporary identity discourse, contributing to a sense of vulnerability and insecurity. In this context, the traumas experienced during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire have been equated with current events, creating an existential anxiety mechanism based on the possibility that Türkiye might face a fate similar to that of the Ottoman Empire.

According to retired admiral Cihat Yaycı (2023: 2), one of the key figures in popularizing the concept of the Blue Homeland, the ancestors of the Turks, during the final period of the Ottoman Empire, paid a heavy price for neglecting naval power, which manifested in “losses of blood, land, and honor” at the beginning of the 20th century. This neglect led to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and foreigners’ subsequent occupation of Anatolia, an existential homeland. Gürdeniz (2015) points out that those who came to dismantle the Ottoman Empire, including the Greeks who invaded Anatolia after World War I, consistently arrived from the sea. The notion that Türkiye is being confined to a specific maritime area in contemporary discussions echoes the narrative of the past, particularly using selective memory linking the

Treaty of Sèvres at the end of World War I—which led to the occupation of Anatolia—with today’s circumstances. According to Cem Gürdeniz, the attempts to confine Türkiye to a limited maritime area in the Eastern Mediterranean represent the imposition of a second Treaty of Sèvres scenario. Thus, Türkiye’s struggle in the Blue Homeland is seen as a continuation of the Independence War and has an existential nature (Cumhuriyet 2019).

President Erdoğan similarly views the current situation as reminiscent of the Treaty of Sèvres, where Türkiye was “deprived of its rightful energy resources in the south through subtle politics” a century ago. For Erdoğan, the struggle in the Blue Homeland equates to the National Struggle against the limitations imposed by Sèvres, which sought to confine the Ottoman State to a small area in Anatolia (BBC News Türkçe 2020). Gürdeniz also views the Blue Homeland as akin to a modern version of the National Pact (*Misak-ı Milli*) adopted by the last Ottoman parliament, emphasizing Türkiye’s independence and the integrity of its territory (Denizeau 2021: 16).

From this perspective of existential anxiety, it is argued that Türkiye must demonstrate dominance and power in the Mediterranean against imperialist policies to avoid the fate that befell the Ottoman Empire (Çandar 2020). Thus, the Ottoman period, which was pushed to the background in the political arena in Türkiye from Atatürk to the Erdoğan era, began to be recalled during Erdoğan’s tenure. The Blue Homeland policy has been one of the most vivid manifestations of this recollection. Based on the parallels drawn with the Ottoman past, the existential anxiety felt is attempted to be overcome by selectively recalling various periods of Ottoman history. In this context, there has been an emphasis on the periods when the Ottomans dominated the seas, and the names, events, and symbols associated with those times have been highlighted to contextualize the space historically. According to Mikhail Alan (2020), Erdoğan sees himself as akin to Sultan Selim I, one of the most magnificent and victorious sultans of the Ottoman Empire. He also considers Türkiye’s mission to be a continuation of the Ottoman legacy. Like Sultan Selim I, Erdoğan aims to reestablish Türkiye as a major actor in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. According to Akkoyunlu and Öktem (2016: 518), the “New Türkiye” under Erdoğan’s leadership views the territories once ruled by the Ottomans as a forgotten imperial heritage.

In line with this goal, mechanisms of historical recall are employed to nationalize maritime spaces. In this regard, the names given to seismic research and drilling vessels used by Türkiye in its oil and natural gas exploration and extraction activities in the Blue Homeland are among the most significant symbolic indicators of seeking ontological security through selective historical memory. The names of the seismic research vessels, Barbaros Hayrettin Pasha and Oruç Reis, derive from two prominent Turkish captains who served in the Mediterranean during the Ottoman period in the 16th century. These captains established Turkish dominance in the Mediterranean, transforming it into a “Turkish Lake.” The names of these seismic research vessels send a clear and direct message to both the domestic and international public: Turks have returned to establish dominance in the Mediterranean like Barbaros and Oruç Reis once did. The names given to the four drilling ships are also the result of a similar selective memory mechanism. Naming the drilling vessels after sultans such as

Fatih (Mehmet II), Kanuni (Süleyman I), and Yavuz (Selim I), who elevated the Ottoman Empire to a major empire in the Mediterranean and the Middle East and brought it to the peak of world politics, conveys a message that Turks intend to return to their former glory in the Mediterranean.

The naming of Türkiye's largest drilling ship as "Abdülhamid Han" is also a product of the selective social and political memory mechanism. Although the reign of Abdülhamid II is often associated with the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the first oil on Turkish territory was discovered during his reign in 1887 in İskenderun (Yetkin Report 2022). President Erdoğan emphasized this in his speech when the drilling ship commenced operations. The deliberate choice of the name "Abdülhamid" is clear from Erdoğan's statements, highlighting the symbolic connection to historical moments of significance and energy exploration under Abdülhamid II's rule, positioning the modern endeavor in a continuum of national resurgence and historical prowess:

"Today, we are sending our Abdülhamid Han ship to the Blue Homeland, to our new drilling route in the Mediterranean. Remember, the first oil in our country was found 135 years ago in the Mediterranean, in İskenderun. ... Those who encounter the name Abdülhamid Han in the Mediterranean will probably first think of Gazi Ethem Pasha and the Battle of Dumlupınar. They understood, at least they remember the National Struggle that took place just a century ago." (Anadolu Agency 2022).

The symbolic emphasis on Abdülhamid, the victory against the Greeks during his reign, and the commander of that victory underscores Türkiye's attempt to demonstrate a historical legacy of possessing and exploring oil in the region. By doing so, Türkiye aims to anchor its actions in a historical continuity and routine, while also seeking to legitimize these efforts. This strategy highlights the nation's longstanding involvement in the area and ties current initiatives back to past accomplishments, framing them as a continuation of a proud national narrative. This approach effectively uses history to reinforce sovereignty and assert rights over natural resources, strengthening Türkiye's geopolitical position and claims in the Mediterranean.

The reinforcement of Türkiye's collective self through the glorification of its maritime past is exemplified by the frequent biographical emphasis on the Battle of Preveze during the reign of Sultan Suleiman I (Kanuni). This battle, which asserted Turkish supremacy in the Mediterranean, is pivotal in Türkiye's historical narrative. In 2020, on the anniversary of the Battle of Preveze, President Erdoğan issued a message highlighting that the Turkish Naval Forces are the heirs to the victorious sailors of Preveze (Hürriyet 2020). Similarly, in a speech during the Blue Homeland exercises² in March 2021, Erdoğan referred to the 1538 Battle of Preveze, where the Ottoman Empire decisively defeated the Christian alliance's

2 Between 2017 and 2025, as part of the Blue Homeland policy, the Turkish Navy conducted ten major exercises named Sea Wolf (*Deniz Kurdu*), Blue Homeland (*Mavi Vatan*), and Determination (*Kararlılık*) in the Aegean, Black Sea, and Eastern Mediterranean.

fleet. He emphasized figures like Barbaros Hayrettin Pasha, Turgut Reis, and Seydi Ali Reis, who played key roles in making the Mediterranean a “Turkish Lake” during the Ottoman era, thereby illustrating the historical continuity of Türkiye’s presence in the Mediterranean (The Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye 2021).

At the end of the Mavi Vatan-2019 exercises, as the soldiers returned to their bases passing through the Bosphorus, they paid a naval salute towards the tomb of Barbaros Hayrettin Pasha located on the shores of the strait as a sign of respect. This ritual has been repeated in the parade ceremonies and subsequent exercises. Historically, this ritual was a tradition performed up to the early 19th century, signifying that the fleet was following in the footsteps of the great Turkish sailor before setting off on a campaign (Anadolu Agency 2019). The revival of this ritual, which had not been performed for about two hundred years, reflects Türkiye’s effort to demonstrate historical continuity and maintain traditions in the seas it claims. This act answers one of the fundamental questions of the ontological security mechanism: “Where do we come from, and where are we going?” by drawing from the Ottoman past and transporting it into the present. This linkage enhances the narrative of continuous maritime presence and prowess and strengthens the national identity and collective memory associated with Türkiye’s naval history.

According to İbrahim Karagül (2019), a prominent journalist and staunch supporter of the Erdoğan government, the Blue Homeland policy has redefined the Turkish public’s perception of the homeland, reviving a “memory” that rediscovers the Seljuk and Ottoman heritage. Karagül’s (2019) statement is striking: “The Seljuks have returned, the Ottomans have returned, the confrontations of World War I have returned, the defence of Anatolia has returned, the claims of centuries have returned; in short, everything that belongs to us has come back. We have seen that all of it is ours, belongs to us.” This reflects a strong nationalistic sentiment, framing the Blue Homeland policy as a strategic move and a restoration of Türkiye’s historical maritime claims and glory.

Türkiye’s Quest for Status, Autonomy, and Great Power Identity through the Blue Homeland

The concept of “space,” particularly the home for an individual, was discussed earlier as a crucial element for identity formation. Similarly, with the Blue Homeland policy, there have been significant shifts in Türkiye’s identity. Historically, Türkiye’s maritime power declined over the last few centuries of the Ottoman era, and for about the last two hundred years, Türkiye has primarily been identified as a land power rather than a maritime state (Tarakcı 2015; Anadolu Agency 2020; Deniz News Agency 2024). However, the Blue Homeland initiative marks a shift back towards a maritime state identity.

This policy redefines Türkiye as a naval power (Deriziotis 2021: 15). This transformation in identity has also shaped Türkiye’s security and foreign policy actions. Following the Blue Homeland policy implementation, Türkiye established military bases in Qatar, Libya, and Somalia (Decottignies and Cagaptay 2016; Euronews 2022; The Arab Weekly 2024). Thus,

Türkiye is trying to reassert its presence in the Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Persian Gulf regions where the Ottoman Empire once had significant influence.

In the 2010s, particularly after 2016, the ontological insecurity Türkiye experienced, along with the incorporation of maritime power elements into its identity, also triggered its quest for status. Until the 2010s, despite some issues, Türkiye had accepted its status within the Western alliance system. However, during the implementation of the Blue Homeland policy, Türkiye entered a phase where its departure from the West was being debated.

Burhanettin Duran, a scholar close to Erdoğan's policies, appointed as Deputy Foreign Minister in May 2024 and as Director of Communications in July 2025, noted that following the events of July 15, a perception developed among the Turkish public that the US had a hostile attitude towards Türkiye (Duran 2018: 44). Consequently, Erdoğan frequently emphasized the need for new allies amid the growing distrust with the West, questioning Türkiye's position within the Western alliance and turning towards new power centers, particularly China and Russia (Duran 2018: 44; Deriziotis 2021: 15-17).

During this period of questioning its position within the West and seeking new directions, 82% of the Turkish public believed that Türkiye did not hold the position it deserved in the international system under the current conditions (Security Radar 2022). In this context, the Blue Homeland policy has been viewed as one of the pathways out of the ontological insecurity caused by questioning Türkiye's international status and finding its current position insufficient.

Ownership of maritime space and the display of power in those areas are expected to address Türkiye's quest for status. Thus, through the Blue Homeland policy, Türkiye seeks not only to achieve great power status but also to be treated equally by other great powers, as it was during the Ottoman period (Diakopoulos and Stournaras 2022). According to Ercan Yıldırım (2019), a columnist close to the government, the intense competition in the Mediterranean involving major powers in recent years will determine Türkiye's place and status on the world stage.

The simplification of history into a never-ending conflict between two opposing groups, friends and enemies, strengthens populist leaders by consolidating their followers around a national identity rooted in mythic narratives. At the same time, it delegitimizes their adversaries by applying historical judgments to undermine them morally (Aydın-Düzgit et al. 2022: 518). Therefore, Türkiye aims to redefine "friends" and "threats" through its maritime actions while also seeking to fulfill its status ambitions. The Blue Homeland policy thus serves as a means for Türkiye to reassert its historical maritime claims and elevate its position within the international hierarchy.

As Türkiye seeks to redefine its identity and gain status through maritime space, it also aims to reinforce its autonomy, which is essential for ontological security. Having been a relatively weak country since the last few centuries of the Ottoman Empire, Türkiye has naturally depended on influential actors in the international system in various ways. This military, economic, and political dependence has undermined Türkiye's autonomy as an

actor. In this context, the Blue Homeland policy also indicates that Türkiye is making its own decisions independently. Thus, alongside objectives such as protecting interests in the surrounding maritime areas and accessing new natural resources, the Blue Homeland policy aims to liberate Türkiye from the constraints imposed by the West (Deriziotis 2021: 25).

In a speech, Erdoğan emphasized that states unable to achieve success and independence in the defence sector cannot secure their future. He stated that, thanks to investments in defence, particularly in maritime areas, Türkiye is on its way to becoming a fully independent country (Milliyet 2024). Moreover, Erdoğan expressed Türkiye's desire to no longer rely on the initiatives of others regarding maritime issues with the striking words: "As with everything else, we will handle our own affairs in this matter, we will cut our own umbilical cord. We have not hesitated, nor will we hesitate, to fight tooth and nail to protect our rights when necessary" (Anadolu Agency 2022). Erdoğan's statement about "cutting our own umbilical cord" and the ambitious, military-focused Blue Homeland policy highlight Türkiye's quest for autonomy, its perception of the West as a threat, and its intention to assert itself as an autonomous actor to its Western allies (Moudouros 2021: 463; Yapar, 2021). Both Erdoğan and then-Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu stressed that nothing can be done in the Eastern Mediterranean without Türkiye's consent (Diakopoulos and Stournaras 2022). Accordingly, Türkiye expects to be taken seriously and have its actions and will respected, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The fact that the Blue Homeland policy constitutes an official state policy of Türkiye is evident in the statements and emphasis placed by government officials, particularly President Erdoğan. Moreover, the explicit use of the term the Blue Homeland in official statements by various ministries—such as the Ministry of National Defense and the Ministry of the Interior—as well as the naming of official naval exercises after this concept, further reinforces its institutionalization (see Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior 2024, 2025; Ministry of National Defense 2025). Additionally, the new national curriculum titled "Century of Türkiye Education Model" (*Türkiye Yüzyılı Maarif Modeli*), introduced by the Ministry of National Education in 2024, prominently features both the name and content of the Blue Homeland (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of National Education 2024).

Türkiye's unwavering commitment to the Blue Homeland policy, which it has put forth to gain recognition as a significant actor both regionally and globally, continues to maintain its vitality as the first quarter of the 21st century draws to a close. In two speeches delivered in July and August 2024, Erdoğan demonstrated this resolve by stating, "We will not take even the slightest step back from protecting our Blue Homeland, which is an inseparable part of our Motherland," and "We will resolutely advance towards the goals of the Century of Türkiye, disregarding the ill-wishers who dismiss the Blue Homeland as a mere tale." Furthermore, he noted that Türkiye would consolidate its power in the Blue Homeland through the domestic submarine production, which he described as a 138-year-old aspiration (Anadolu Agency 2024; Independent Türkçe 2024). Speaking at the Blue Homeland-2025 naval exercises held in January 2025, the Minister of National Defense, Yaşar Güler, also emphasized Türkiye's determination to safeguard its rights and interests in the Blue Homeland (Anadolu Agency 2025).

On the other hand, although the concept of “Blue Homeland” has been vigorously promoted by political elites and thus regarded as a means of achieving autonomy, status, and prestige for Türkiye, it has received limited support among the Turkish public. As of 2021, 76% of the Turkish population stated that they had never heard of the “Blue Homeland” concept (Aydın 2021). Therefore, for the Blue Homeland policy to significantly contribute to Türkiye’s ontological security, it would need to be broadly embraced by the public.

To sum up, the policies that Türkiye is implementing in the Blue Homeland undoubtedly have a traditional security dimension and a motivation for material gain. However, as argued in this study and presented above, the significance of the Blue Homeland policy for Türkiye lies not only in its material gains but also in the sense of historical continuity it provides, its response to existential anxieties, its perception of autonomy, its reflection of a great power identity, and its role as a platform for demonstrating status. These aspects make it crucial for Türkiye’s ontological security system.

Conclusion

At the individual level, ontological security, an essential part of the actor’s security system, functions as a mechanism that affects the sense of security and determines the actors’ actions at the societal and state levels. States, like individuals, want to feel themselves as valuable, enduring, effective, and autonomous agents shaped around a distinct identity in the world. This motivation causes the state to have existential anxieties. Therefore, states, like individuals, strive to overcome existential anxieties.

In this regard, states construct a biographical narrative that creates historical continuity and routines between the past and the present using selective memory, thus establishing a foundation for their self-identity. Within the framework of this biographical narrative, the identity that emerges indicates definitions of friend and threat, the state’s position among others, and what should or should not be done. Additionally, states want to feel and demonstrate to others that they are not dependent on others and are the source of their actions. Thus, the sense of being an autonomous actor functions as a protective cocoon, reinforcing ontological security.

On the other hand, states, like individuals, conduct all processes of constructing their ontological security systems in specific spaces. This study has shown that ontological security has a spatial dimension for states, similar to individuals. Like individuals, states establish routines with historical continuity through their relationship with space; they develop and transform their identity; they make distinctions between friends and threats; they produce status; and they regulate their relationships with others.

The spatial areas of states are the territories defined as “homeland.” Although the homeland is generally an influential element in the internal functioning of the state, as demonstrated in this study, it can also be quite effective in the processes of foreign policy-making in certain aspects. For a state to have ontological security, the elements of its collective self must be displayed and accepted by others. States assert themselves to others through foreign policy.

The theoretical claim put forth in this study has been tested by analyzing Türkiye's Blue Homeland policy and its foreign policy dimension. In response to various processes that developed in the 2010s, Türkiye aims to overcome its existential anxieties through its relationship with specific maritime areas referred to as the Blue Homeland. In Türkiye's relationship with the Blue Homeland, a biographical narrative with historical continuity is observed, along with a reliance on routines reflected in this narrative, efforts to achieve autonomy through the use of space, and a desire to obtain an effective status through ownership and actions within the space.

The Blue Homeland is not only a physical space with specific geographical coordinates for Türkiye but also a social source of power where the state's self-identity is existentially reproduced. Through the power derived from this space, Türkiye aims to overcome the ontological insecurity that emerged in the 2010s. This desire is reflected in the shaping and implementation of its foreign policy.

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