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From Domestic Contestation to Alpha Male Foreign Policy: Phantasies of Masculinity and the US Self

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How does masculinity inform the 2024 US presidential election and subsequent US foreign policy? To address this question, we develop the concept of phantasy of masculinity, an affectively charged imaginary that links normalized gender discourses with the narrative reconstruction of Self and Other(s), and that becomes increasingly regressive along a spectrum of intensification towards hypermasculinity. Analyzing official speeches and the media discourse surrounding the 2024 US presidential election campaign and the first year of foreign policy in the second Trump administration, we show that phantasies of masculinity Othering domestic political rivals were central to narrative contestation for both Republicans and Democrats. We further argue that US foreign policy is regressing towards hypermasculinity, in an affectively driven yet ultimately futile attempt to restore ontological security under conditions of perceived crisis. The article makes two contributions to International Relations (IR) scholarship. First, it develops the concept of phantasy of masculinity as a framework for analyzing the psychological and affective dimensions of masculinity. Second, it offers an explanation for seemingly “irrational” US foreign policy under Trump. We conclude by calling for closer integration of feminist IR and Ontological Security Studies to better understand geopolitical implications of gendered insecurities in an uncertain era.

¿Cómo influyó la «masculinidad» en las elecciones presidenciales de EE. UU. de 2024 y en la posterior política exterior estadounidense? Con el fin de abordar esta cuestión, desarrollamos el concepto de fantasía de la masculinidad, un imaginario cargado de afecto que vincula los discursos de género normalizados con la reconstrucción narrativa del Yo y del (los) Otro(s), y que se vuelve cada vez más regresivo a lo largo de un espectro de intensificación hacia la hipermasculinidad. Demostramos, a través de un análisis de los discursos oficiales, así como del discurso mediático en torno a la campaña presidencial estadounidense de 2024 y el primer año de política exterior en la segunda administración de Trump, que las fantasías de masculinidad que excluyen a los rivales políticos nacionales fueron fundamentales en la disputa narrativa tanto para republicanos como para demócratas. Además, argumentamos que la política exterior de EE. UU. está regresando a la hipermasculinidad en un intento impulsado por las emociones, pero que en última instancia resulta inútil, de restaurar la seguridad ontológica bajo condiciones de crisis percibida. El artículo hace dos contribuciones a los estudios académicos del campo de las Relaciones Internacionales. En primer lugar, desarrolla el concepto de fantasía de la masculinidad como un marco para analizar las dimensiones psicológicas y afectivas de la masculinidad. En segundo lugar, ofrece una explicación para la aparentemente «irracional» política exterior de EE. UU. bajo el mandato de Trump. Concluimos haciendo un llamamiento a una integración más estrecha de los estudios feministas del campo de las RRII y de los estudios de seguridad ontológica con el fin de poder entender mejor las implicaciones geopolíticas de las inseguridades de género en una era incierta.

Comment la masculinité renseigne-t-elle l'élection présidentielle états-unienne de 2024 et la politique étrangère des États-Unis par la suite ? Pour répondre à cette question, nous créons le concept de fantasme de masculinité, un imaginaire chargé sur le plan affectif qui relie les discours normalisés sur le genre à la reconstruction narrative du Moi, de l'Autre et des Autres, et qui devient de plus en plus régressif à mesure que l'hypermasculinité s'intensifie. En analysant les discours officiels et le discours des médias autour de la campagne pour les élections présidentielles états-uniennes de 2024 ainsi que la première année de politique étrangère du second mandat de Trump, nous montrons que les fantasmes de masculinité qui mettent en marge les rivaux politiques nationaux constituaient un élément central de la contestation narrative des républicains comme des démocrates. Nous affirmons en outre que la politique étrangère états-unienne revient vers l'hypermasculinité, une tentative motivée par l'affect et finalement futile de restaurer la sécurité ontologique dans des conditions de crise perçue. L'article apporte deux contributions à la recherche en relations internationales. D'abord, il développe le concept de fantasme de masculinité comme cadre d'analyse des dimensions psychologiques et affectives de la masculinité. Ensuite, il propose une explication à la politique étrangère états-unienne a priori « irrationnelle » sous la présidence de Trump. En conclusion, nous appelons à

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une intégration plus étroite des RI féministes et des études de sécurité ontologique pour mieux comprendre les implications géopolitiques des insécurités genrées à une époque d'incertitudes.

Introduction

The 2024 United States (US) presidential election is widely regarded as a critical juncture in both American and global history, during which the fate of the nation and the world order were at stake. It was not merely another election but a moment in which competing visions of US autobiographical narrative(s), namely “stories” that individuals and collectives “tell to and about themselves” (Subotić 2016, 611), confronted one another. At such a decisive crossroads, one might have expected the election campaign to focus chiefly on urgent geopolitical issues: the global role of the US, China’s rise, the war in Ukraine, and American support for Israel. While all these issues were fiercely debated, what emerged with striking prominence at the heart of the narrative contestation over the future of the US were questions of masculinity, expressed both implicitly and explicitly throughout the campaigns and the surrounding media discourse. As one observer remarked, “masculinity [was] on the ballot” (Flood 2024). While this political contestation was primarily domestic, its repercussions were global, as they ultimately shaped how the US conducts itself internationally under the second Trump administration. In this article, we ask what role masculinity played in the collective narrative contestation of the 2024 US presidential election, what broader function masculinity serves in the (re)negotiation of state Selves, and how these dynamics ultimately shape foreign policy. To address these questions, we draw upon feminist scholarship on masculinities and research on ontological (in)security, also referred to as “the security of being,” within the field of International Relations (IR).

Feminist IR argues that masculinity constitutes a core dimension of state narratives, as it is (stereotypically) associated with projecting strength, protection, and legitimacy (see Agius 2022; Kinnvall 2019). However, “masculinity” is not monolithic, but can be performed in multiple ways (Parnpart and Zalewski 2008) which are hierarchized according to their perceived desirability (Sjöberg 2017). State Selves are (re)negotiated through narrative contestation that unfolds as actors seek to advance masculinized autobiographical narratives to promote and sustain a dominant understanding of the nation(-state) (Delehanty and Steele 2009). This has been demonstrated extensively in relation to the US, with scholars showing how gender(ing) dynamics that masculinize the Self and feminize Other(s) define national interest and foreign policy (Agathangelou and Ling 2004; Maruska 2009; Nayak 2006). From this perspective, masculinity lying at the heart of narrative contestation of the 2024 election and informing foreign policy during the second Trump administration is not surprising, as it represents a continuation and intensification of masculinist narratives and (neo)imperial foreign policy practices that recur in US history (Dean 2001; Doty 1993; Maruska 2009). What is surprising, however, is the particular configuration of masculinity characterizing the narrative contestation in the 2024 elections; both Republicans and Democrats, albeit to a significantly different extent, drew on signifiers of hypermasculinity—which exaggerate the features associated with masculinity (Maruska 2009)—to construct their proposed narrative of the US Self. With the victory of the Make America Great Again (MAGA) strand of the Republicans,

these features of aggression and violence have been translated into an erratic foreign policy that is challenging long-established international hierarchies and turning friends into foes.

Our article contributes to the broader conversation on Trump and foreign policy by adopting a gender perspective, which allows us to investigate the previously underexplored interrelations between the “domestic” and the “international” sphere in the US context. Some scholars adopted a gender angle to examine the 2024 election, primarily focusing on how voters’ gender influenced their electoral behavior (Turcotte and Raynauld 2025). While a substantial body of literature investigated the foreign policy of Trump’s first and second term, such analyses often remain anchored in assessing whether his so-called “populist” (Homolar and Löffmann 2022; Wojcowski 2020) and “alpha male” foreign policy (Aggestam and True 2021; Hamilton 2019) represents a case of change or continuity compared to previous administrations (Abrams 2017; Bentley and David 2021). In this context, scholarship grounded in rationalist paradigms frequently struggles to account for foreign policy decisions that appear irrational and that effectively undermine, rather than reinforce, the international role of the US (Karkour 2021; McManus 2025). In this article, we examine how the gendered domestic narrative contestation that unfolded during the election informs contemporary US foreign policy in the second Trump administration, as well as (dis)continuities with his first term and earlier administrations.

To this end, we turn to the literature on ontological (in)security, which provides a framework for understanding *when*, *how*, and *why* traits associated with hypermasculinity are promoted in processes of narrative contestation, and their implications on foreign policy. Building on scholarship drawing on the work of British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (Cash 2017; Houde 2024), we conceptualize ontological (in)security as structuring positions that shape modes of relating to Self and Other (Gellwitzki 2025). These positions are sustained and negotiated through phantasies: affectively charged imaginaries that mediate perceptions of reality and organize relations between the Self and Other (Gellwitzki and Houde 2023, 436). We bring the Kleinian concept of phantasy in conversation with feminist IR to develop the concept of *fantasy of masculinity*. Masculinity is conceptualized as an affective imaginary through which actors are enabled to construct compelling narratives of the Self while marginalizing alternatives. As ontological insecurity intensifies, these phantasies become increasingly rigid and defensive, producing more regressive forms of Self–Other relations. Masculinity thus functions as a fulcrum linking normalized gender discourses with the narrative (re)construction of Self and Other(s). Approaching masculinity as *fantasy* illuminates the psychological and discursive mechanisms through which masculinity informs narrative contestation and foreign policy.

Our main line of argument is that, in the position of ontological insecurity (characterized by widespread uncertainty and anxieties) always already masculinized narratives about the state (see, for example, Bilgic 2016; Kinnvall 2019; Agius 2022) regress further into phantasies of hypermasculinity, a shift reflected in both domestic and foreign policy.

Phantasies of hypermasculinity offer an idealized conception of the collective Self that can be aspired to, thereby functioning as a defense mechanism against said anxieties. This helps us understand why narratives centered on a hypermasculine Self become more resonant than competing ones that construct masculinity in more nuanced ways. To be effective, phantasies must be enacted in practice (Price 2025) and this is how they motivate and underpin both narrative and policy processes. This reiteration, however, leads to a paradox whereby the need to perform hypermasculinity increases ontological insecurity rather than resolving it; in the context of this article, Trump's hypermasculine foreign policy speaks about unresolved anxieties about the US international role, which hypermasculinity promises to alleviate, but fundamentally reproduces. Thus, ontological security and the concept of *fantasy of masculinity* constitute useful conceptual tools for making sense of both narrative contestation and US foreign policy under Trump's second term in ways that alternative approaches do not, as they illuminate the psychological and discursive mechanisms behind them.

The article advances IR scholarship by further integrating feminist IR and Ontological Security Studies (OSS). It contributes to these literatures in three ways. First, by developing the concept of *fantasy of masculinity*, it highlights the psychological and discursive underpinnings of different idealizations of masculinity and their role in narrative contestation and foreign policy. Second, as we will see below, it offers an analytical toolkit to study masculinity through the mechanisms of splitting, introjection, projection, and projective identification, which allows us to understand how different "parts" of masculinity can be kept together, however incoherently, in autobiographical narratives. Third, it develops OSS to foreground the foundational role of masculinity in the security of the collective Self and shows that conditions of ontological insecurity are conducive to shifts towards hypermasculinity. In other words, in a position of ontological insecurity, phantasies of aggressive and violent masculinity tend to resonate more than nuanced, ambivalent, and progressive ones.

Applying the concept of *fantasy of masculinity*, our empirical analysis shows that three factors set the 2024 presidential election and the foreign policy of Trump's second term apart from earlier campaigns and his first term. First, during the campaign, the contestation between Republicans and Democrats around the US autobiographical narrative unfolded primarily through gendering and Othering the domestic political rival by phantasising and hierarchizing different forms of masculinities. This is not to say that feminized and racialized foreign Other(s) were not actively constructed, but rather that this did not differ significantly between the two parties and was largely in continuity with previous administrations (see Agathangelou and Ling 2004; Maruska 2009; Nayak 2006). Thus, the defining point in the narrative contestation was the Othering of the domestic political rival along gender lines, a process characterizing both Republicans and Democrats. The former discursively constructed a strong, dominant, and aggressive country by phantasising masculinity in hypermasculine terms and by (hyper)feminizing the Democrats. While the latter sought to promote a more "positive" form of masculinity by rejecting overt hypermasculinity and by drawing on narratives of care to present itself as a more "feminized" actor, it nonetheless reproduced some elements of hypermasculinity.

Second, the *explicit* discursive hypermasculinization of the US Self promoted by Trump and the Republicans is reshaping the country's autobiographical narrative, foreign policy,

and position within international hierarchies. While the US routinely resorts to hypermasculine foreign policies—such as war and foreign intervention—when it perceives its masculinity and physical security to be threatened (Agathangelou and Ling 2004; Maruska 2009; Nayak 2006), discursive practices of hypermasculinization are often understood as modes of Othering, as they seek to subordinate Others by portraying them as aggressive, violent, and irrational (Bilgic 2016). This enables the construction of the Self as a masculine protector (Young 2003), which serves to justify and legitimize those hypermasculine foreign policies in the first place. However, during and after the campaign, Trump and the Republicans did not (always) resort to hypermasculinizing Others to justify their construction of a dominant, aggressive, and violent country. Thus, we argue that hypermasculinizing Others is no longer always necessary to legitimize aggressive foreign policy; in the autobiographical narrative of the second Trump administration the US *is*, and *ought to be*, hypermasculine both domestically and internationally, with hypermasculinity justified irrespective of how Others behave.

Third, and directly related, the hypermasculinization of the US Self is no longer a dialectical process vis-à-vis selected feminized and racialized Others, but rather a totalizing mode of relating involving allies, neutral states, and adversaries alike. We argue that this process leads to a proliferation of Others in US foreign policy; no longer exclusively the racialized one (Maruska 2009; Nayak 2006), but *anyone* who obstructs US hegemony and its performance of hypermasculinity. Under the current administration, this is most clearly reflected in the changing behavior towards traditional US allies, constituting a rupture with longstanding foreign policy practices. Beyond US foreign policy, these processes affect global order and hierarchies, as hypermasculinization no longer relies exclusively on racialized difference but can also emerge against those traditionally perceived as close and familiar because of shared Whiteness and affiliation with a so-called Western civilization.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. We begin by exploring feminist scholarship on masculinities and its relationship to narrative contestation and foreign policy practice. We then move to OSS and the literature on collective narratives to articulate the notion of *fantasy of masculinity*, and the different modes of relating structuring the security of being. In the third section, we demonstrate the validity of this approach by looking at the Republican and Democratic campaign leading to the 2024 election. Subsequently, we discuss how the hypermasculinization of the Self propagated by the Republicans translated into foreign policy discourses and practices into the first year of Trump's second term. Finally, we conclude with a call for a stronger engagement between OSS and feminist research that will help advance our understanding of how gendered insecurities and phantasies shape global politics across different levels of analysis.

Hierarchies of Masculinity and Foreign Policy

One of the foundational claims of feminist IR is that gendering dynamics within and beyond the state contribute to shaping individual and collective narratives (Sjoberg 2017). Gendered narratives are usually inserted within exclusionary (Bennett 2024a) heteronormative logics (Barfucci 2026) that privilege qualities associated with masculinity over those considered to be feminine (Sjoberg 2017). In this context, states often seek to construct their desired masculinity by feminizing Other(s) (Delehanty and Steele 2009). However, collective narratives do not always resolve on a

binary juxtaposition between a “masculine” Self and a “feminine” Other (Agius 2022). Rather, they can also be articulated along different forms of masculinity (Bilgic 2016) whose desirability is contingent on the aforementioned heteronormative hierarchies (Barfucci 2026). We argue that the concept of *phantasy of masculinity*, developed later in the article, is key to understanding how masculinities are put into a hierarchy of desirability to (re)construct and contest autobiographical narratives.

The lens of masculinity has been extensively deployed to study the US and its practices of imperialism (Ashe 2015; Kaplan 2002), as well as its foreign policy during the Cold War (Dean 2001) and after (Weber 1999). Following the argument that US identity narratives constantly rely on the construction of (radical) difference (Campbell 1998), scholars argue that US foreign policy operates through gendered and racialized Othering, whereby a (hyper)masculine Self is constructed as superior to a (hyper)feminine and racialized Other. This discursive practice is often mobilized to legitimize interventionism and aggressive foreign policy (Agathangelou and Ling 2004; Leatherman 2005; Nayak 2006). While this literature discusses in detail the relationship between masculinity and foreign Others, the processes through which such narratives develop domestically and are then projected internationally have received more limited attention (see Agius 2022 for an exception). That is, although this scholarship primarily focuses on how the US Self is constructed in relation to racialized and gendered *foreign* Others, it has paid less attention to how it is also articulated through *domestic* Others. Through an analysis of the 2024 US election, this article shows that domestic Others are equally foundational to the development of masculine autobiographical narratives and their performance on a global stage. Importantly, as shown below, attention to domestic Othering does not imply that foreign Others no longer define US identity narrative but rather that an understanding of internal Othering is equally crucial to make sense of domestic narrative contestation and its shaping of foreign policy. This is especially so in the case at hand, where the identification and construction of foreign Others was not so intensely contested.

One of the forms of masculinity more widely discussed in relation to the US is hypermasculinity, which Maruska (2009, 239) conceptualizes as “a sensationalist approval of elements of masculinity, such as rigid gender roles, vindictive and militarized reactions, and obsession with order, power, and control.” This concept has gained traction especially following Trump’s first election in 2016. Since first taking office, Trump has challenged the parameters of IR theory (Jervis 2018), leading scholars to argue that his foreign policy follows a new doctrine of “unpredictability” (Bentley and David 2021), is fundamentally irrational (Karkour 2021), and detrimental to US interests (McManus 2025). In line with those arguing that Trump represents a rupture, feminist scholars contend that his domestic and foreign policies are the epitome of “alpha male” behavior (Aggestam and True 2021; Hamilton 2019; Homolar and Löffmann 2022). While the brazenness of the first and second Trump administration should not be underestimated, it is important to not mystify the role and origin of hypermasculinity in US identity narratives with Trump. As Maruska (2009) notes, practices of hypermasculinity are part of historical processes that precede him and are core to the country’s autobiographical narrative (see also Agius 2022), with the US resorting to hypermasculine foreign policies, such as war and foreign intervention, when it perceives its masculinity to be attacked or in crisis (Agathangelou and Ling 2004; Nayak 2006). Thus, the “liberal panic” over Trump’s hypermasculinity risks overlooking

how masculinity, racism, and exclusionary violence are core to US identity narratives (Agius 2022, 402) and how “strongmen” like Trump are “symptomatic of structural and systemic reproduction of gendered state power” rather than a rupture in the system (Joshi and Tanyag 2026, 2). Trump’s aggressive foreign policy should also be read in conjunction with global constructions of hypermasculinity, which are becoming the trademark of authoritarian (Aggestam and True 2021) and populist (Aiolfi 2025) politicians globally. As we show in the empirical sections, conceptualizing masculinity as a *phantasy* through ontological security allows us to contextualize the regression into hypermasculinity while illuminating the psychological and discursive mechanisms behind it.

Beyond the exaggeration of masculine features, hypermasculinization can also be understood relationally as a practice that seeks to subjugate Other(s) by attributing to them “values such as excessive aggressiveness, militarism, barbarism and violent irrationality” (Bilgic 2016, 3). This often goes together with (hyper)feminization, understood as attributing to Other(s) features of “irrationality, weakness, emotionality” (Bilgic 2016, 3). Both practices construct the Other as weak by subordinating it “to those who define the ‘standards’ of masculinity” (Bilgic 2016, 3) and can be seen in the construction of terrorists operated by the Bush administration following 9/11. Terrorists were subordinated and racialized both through hypermasculinization—by highlighting their “barbaric” modes of killing (such as beheading)—and hyperfeminization, by distributing images of submissive terrorists in front of US soldiers, which rendered the former “docile and subordinate” (Leatherman 2005, 110). Such discursive practices, particularly hypermasculinization, can legitimize political and military intervention, often by Western countries onto non-Western ones, by framing it as needed to protect against and “civilize, modernize, [and] democratize” those constructed as hypermasculine (Bilgic 2015, 203). In other words, hypermasculinizing Other(s) allows an actor to legitimize its own hypermasculine foreign policy by framing itself as the masculine protector, drawing on the “positive” signifiers of masculinity (Young 2003).

As we argue in the empirical sections, what sets US foreign policy under Trump’s second term apart from previous administrations is the explicit and all-encompassing embrace of hypermasculinity as a defining feature of the Self, which is constructed not only by conjuring difference vis-à-vis selected gendered and racialized foreign Others (Maruska 2009; Nayak 2006) but also against those normally considered close and similar. This is most visible in the administration’s shifting stance towards traditional allies, such as EU and NATO countries, with several implications on the construction of global hierarchies. To interrogate the gender(ing) dynamics at the heart of the narrative contestation in the 2024 election and the regression into hypermasculinity in US public discourse and foreign policy, we turn to the literature on ontological security and the work of Melanie Klein.

Ontological Security and Phantasies of Masculinity

Originally inspired by the sociological work of Anthony Giddens, recent scholarship on ontological security in IR has increasingly drawn on various theoretical sources (see, for example, Ralph 2024; Rogers 2024; Rosher 2022) to explore how individuals and collectives strive for the security of their Selves. We draw on and contribute to the Kleinian approach to ontological (in)security (see, for example, Cash 2017; Gellwitzki 2025; Houde 2024), which suggests that ontological security is a psychological *position* that

structures modes of relating to the Self, Others, and the world along a spectrum from security to insecurity. As insecurity intensifies, these modes of relating are not simply amplified but qualitatively reconfigured, producing increasingly rigid, antagonistic, and defensive forms of Self-Other relations (Gellwitzki 2025). We synthesize this approach with the feminist strand of OSS (see Agius 2022; Delehanty and Steele 2009; Kinnvall 2019), to conceptualize *when, how, and why* these narratives shift from masculine to hypermasculine forms.

Social collectives, be it groups, movements, or states, conjure a sense of Self through autobiographical narratives that answer fundamental questions such as *who are we?*, *where do we come from?* and *where will we go from here?* (Bachleitner 2021). Autobiographical narratives bind together past, present, and future in a meaningful way and offer answers to the fundamental questions of existence, thereby alleviating existential anxieties. These also define who belongs to the collective Self and who does not and characterize the very qualities of the group. They also act as the constitutive and cognitive frameworks that give meaning to a political community, serving as the maps by which the group defines its own existence through ongoing action (Kinnvall 2004; Subotić 2016). These narratives are not static but rather ever evolving (Browning and Joenniemi 2017), constantly adapted to fit novel situations (Subotić 2016), and open to contestation (Delehanty and Steele 2009) as different segments of a political community may struggle over diverging interpretations of its past, present, and future. Through political debates, media discourses, and other discursive interventions, actors become part of a process of narrative contestation where different narrative strands struggle to be (come) dominant; that is, to be considered as natural and common sense (Gellwitzki et al. 2024).

Ontological (in)security is a useful lens for studying narrative contestation. It allows us to conceptualize and analyze how autobiographical narratives are (re)told and how modes of relating are reconfigured in response to changing socio-historical contexts (Cash 2017, 2020; Delehanty and Steele 2009; Gellwitzki 2025). From a psychoanalytic perspective, narrative contestation takes the form of (re)telling collective narratives by (re)interpreting the established dominant autobiographical stories through the lens of different configurations of phantasies (Houde 2024). Phantasies are affectively charged narrative imaginaries that structure relations between Self and Other and shape how reality is perceived, interpreted, and made meaningful. In other words, they mediate how individuals and collectives relate to themselves, others, and the world (Cash 2017; Gallagher 2017; Joffé 1999). Phantasies are situated along a spectrum of intensification; individuals and collectives in a position of ontological security can uphold ambivalence and complexity, while those in a position of ontological insecurity tend to resort to regressive phantasies that divide the world simplistically between good and bad (Gellwitzki 2025).

Phantasies are about objects, be it ideas, concepts, or persons. We argue that masculinity is a “fantasy object,” instrumental both in narrative contestation and US foreign policy. In a position of ontological security, masculinity may be constructed as a “whole” object (complex, ambivalent, and multifaceted), while in a position of ontological insecurity it may be split into utterly good and thoroughly bad part-objects. In Kleinian theory, a good part-object is a fragment of the whole object that is idealized and loved, while a bad one is feared, hated, or rejected. These split parts are experienced and narrated as entirely separate, despite representing different aspects of the same object. An example of this pro-

cess can be seen in the notion of “alpha” and “beta” male, frequently invoked by reactionary media during the presidential campaign (Greene 2022). The former is depicted as the peak trait for leaders—strong, dominant, and authoritative—while the latter as inferior, weak, and lacking in courage and resolve; thus, one form of masculinity is idealized and another denigrated. In processes of narrative contestation, the idealized *fantasy of masculinity* is introjected into the propagated collective narrative whereas the denigrated one is projected into the Other’s competing one. In other words, idealized or vilified phantasies of masculinities are put into relational hierarchies and ascribed to different narrative strands. These are not only (re)produced discursively but also performatively reinscribed and embodied (Price 2025) by political leaders that act as personification and targets of introjection and projection (Gellwitzki 2025). Crucially, projection can also take the form of projective identification, whereby the expelled part-object of masculinity is not simply attributed to the Other but remains part of the Self, as the subject continues to identify with and be affected by those very aspects it seeks to reject.

While masculinity always permeates individual and collective subjectivities, feminist research shows that insecure individuals, particularly in online communities, tend to develop more extreme understandings thereof (Botto and Gottzén 2024). A similar logic applies to social collectives. While political communities always understand themselves in gendered terms, concerns about the masculinity of the Self become more salient in times of crisis and uncertainty (Agius, Bergman Rosamond, and Kinnvall 2021). The US presidential election and the current geopolitical environment are thus fertile ground for phantasies associated with the position of ontological insecurity. The politics of narrative contestation involves a struggle to assert how the collective Self can align with idealized masculinities, which creates a need for congruence between the masculine narrative and political behavior (see Steele 2008). In this way, *phantasies of masculinity* become cornerstones of domestic and foreign policy discourses and practices. Even though they promise to alleviate the anxieties associated with the position of ontological insecurity, their perpetuation (re)produces those anxieties in the first place. This will be discussed more extensively in the empirical sections, looking at how the current administration’s preoccupation with US hegemony and international relevance speaks about its anxieties of losing that role.

Phantasies of Masculinities and Collective Narrative Contestation in the 2024 US Presidential Elections

To examine the role of phantasies of masculinity in the contestation and (re)negotiation of the US autobiographical narrative and foreign policy, this article focuses on the 2024 presidential election campaign and the first year of Trump’s second term in office. Following Hansen (2006), we examine two discursive arenas: the “official discourse” and the “wider political debate.” The article analyzes the former by drawing on official campaign materials as well as speeches delivered at key moments during the campaign and in relation to major foreign policy decisions. The latter arena is examined instead through newspaper articles published during the election period and about key foreign policy decisions. Through discourse analysis, the article examines the gendered language and imagery through which narratives about the US Self employ, reconstruct, and contest notions of masculinity, and their implications for foreign policy.

The data collection for the narrative contestation is limited to the period between the nomination of Trump and Harris as presidential candidates, and Trump's inauguration speech in January 2025. This marked the key time frame during which the US autobiographical narrative was contested and renegotiated, with the MAGA strand of the Republican Party ultimately establishing itself as the dominant narrative through electoral victory and subsequently re-inscribing such narrative in foreign policy. As commentators across the political spectrum observed, masculinity stood at the center of the campaign (Douthat 2024; Flood 2024; Widakuswara 2024) and provided ample opportunities for both parties and candidates to narrate themselves, US citizens, and the country *differently* from their opponents. In this process, both campaigns Othered their *domestic* opponent, while converging around the identification, gendering, and racialization of foreign Others. For example, even though foreign policy preferences differed, Iran was generally narrated as a threat, support for Israel as essential, and an end to the war in Ukraine as necessary. For this reason, we concentrate on internal Othering in our analysis.

In what follows, we identify three dynamics that characterize the 2024 campaign and subsequent US foreign policy: (1) narrative contestation centered on different phantasies of masculinity; (2) idealization of, and projective identification with, (hyper)masculinity by Republicans and Democrats respectively; and (3) regression to, and consolidation of, hypermasculinity in the US autobiographical narrative and foreign policy after the election. The analysis highlights how both parties and their representatives constructed masculinity differently, while remaining subsumed within a broader US Self that values masculinity. We analyse the Republican campaign first, followed by the Democratic one. We then examine the implications of this contestation on foreign policy, and how this autobiographical narrative has been performed and reinscribed.

The Republicans: Narrating and Embodying a Hypermasculine America

Republican National Convention, Milwaukee (Wisconsin). Former professional wrestler Hulk Hogan tears off his T-shirt while shouting, "Let Trumpmania run wild, brother! [...] Let Trumpmania make America great again!" Moments later, as the chords of James Brown's *It's a Man's Man's Man's World* echo through the arena (Fernando 2024), Trump steps onto the stage to formally accept his nomination as the presidential candidate of the Republican Party. This carefully choreographed vignette—an "unapologetic show of masculine kitsch" (Bidgood 2024b)—encapsulates the discourse advanced by Trump and MAGA; one rooted in "traditional ideas of masculinity," including "assertiveness, toughness, and dominance" (Flood 2024). Through, among others, open threats of political violence, Trump positioned himself as the embodiment of unrestrained masculine power, casting himself as the "apex predator" who would "become dictator for a day" and who possessed "enough big penis energy" to lead America (Norman 2024). From the outset of the campaign, Republicans phantasmized masculinity by splitting it into utterly "good" idealized part-objects (strong, dominant, and powerful) and thoroughly "bad" denigrated ones (weak, submissive, and powerless).

To construct the idealized image of the US as unabashedly masculine, the Trump campaign drew on what commentators called "the dark side of the Y chromosome" (Douthat 2024). Running a "high-testosterone, anti-immigrant, protect-the-economy campaign" (Fleishman

2024), Republicans aimed to capture the so-called "bro vote" (Fung 2024), namely the support of young and predominantly white American men immersed in the manosphere media ecosystem (Fernando 2024). To engage men "in alpha-male terms" (Kellman 2024), Trump appeared on podcasts such as *The Joe Rogan Experience*, transforming himself into a "fully-fledged podcast bro" on a "red-pill podcast tour" (Lewis 2024) and promoting models of hypermasculinity exemplified and celebrated by figures such as Andrew Tate. Thus, the Republicans' autobiographical narrative was promoted beyond the campaign, by actors who, like Trump, embodied, performed, and introjected phantasies of hypermasculinity. Articulating masculinity on biological essentialist constructions of sex and gender and presenting hypermasculinity as the only *real* form of masculinity addressed the gendered anxieties of "men unhappy with their status" (Spiers 2024) who felt that their masculinity was "under threat" (Bennett 2024b) and promised to restore the patriarchal order (Kellman 2024) by giving them "a scapegoat" through "strongman politics" (Healy, Cottom, and Darbha 2025).

Beyond attempts to garner the manosphere vote, the appeal to signifiers of strength, dominance, and virility permeated the audiovisual materials produced for the campaign, particularly in the aftermath of Trump's attempted assassination in July 2024. One striking example appears in the video introducing then Ohio Senator JD Vance as Vice-Presidential candidate (Donald J. Trump 2024f). The video features a clip from a rally speech where Vance asks: "Who do you want, answering the phone? [...] a person who hides with the friendly American media, or [...] a person who takes a bullet to the head and stands up and says FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT?." As he says so, the video reproduces images of Trump who, supported by his security detail following the assassination attempt, has his fist high in the sky and shouts that same word (Donald J. Trump 2024f). Beyond repeating conspiratorial and anti-intellectual tropes, the Trump campaign projected a vision of America that must perpetually fight. This ethos is distilled in the campaign's final advertisement, which asserts that America "can make a comeback" because when "we get knocked down, we don't stay down: we stand up again. We fight, we fight, we fight" (Donald J. Trump 2024g).

In his speeches, Trump frequently drew upon signifiers of hypermasculinity to construct a narrative of the US as sovereign and indomitable, introjecting them as "good" part-objects. For example, accepting his nomination, he declared: "No nation will question our power. No enemy will doubt our might" (The New York Times 2024b). Similarly, during the inauguration speech in January 2025, he proclaimed that his administration would build "the strongest military the world has ever seen," a statement closely followed by "We will not be conquered, we will not be intimidated, we will not be broken and we will not fail" (The White House 2025b). This (re)produced an idealized autobiographical narrative of the US that would be strong *once again*, repairing the damages of the Democrats that turned it into a weak and "feminized" entity, taken advantage of by friends and enemies alike (The New York Times 2024b).

In continuity with previous administrations and his first term (Maruska 2009; Nayak 2006), Trump constructed the hypermasculine posture of the US in relation to foreign enemies, drawing on and reaffirming racialized, violent, and exclusionary ideas that are foundational to US national identity narratives (see Agius 2022). Yet, the narrative *contestation* with the Democrats was defined most significantly by splitting the object of masculinity and by dynamics of internal Othering. Republicans framed themselves as the sole authentic representative of the US, contrasting their "party

of masculinity” with the “party of weakness” (Zaldivar and Emans 2024). Within this narrative, voting for Trump was presented as the only expression of “American manliness” (Kellman 2024), implying that a vote for Harris constituted a rejection of it (Zaldivar and Emans 2024). Therefore, voting was narrated not merely as a choice between political leaders, but as one between a strong, masculine Self and a weak, emasculated internal Other. Hypermasculinity was introjected as a “good” part-object, while traits not aligned with it, alongside “femininity,” were split off and projected onto an *internal*, threatening Other intent on subverting the US Self.

These dimensions of internal Othering, particularly the projection of “bad” and “feminized” part-objects onto the Democrats, dominate the videos produced by the Trump campaign. For instance, the ad titled “Meet San Francisco Liberal Kamala Harris” ridicules the former Vice President for her “liberal views,” particularly taking issue with her statement that she would not deny healthcare to migrants because she opposes “any policy that would deny [public health to] any person, any human being” (Donald J. Trump 2024e). Harris is feminized, cast as an object of mockery, and presented as irrational and unserious, with numerous clips of her laughing interspersed throughout the video, which function to delegitimize her through stereotypically racialized constructions of Black femininity as excessive and lacking control (see Collins 2000). Her support for migrants is presented as an anti-American choice, implying that her party is serving an “Other” rather than the American Self. Similarly, other videos present her as “weak” (Donald J. Trump 2024c) and the Democrats as the party of “weakness” (Donald J. Trump 2024b) as they “invited war and welfare for illegals, while Americans struggle” (Donald J. Trump 2024a). Within this narrative, the Republicans’ phantasized ideal of masculinity stands as an essential trait the US Self must embody to preserve and protect the nation and its people.

While hypermasculine narratives were dominant during the campaign, they were not entirely coherent. This was particularly the case when constructing Trump’s own role, which was that of the masculinized protector of a country perceived to be corrupted by elites, Democrats, and changing gender norms. While still portrayed as the “epitome of the alpha male” (Davis 2024), he was not always constructed through signifiers of aggressiveness and violence, but also on more “positive” attributes of masculinity, such as protection and rationality. This can be seen in the video “MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN,” which features cinematic imagery of Trump accompanied by a voiceover declaring that “greatness doesn’t discriminate [...] is for those who work for it [...] and for anyone willing to fight for it” (Donald J. Trump 2024d). Similarly, Vance was presented as a committed father, dedicated to the issues of the White American working class (Donald J. Trump 2024f). Commentators noted that this projection of a more caring and less aggressive masculinity was necessary for the Republicans to balance the cruder resonance with the “bro vote” and be more appealing to women voters, given the party’s reactionary positions on sexual health and reproductive rights (Barclay 2024). In any case, at the heart of this masculine Self-image lay casting the Democratic Party not merely as political opposition, but as an existential Other, a gendered and racialized figure against which the nation must define and defend itself.

In sum, the Trump campaign constructed an autobiographical narrative that centered on phantasies of hypermasculinity, which defined who the US is domestically and internationally. The campaign’s narrative contestation was structured by mechanisms of splitting, projection, and introjection, with the Democrats, Harris, and feminized qualities

projected as weak, irrational, and threatening internal Others. The idealization of hypermasculinity addressed the existential anxieties arising from a perceived collapse of traditional male roles in neoliberal society, American decline, and geopolitical impotence in a changing world order, showing that the position of ontological (in)security provoked a regression toward more extreme phantasies of masculinity, which are less ambivalent and rely on clear identifications of Self and Other. The resulting US autobiographical narrative was one in which the nation was imagined as perpetually embattled, requiring a phantasized hypermasculine strength to survive. This entrenched a regressive but affectively potent vision of US Self, where the phantasy of hypermasculinity must be continually performed to provide narratives of purpose, meaning, and agency that “softer” forms of masculinity cannot offer. As we will see in the foreign policy section, the hypermasculinization of the Self promoted during the campaign contributed to the resurgence of unilateral, aggressive, and assertive behavior in international politics. Before discussing this, we turn to the other side of the narrative contestation, focusing on constructions of masculinity in the Democratic campaign, which proved essential in reproducing a masculinized US autobiographical narrative, rather than successfully challenging it.

The Democrats: Positive Masculinity but Tough on the Border

Democratic National Convention, Chicago, Illinois. Former teacher, football coach, veteran, and Governor of Minnesota, Tim Walz, delivers a speech to accept his nomination as Vice-Presidential candidate. Thanking his family, he speaks of the challenges faced with his wife to start a family through fertility treatments. As he does so, the cameras focus on Walz’s son, Gus, who shouts, “That’s my dad,” with tears streaming down his face. This moment set the tone for the Democratic campaign, in which masculinity was just as central as in the Republican one. Differently from Republicans, Democrats often attempted to construct masculinity as a “whole” object—complex, ambivalent, and multifaceted—by highlighting traits of respect, protection, and more “feminized” narratives of care. At the same time, Democrats were not immune from dynamics of internal Othering, which led them to often regress into more simplistic phantasies that split masculinity by idealizing a “positive” part-object constructed in opposition to the vilified “bad” part-object of Republican masculinity. On issues such as gun and border control, Harris and Walz also projectively identified with those vilified parts of masculinity, such as violence and aggression, originally disavowed and projected onto the political rival (see below). The latter dynamic is particularly significant because, while their identification with hypermasculinity was less all-encompassing compared to the Republicans, it relied on similar psychological mechanisms that make regressive phantasies of masculinity more appealing than ambivalent or “softer” ones. Moreover, it reaffirmed the key role of masculine and exclusionary dynamics to US identity narratives (see Agius 2022) thus contributing, perhaps inadvertently, to normalizing Trump’s own brand of aggressive masculinity, presenting it as legitimate to affirm power over others.

Differently from the Republicans, the Democrats sought to construct a multifaceted mode of masculinity that challenged the stereotypical assumptions of hypermasculinity. This attempt to promote a “modern masculinity” and the “enlightened maleness” of the “good progressive dads” (Douthat 2024) is exemplified by Harris’ choice of Walz as running mate, who—as described in the video “Meet Tim Walz”, produced to introduce him as Vice-Presidential

candidate—is “nice” and “loves being a dad” (Tim Walz 2024b). This “healthy masculine confidence” was also projected on Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff and, in a campaign trail populated by superstar appearances, onto Travis Kelce, American football star and fiancé of singer Taylor Swift (Bennett 2024b). The Democrats’ attempt to construct masculinity as a multifaceted object was different from Republicans who projected features considered not sufficiently masculine in the opposing camp.

However, this attempt was not always successful, as the Democrats also often relied on mechanisms of splitting of the object of masculinity that were similar to the Republicans. In this case, however, “positive” masculinity and the traits associated with it were idealized as a good part-object, whereas hypermasculinity and its associated features were denigrated as a bad part-object and projected onto the Other, namely MAGA Republicans. Similarly to the Republicans, the Democrats sought to embody, perform, and introject the good part-object into their articulation of the national autobiographical narrative, deploying masculinity to create a dividing line between “us” and “them.” This can be seen, for example, in the ad “He ain’t me,” where a man from Pittsburgh juxtaposes his everyday masculinity with that of millionaire Donald Trump (Harris 2024c). Further, CNN commentator Dana Bash made the headlines for stating that male figures such as Walz and Emhoff can speak to men “who might not be the sort of testosterone-laden [...] who want to listen to Hulk Hogan” (Hall 2024). After the elections, Walz continued to operate similar distinctions by describing Republican voters as “bad guys” and “misogynists,” wondering if they could be pushed “under a rock” (This is Gavin Newsom 2025). Overall, the main difference between the two parties was whether hypermasculinity was constructed as a good or a bad part-object; yet the underlying psychological mechanisms were the same.

While the Democrats sought to challenge ideas of hypermasculinity, they did not downplay the importance of masculinity altogether. Rather, idealizations of masculinity were also key to their campaign, which shows that autobiographical narratives do not always resolve on a masculine-feminine binary, but rather on complex hierarchies of masculinity. In Walz’s case, campaign materials and speeches repeatedly appealed to his “stereotypically masculine traits [...] as sports-lover, military veteran, gun owner and father” (Woodward 2024). This can also be seen in the abovementioned ad; as Gwen Walz narrates the life story of her husband, she focuses on his twenty-four years of service in the US National Guard and on him being a “lifelong hunter and gun owner,” however committed to the necessity of background checks to possess weapons (Tim Walz 2024b).

The Democratic message to the country was also constructed by appealing to signifiers of care, seeking to promote and embody a more stereotypically “feminized” vision of the nation (Deleahanty and Steele 2009). For example, during the Democratic National Convention, Harris stated that she would accept her nomination “on behalf of every American, regardless of party, race, gender or the language your grandmother speaks” (The New York Times 2024a). She fostered an image of the US “where we care for one another, look out for one another and recognize that we have so much more in common than what separates us” (The New York Times 2024a). Seemingly, ideas of masculinity were not as central in her construction and message about and to the US. However, when Harris campaigned on topics that went beyond sexual health and reproductive rights, and involved borders, security, and defense—traditionally considered more “masculine”—she associated herself and promoted “tougher”

qualities of masculinity, appealing to similar signifiers of strength, dominance, and protection as Trump. Put differently, in the domains of migration and security, Harris engaged in projective identification with the bad part-objects of masculinity that had originally been projected onto the Republicans; she embodied the disavowed masculine traits, which returned in displaced form within the Democratic narrative.

This can be seen in some of the ads produced by the Democratic campaign. In these videos, Harris’ past as prosecutor is often used to present her as a caring individual who looks after her people. For example, the ad “All Americans” states, “As a prosecutor, I never asked, victim or witness, are you a Republican or a Democrat. The only thing I ever asked them is: *are you okay?* And that’s the kind of president we need right now: someone who cares about you and is not putting themselves first” (Harris 2024a). Concurrently, her previous career is evoked to demonstrate that she is “fearless” because she put “murderers and abusers behind bars” (Harris 2024b) and is “tough on crime” (Fung 2024) as she “backed the toughest border control bill in decades” (Harris 2024d). In this sense, appealing to stereotypical signifiers of masculine strength, courage, and efficiency became a way for Harris, just like Trump, to show that she could “actually get the job done” (Fung 2024). Harris took a similar approach to issues of gun control. During a livestreamed forum with Oprah Winfrey—and in line with her running mate (Tim Walz 2024a)—Harris argued that gun control was essential to prevent school shootings. However, she “reached for a different kind of message entirely” when the discussion shifted to gun ownership, stating that anyone who tried to break into her house is “getting shot” (Bidgood 2024a). As political scientist Dan Cassino noted, “When Harris talks about owning a gun [...] she’s claiming masculine traits” (Schipper 2024).

There are several implications in the Democrats’ construction of masculinity and in Harris’ projective identification with hypermasculinity. While the Democrats sought to dwell in ambivalence (see Cash 2017), construct more complex forms of masculinity, and promote a more “feminized” narrative of the US, they also often regressed into more simplistic mechanisms that split masculinity into good and bad-part objects. This shows that the narrative contestation was not *entirely* between a feminized and a masculinized account of the national biography, but *primarily* between competing forms of masculinity. The Democrats oscillated between divergent masculine modes that sought to disavow certain (hyper)masculine traits but, in the context of border control and gun issues, ultimately failed to do so and converged onto standards set by Republicans, contributing to their normalization. Put differently, while ostensibly seeking to critique Republican hypermasculine narratives of the US, the Democrats played a role in (re)producing and legitimizing them. This shows that there are arguably more lines of continuity than discontinuity in the idealization of certain traits of masculinity across the US political spectrum, speaking of a subsumed US autobiographical narrative where masculinity remains central (see also Agius 2022).

Narrative contestation is, of course, an ongoing process as an autobiography is never fixed but continually evolving. Nevertheless, the 2024 presidential election marked a significant inflection point, in which the US Self appeared on the ballot, and the MAGA narration of the national biography “won,” becoming institutionalized and sedimented through a shift in administration. This does not mean that narrative contestation ceased with electoral victory, but rather that this narrative of hypermasculinity has become dominant, with its consequences materializing in both domestic and

foreign policy. In what follows, we show how the Republican construction of unabashed hypermasculinity discussed above translates into an aggressive and hypermasculine foreign policy that is (re)shaping international hierarchies, and we illuminate the psychological and discursive mechanisms behind actions that risk undermining, rather than promoting, US interests.

The Post-Election US Autobiographical Narrative: "Alpha Male" Foreign Policy Like Never before

This last section discusses how the Republican hypermasculine vision of the US is shaping the country's foreign policy in the first year of Trump's second administration. In the media, the current President is described as "bulldoz[ing] his way over entire populations over a personal quest for masculine bravado" (Denecour 2025), bringing a "brand of traditional masculinity defined by aggression, lack of emotional regulation, and poor impulse control [...] which favors preemptive attacks in pursuit of national self-interest over US values" (Lassman 2025). This section looks at the psychological and discursive mechanisms behind this regression to hypermasculinity, showing that while the current government has elements of continuity with Trump's first term and previous administrations, it is fundamentally (re)shaping both the conduct of US foreign policy and international hierarchies, through a proliferation of Others that includes both allies and adversaries. In Kleinian terms, Trump splits the world along a friend-enemy distinction, and anyone who does not immediately and unconditionally defer to American authority is treated as an adversary, if not an outright enemy. This includes an idealization of the hypermasculine Self and a denigration of emasculated and feminized Other(s) through foreign policy discourse and practice.

That the Republicans' hypermasculine phantasy of the US would not remain confined to campaign rhetoric became clear during the inauguration ceremony in January 2025. The guest list of the event, featuring billionaires, "tech-bros," the chief executive of Ultimate Fighting Championship, and convicted sex offenders gave an early indication of this (Bernstein 2025). The introjection of hypermasculine characteristics of power and aggression, and the projection of "feminized" weakness onto Others, came to the forefront in the inaugural address. Trump claimed that the US would be(come) again "the greatest" and "most powerful" nation; that they would "be strong, and [...] win like never before"; and that any challenges would "be annihilated" (The White House 2025b). To demonstrate so, he announced the reinstatement of his "Remain in Mexico" policy against "millions and millions of criminal aliens" and the unilateral decision to rename the Gulf of Mexico as Gulf of America (The White House 2025b). After the inauguration, there have been multiple instances in which phantasies of hypermasculinity have translated into unilateral, aggressive, and assertive foreign policy decisions, including the renaming of the Department of Defense as Department of War (The White House 2025a). What follows is a series of illustrative examples from the first year of Trump's second administration, which are provided with the caveat that "there is no permanence to Trump's statements" (Shortis 2026) and that US foreign policy remains in a state of unprecedented flux.

Some of Trump's foreign policy decisions are arguably in continuity with the discursive practices of previous administrations, as they reproduce narratives that hypermasculinize the US Self by conjuring racialized difference and

hypermasculinizing and/or feminizing the Other. For instance, addressing the nation after the bombing of Iranian nuclear facilities in June 2025, Trump described Iran as "the bully of the Middle East" and characterized its nuclear program as a "horribly destructive enterprise," stating that the Iranian government killed Americans by "blowing off their arms and legs with roadside bombs" (Al Jazeera 2025). In doing so, he reproduced racialized tropes of non-Western Others as uncivilized, barbarous, and threatening (Bilgic 2015). He then hypermasculinized the US Self through its military, declaring that the bombings were a "spectacular military success" carried out by the only "military that could do [it]" (Al Jazeera 2025), reaffirming the superiority of the West, needed to civilize and defend against the racialized Other. Practices of hypermasculinization that rely on the feminization of Other(s) can instead be seen in Trump's portrayal of the operation leading to the arrest of Nicolas Maduro, in which he stated that Venezuela's "military capacities were rendered powerless [...] quickly overwhelmed and incapacitated" by "the strongest and most fierce military on the planet by far" (Senate Democrats 2026). While these examples show continuity in the gendered and racialized construction of Self and Other, other instances indicate that a hypermasculinized enemy is no longer necessary to legitimize aggressive foreign policy.

This is evident primarily in Trump's conduct toward the traditional (and predominantly White) allies of the US. A striking example is represented by the "astonishing White House exchange" (Bedigan 2025) between Trump, Vance, and Ukrainian President Zelenskyy in February 2025. In the meeting, both Trump and Vance repeatedly affirmed their hypermasculinity by feminizing and subordinating Zelenskyy; they raised their voices, interrupted him, and mocked him. The masculinity of the Ukrainian President was questioned by Vance (who doubted his ability to rally soldiers against Russia), Trump (who continuously patronized him), and the press, with a journalist asking why he would not wear a suit in the Oval Office. This episode illustrates how hypermasculinity is performed toward US allies, reinforcing the US Self while subordinating even friendly counterparts. While this is a memorable example, it epitomizes a much broader and increasingly totalizing dynamic in US foreign policy.

For example, Trump repeatedly referred to European countries as a "decaying" group of nations led by "weak" people who failed to control migration and to end the Russian-Ukraine war (Burns 2025). This is similar to how he constructs relationships with NATO members. Since the start of his second term, the desire to annex Canada or Greenland has been a recurring theme in his speeches. This display of hypermasculinity peaked in his address at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2026, during which he threatened Canada's survival by declaring that it "lives because of the US" (Shortis 2026). While he backtracked from previous statements about using military force to seize Greenland from Denmark, he nonetheless boasted the hypermasculinity of the US by asserting that, if he chose to "use excessive strength and force," the country "would be, frankly, unstoppable" (Gangitano 2026). Trump also questioned Denmark's capacity to fulfil a (masculine) role in protecting its people by repeatedly stating that the country is unable to provide for the security of Greenland, especially against China and Russia (Henley and Roth 2026). Similarly, Trump challenged the masculinity of his NATO allies, declaring that they "stayed a little back, a little off the frontlines" in Afghanistan (Sky News 2026). While these claims were eventually retracted, they illustrate that the US is now able to hypermasculinize it-

self without needing the construction of an enemy/Other for justification.

The US autobiographical narrative is reconstructed to fully idealize and embrace (hyper)masculine autonomy and to reject relationality and dependency on Others. In terms of US foreign policy, this threatens to undermine alliances and alienate partners, as such autonomy is regularly reasserted through often arbitrary verbal outbursts and violent displays that project strength and dominance. For example, the statement about NATO allies created furious backlash in Europe, particularly the United Kingdom, traditionally the closest European ally. This shows that, rather than a relational process vis-à-vis specific gendered and racialized Others, hypermasculinity is increasingly becoming a totalizing mode of relating, with both adversaries and allies subordinated and feminized. While conjuring racialized differences against non-Western Others still characterizes some aspects of US foreign policy (as discussed in the cases of Iran and Venezuela), hypermasculinity is becoming so all-encompassing that it does not always require racialized differences to be constructed. This leads to a proliferation of Other(s) in both domestic and foreign policy; indeed, *anyone* who obstructs the US performance of hypermasculinity is at risk of becoming a target. This suggests a shift in the logics of race and world-making (Acharya 2022), as US hypermasculinity (re)orders the world and (re)defines hierarchies without requiring racial difference to do so. While racialized difference is still relied on to construct hypermasculinity of Others, this can also be done by subordinating those previously considered close and familiar, in this case predominantly White and Western allies.

From an ontological security perspective, the second Trump administration must continuously perform the phantasies of hypermasculinity it mobilized during the election campaign, as failure to do so would heighten uncertainty, destabilize policy, and expose the US autobiographical narrative to renewed domestic and international contestation (see Steele 2008). This performance, however, simultaneously perpetuates the demand for hypermasculine narratives by reproducing anxieties and ontological insecurity rather than resolving it (see Gellwitzki 2025). In the case of Trump's foreign policy, the preoccupation with US hegemony and relevance speaks to deep-seated anxieties about losing that role; yet the vicious circle requires them to either continue performing that hypermasculine domination or embrace the uncomfortable fact that the US is, relatively speaking, declining. Thus, an ontological security lens focusing on *phantasies of masculinity* can make sense of these foreign policy decisions, however detrimental to the US international role and credibility, and of their regression into (hyper)masculine modes of relating.

Conclusion

The 2024 US presidential election represented a critical juncture in the contestation of the nation's autobiographical narrative wherein competing visions of the national Self were deeply intertwined with phantasies of masculinity. By integrating feminist scholarship on masculinities with a Kleinian approach to ontological (in)security, this article has illuminated how *phantasies of masculinity* structure narrative contestation and shape both domestic and foreign policy practices. Our analysis of the Trump and Harris campaigns reveals that both sides engage in narrative contestation through the deployment of masculinities, albeit in divergent ways, alongside the Othering of domestic rivals, while exhibiting little variation in their construction of foreign Other(s). This suggests that Trump and his second administration are by no

means outliers, but rather a particularly explicit iteration of a longer history of hypermasculine US narratives and "alpha male" foreign policy. Moreover, it shows that Democrats bear responsibility for the (re)production of a certain masculinized narrative of the US. The issue, then, is not a particular administration, party, or ideology but the broader pattern through which US autobiographical narratives remain consistently gendered and tend to regress into hypermasculinity. While previously this primarily occurred when the country's physical security was perceived to be under threat, under the second Trump administration this is becoming the main code of conduct in foreign policy.

Competing phantasies of masculinity were not merely rhetorical instruments but functioned as psychological mechanisms for managing existential anxiety in late modernity, offering affectively resonant narratives through which collective insecurity can be contained, managed, and displaced. Throughout the empirical analysis, we demonstrated that a position of ontological insecurity is conducive to a regression into hypermasculine narratives that offer an apparent solution to existential anxieties; however, they ultimately (re)produce the very anxieties they promise to alleviate by conjuring unreachable aspirational ideas. This vicious cycle is becoming increasingly manifest in an erratic foreign policy characterized by hypermasculine posturing that seeks to continuously reaffirm US superiority, not only by reproducing racialized international hierarchies, but also by establishing dominance against those previously considered allied, close, and familiar. Thus, hypermasculine foreign policy should be understood not as strategic irrationality, but as an affectively driven yet ultimately futile attempt to restore ontological security under conditions of perceived crisis. The implications of hypermasculinity as a totalizing mode of relating extend beyond US foreign policy, affecting the role of race in hierarchies, world-making, and global ordering. Phantasies of hypermasculinity are contributing to a profound reconfiguration of alliances and transforming how IR has traditionally been conducted, thereby underpinning the "decline of the Western order" (Zarakol 2022, 237–43) and the emergence of "a transitional period in which the global order is being re-imagined" (Gellwitzki and Moulton 2025, 45).

The conceptual framework and theoretical toolkit developed in this article can be applied beyond the case of the US. Looking ahead, this may prove fruitful for exploring how these phantasies of hypermasculinity are (re)produced and resonate globally, as more countries adopt increasingly (hyper)masculine foreign policies. Further integration of feminist and ontological security scholarship will also enable a more sustained interrogation of how gendered subjectivities, insecurities, and phantasies continue to shape global politics. Future research might also examine how alternative and less exclusionary gendered narratives could disrupt these cycles of insecurity and open up different foreign policy trajectories. By taking seriously the interplay between masculinity and existential anxiety, IR scholars can better grasp the dynamics of gendered insecurities and their implications in an era of pronounced uncertainty. Ultimately, this article underscores that understanding contemporary foreign policy requires attending to the affective and gendered narratives through which states make sense of themselves and others.

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