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The ties that bind: on affective ties, power, nationalism, and competition over the global distribution of feeling

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Abstract
Affective ties encompass a broad family of emotional phenomena, including love, affection, attachment, and devotion. Affective ties may appear deeply personal, and they most certainly are. But they are also important resources for the exercise of political power in international politics – not only as vulnerabilities that can be exploited for coercion but also, and more significantly, as means to mobilise action and sacrifice. Viewed from the vantage point of political agents, affective ties are thus power resources whose distribution in the international system shapes their strategies and choices. Viewed from the perspective of the system, the international realm is not only characterised by struggles over material capabilities or ideas but also competition over affective ties. Correspondingly, nationalism is not simply an identity. It is a collection of techniques and practices for generating and capturing affective ties that has emerged as a highly effective contender in this contest, with crucial implications for how the international system is organised. That being said, other forms of eliciting affective ties also persist.

Keywords: emotion; affect; power; nationalism; international relations theory

Far from the end of history,[1] the developments of the last decades would appear to indicate that the past remains as present as ever. Despite the unprecedented collective challenges we presently face, the current era has not heralded a movement towards ever greater global integration and the triumph of a de-nationalised, secular, liberal international ideal. First and foremost, the nation, but also religion, and even

[1]Fukuyama 1992.

personalistic cults built around strong-man-style political leaders – all these appear to remain potent forces shaping international politics, while the notion of a world government now seems quaint.[2]

In order to fully explain why these forces persist, we must understand the felt dimension of international politics. In this article, we contribute to such an explanation by theoretically exploring the significance of *affective ties* for international relations. Affective ties, as we use the term here, encompass a broad family of emotional phenomena, including love, affection, attachment, and devotion. They are a set of positive affective dispositions and concerns that emotionally invest actors in the fate of their object. Affective ties may appear deeply personal, and they most certainly are. But they are also important resources for the exercise of political power – not only as vulnerabilities that can be leveraged to coerce but also more significantly as means to mobilise for action and sacrifice. This does not just shape the strategies and choices of political agents; global competition over affective ties also has important implications for the nature of the international system itself. In particular, we argue that the enduring resilience of nationalism on the international stage – as well as religion and also personalism – is a testimony to their potency in the global contest to create and orient affective ties.

Admittedly, there already exists a large literature on the intersections of affect and emotions with international politics[3] – including work highlighting the roles of emotions ranging from fear,[4] anger,[5] humiliation,[6] and trauma[7] to empathy and joy.[8] There is also more specifically related work on the ethics, political thought, and micro-politics of love, affection, interpersonal commitments, and care within international politics.[9] And there is now even work on the social rules that seek to govern emotions or distribute rights and duties to feelings.[10]

Our primary intended contribution here lies not in highlighting the importance of emotion or even affective ties per se,[11] nor in simply raising the significance of emotion for nationalism,[12] even if both bear reiterating within disciplinary conversations. Rather, it lies in introducing to the field the arguments that (1) emotion and feeling – here illustrated by a focus on affective ties – are resources that can enable the operation of certain power relations and (2) competition over the global distribution of feeling has led to the prominence of certain techniques, discourses, and practices that now profoundly shape how the system is organised. These arguments are not separate but rather emerge from different vantage points on the same set of phenomena. Micro-structurally perceived – that is from the vantage point of actors

[2]Wendt 2003.

[3]Classic works include Crawford 2000; McDermott 2004; Mercer 2010; Hutchison 2016; Ross 2019; Kaufman 2019. For a full review, see Markwica 2018, 37–46.

[4]Van Rythoven 2018; Crawford 2000.

[5]Hall 2017; Markwica 2018; Eznack 2013; Linklater 2014.

[6]Saurette 2006; Fattah and Fierke 2009; Barnhart 2020.

[7]Resende and Budryte 2014; Hutchison 2010.

[8]Welland 2018.

[9]Heimann and Kampf 2024; Hartnett 2024; Pin-Fat 2019; Poopuu 2023; Crawford 2014; Held 2004.

[10]Koschut 2020b; Gustaffson and Hall 2021.

[11]The field already includes literature on kindred terms such as love, care, friendship, and more: Heimann and Kampf 2024; Hartnett 2024; Pin-Fat 2019; Poopuu 2023; Crawford 2014; Held 2004; Koschut and Oelsner 2014.

[12]Heaney 2013; Malešević 2019, 65–6.

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within the system[13] – political agents encounter the affective ties that surround them as resources for exercising power relations and also potential sites for intervention. From a macro-structural perspective – or in other words, 'from the standpoint of the system,'[14] – the felt dimension of international politics is a domain shaped in no small part by struggles to generate and capture affective ties for political ends. The result has been the emergence and spread of particular *ideo-affective technologies* – amalgams of interlocking discourses, practices, and techniques that combine the ideational and the felt to cultivate, align, and shape affective experience in specific directions. At present, when it comes to affective ties, the ideo-affective technology of nationalism commands an ascendant global position, although other, older contenders such as religion and personalism also persist.

These arguments may appear abstract, but their implications are quite real. They speak to the strategies political agents adopt within the international system, be it how they apply violence or cultivate and generate support. They speak to the nature of the international system within which we find ourselves and the reasons for why – despite aspirations of progress to a more secular, less personalist, more globalist world – it would appear that nationalism remains dominant. Crucially, whereas existing work may speak to the *how* of nationalism's emergence, our arguments speak to the *why* of nationalism's enduring successes. Indeed, we address why it is in a world of multiple potential identities national identity continues to command such pride of place. The world we now occupy – one in which the nation is a central locus of commitment and identification, even of the willingness of individuals to harm and suffer harm – is a contingent but very sticky one in no small part due to the ways in which nationalism is so effective at eliciting and engaging affective ties. Our arguments thus also have implications for the possibility of future change, or perhaps better said, the current lack thereof.

This article proceeds in four parts, progressively zooming out on the collection of dispositions and concerns that are affective ties. We begin with affective ties as our basic building block, discussing how they are felt, experienced, and generated, as well as how they can be conceived of in a structural fashion. Then, we proceed to explore how political agents encounter affective ties as power resources distributed within their environment. Subsequently, we arrive at a view of the system as a domain of competition over these resources in which the techniques and practices belonging to nationalism have prevailed. We conclude with a final section discussing the implications of our arguments and potential ways forward.

Affective ties

Human beings think, believe, strategise, and act, but they also feel. This observation may be so obvious as to appear trite, but despite the massive outpouring of work on emotions, affect, and international relations in the past decades, even now its full implications have yet to be realised. Indeed, each of us possesses a unique and complex makeup of affectively laden concerns and dispositions that when engaged elicit within us feelings and emotions that inform and guide what we prefer, want, and do.[15] These make us who and what we are, motivating and driving us, and we can neither easily will them into or out of existence. Affective ties constitute a core part of our felt, emotional experience, tying us to what we care about and love. In what

[13]Wendt 1999, 147.
[14]Ibid.
[15]Hall and Ross 2015, 854–5.

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follows, we explicate our definition of affective ties, address how they are generated, and discuss how we can conceive of them from a structural perspective.

What are affective ties?

Affective ties are felt bonds of positive affect that emotionally invest individuals in a diverse variety of targets, including other persons, things, groups, institutions, or even causes. As noted above, affective ties are an umbrella term for a broad family of emotional phenomena, including love, affection, attachment, and devotion. Affective ties involve a combination of dispositions to feel certain positive feelings towards their object as well as concerns that emotionally invest actors in the fate of said object.[16] They are capable of motivating the sacrifice of actors' own individual welfare or moral values for the object of their affections. In what follows, we elaborate upon several core attributes of affective ties crucial to our subsequent arguments.

First, affective ties are *felt*.[17] Feeling plays a central role in their potency. To illustrate, consider the following statement: 'I think I care about you.' This is a perfectly valid statement, and yet it implies a degree of doubt that is not implied, for instance, in the statement, 'I think this is a good idea.' There is an affective dimension to caring, something that individuals sense within themselves as more than simply an intellectual proposition. Phenomena such as loving, sensing attachments, or caring about another are inseparable from their subjective felt experience. The feelings actors experience as a result of affective ties are a core part of how they understand the strength of their linkages to other people and things.[18]

Affective ties can thus be considered part of a larger collection of affective phenomena that motivate actors and inform their perceived interests. Within the field of international relations, there has been a growing realisation that emotion and affect play a key role in creating subjective value.[19] As Mercer observes, 'One cannot have preferences, let alone stable ones, without emotion.'[20] Or in the words of Hall and Ross, 'Individuals possess the capacity for reason, reflection, and strategic and normatively guided behaviour, but these capacities are largely unmotivated and directionless without affective dynamics.'[21] Put simply, our feelings signal to us what we value and care about. As the psychologist Frijda notes, 'With cognitive judgements, there is no reason, other than an affective one, to prefer any goal whatever over any other.'[22] To strip away feeling is to strip away a core means by which we subjectively adjudicate personal value. But where feeling exists strongly, it can be a powerful force to move people, to provide them with a basis for knowing what is significant to them.

Second, affective ties create *bonds*. This is more than just a positive disposition, like one might have towards a tune or a pleasant colour. This means that actors possess an internalised concern for the target of their ties and are emotionally invested in the

[16]Ibid.

[17]And thus fall within the larger category of affective phenomena that involve 'the range of ways embodied mental processes and the felt dimensions of human experience influence thought and behaviour.' Ibid.

[18]Mercer 2010; McDermott 2004.

[19]McDermott 2004; Mercer 2010; Hall and Ross 2015.

[20]Mercer 2013, 227.

[21]Hall and Ross 2015, 856.

[22]Frijda 1994, 200.

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preservation, well-being, and/or advancement of those people or things to which they are attached. Affective ties are in this sense similar to what Poulsen labels 'the maximalist version of loyalty,' in which actor A is not only persistently partial to B but also 'must actively promote the interests of B.'[23] That said, whereas loyalty entails partiality to another actor's interests as desired by that actor, affective ties can conceivably lead to sacrifice above and beyond this, even when unwanted by the recipient. Affective ties are a form of caring, which in turn can motivate actions of care for their targets.[24] Indeed, the greater the extent individuals are moved to make such sacrifices, the greater the strength of the affective bond. Clearly, this is not to claim that egoism or morality do not also drive individual choices, but rather that these may at times find themselves in competition with – and losing to – strong affective bonds.

Within existing international relations theorising, affective ties are thus most possibly akin to what Abramson et al. describe as 'personal commitments' that are denoted by 'an agent's relative willingness to perform an action for someone or something that she considers personally valuable… [and mean that] sometimes one would sacrifice self-interest to fulfil the interest of someone or something else.'[25] But while personal commitments in their treatment can have either normative or affective roots – constituted as either an 'ought to' or a 'want to' – we place front and centre the affective nature of these ties.

Thirdly, because individuals care about the target of their attachment, *they will be emotionally entangled with the fate of said target.* In other words, they will be prone to feel emotions in response to developments and events which they perceive as impacting – positively or negatively – upon said target's welfare.[26] Affective ties effectively link the subjective emotional experience of their owner with the circumstances of their target.[27] In fact, we can often observe the intensity of affective ties through the emotional suffering or outrage caused by the loss of their object.[28] This is significant due to the effects emotional experience can have on preference construction, motivation, judgement, and choice.[29] But it also means that the subjective felt state of actors may in part or whole become hostage to the object of their affection. Consequently, the anxiety, fear, desperation, worry, anguish, anger, joy, or more that an actor may experience as a function of their affective bonds to others can shape what they want in a particular situation, their sense of urgency, and their risk tolerance.

This differentiates affective ties from a seemingly kindred concept, empathy. Empathy, highlighted by a number of international relations scholars,[30] is a prosocial ability to think and feel into the perspective of another. Both affective ties and

[23]Poulsen 2020, 8.

[24]As acknowledged by those who seek to theorise an ethics of care for international relations. Held 2006.

[25]Abramson et al. 2022, 2.

[26]Frijda 1988, 351–2; Moors et al. 2013.

[27]This observation is also potentially complemented by the phenomenon of the endowment effect, identified by Samuelson and Zeckhauser in connection with status quo bias in decision-making. The dispositions associated with affective ties may conceivably intertwine with the endowment effect and its policy-related implications. Samuelson and Zeckhauser 1988.

[28]Baumeister and Leary 1995.

[29]Markwica 2018, 66–70.

[30]Booth and Wheeler 2008; Crawford 2014; Holmes and Yarhi-Milo 2017; Holmes and Wheeler 2020.

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empathy point to the ability of humans to move beyond egoism. But in contrast to empathy, affective ties presume no understanding – real or imagined – of how others feel. Affective ties are something one feels for, on behalf of, or towards their target, whereas empathy is feeling with what its object feels. Consequently, one can also experience affective ties to certain targets or abstractions that are not themselves capable of having feelings – such as religion or the nation – and thus not potential objects of empathy. Conversely, one might also engage in empathy for strategic ends – to better understand an international counterpart, for instance.[31] But this is not the same as feeling towards or about them. In short, affective ties may motivate empathy, but they also may not, and the reverse is equally true. The two are simply different concepts.

Lastly – and here too with parallels to Abramson et al.'s description of personal commitments[32] – *affective ties can have a diverse variety of targets.* People may feel these attachments towards individuals, things, groups, institutions, and even abstractions. The target of an affective bond need only have a subjective existence for the individual in question. As Abramson et al. also so astutely note, this can create multiple, cross-cutting commitments that may at times pull in different directions.[33] While the personal costs and benefits an actor confronts in adjudicating between such commitments can certainly play a role in their eventual behaviour, the relative felt intensity of the affective ties in question and the emotional stakes in play are key parts of the equation.

Sources of affective ties

Theorising the significance of affective ties for international politics also requires establishing an understanding of how they come into being; this has key implications for discussions later in this paper as to how political agents may or may not be able to intentionally intervene to cultivate or shape them. Affective ties can be generated through a number of pathways.

First, the most archetypical of such pathways may be that of *repeated positive affect experienced in close personal or community relationships or settings.*[34] While not wishing to become mired in the significant debates[35] that surround work in psychology on attachments formed at young ages, it is safe to say that attachments and bonds formed between children and their caregivers offer one prominent example of the emotionally-laden connections that individuals may establish. In fact, the bonds caregivers form towards children are theoretically significant for international relations: as feminist scholars of international relations have noted, the Hobbesian view of a war of all against all in a state of nature is unrealistic, as it overlooks the need for intergenerational care for the vulnerable in order to sustain human reproduction.[36] But positive bonds may also emerge from a host of non-familial relationships or contexts where individuals feel affection, affinity, or

[31]Baker 2019; Yorke 2023.
[32]Abramson et al. 2022, 3.
[33]Ibid.
[34]Baumeister and Leary 1995.
[35]Mercer 2011; Duschinsky 2020.
[36]Tickner 1992, 45–6.

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belonging, such as close friendships, romantic relationships, small-group camaraderie, or community engagement.[37]

A second pathway is through *affective transfer*. This occurs when the feelings and affinities associated with one or more elements of an individual's lived experience inform or bleed into attachments toward other adjacent or affiliated actors, groups, institutions, or abstractions. This is akin to what Hall and Ross describe as 'spillover effects,' through which affective responses or dispositions elicited by one target can spill over onto attitudes towards others.[38] In this manner, for instance, childhood affinities for and emotional memories of particular localities or markers of community may flow into affective ties to the state that claims to encompass and protect them. Affective transfer is particularly relevant in the case of affective ties to abstractions or disembodied institutions; since these lack concrete form, they can benefit from – even be parasitic upon – affiliations with more tangible, intimate elements of an individual's lived experience that may be more affectively salient.

Third, others have argued that *shared negative emotional experiences* – such as communal hardship or trauma – can also offer a pathway through which such bonds emerge. As Hutchison writes, 'shared understandings and meanings that can form after trauma play a key role in shaping a sense of collective or communal identity… the feeling of belonging with, and being loyal to, this group is thought then to ensue.'[39] It is here the notion that the trauma is shared that creates affective ties with those who have similarly suffered. Moreover, a 'chosen trauma' can be transmitted from one generation to the next, setting the stage for a sense of belonging that is defined in opposition to one or more groups.[40]

A fourth, and not unrelated pathway, is through the *processes of identification* more broadly. In other words, the identities shaping lived experience that actors adopt or are socialised into can form the basis for affective bonds and emotional investment.[41] Group identifications, for example, can supply individuals with feelings of belonging, esteem, and self-worth.[42] This understanding underpins important work in social psychology – and social identity theory more specifically – that has been imported into international relations.[43] Consequently, as Poulsen writes, 'Affective attachments are typically rooted in a sense of a shared social identity.'[44] In explaining extreme self-sacrifice, others even go beyond 'shared social identity' to posit attachments stemming from 'identity fusion,' wherein personal and group identity become marked by a 'visceral sense of oneness.'[45]

But that being, we should be careful to note that this fourth pathway only operates by virtue of the lived experience of identifications; not all identities will give rise to affective ties, nor vice versa. Actors can be ascribed identities to which they feel indifferent, which they find ill-fitting, or even despise and hate. It is the lived experience of those identities and the feelings this engenders that are important in

[37]Malešević 2019, 37.
[38]Hall and Ross 2015, 850.
[39]Hutchison 2016, 60.
[40]Volkan 2001.
[41]Polletta and Jasper 2001, 290 & 299; Flesher Fominaya 2010, 395; Poulsen 2020.
[42]Mercer 2014.
[43]Mercer 1995; Clunan 2009.
[44]Poulsen 2020, 10–11.
[45]Swann et al. 2014, 913.

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determining to which identities actors feel attachments. One cannot simply infer attachments on the basis of an attributed identity, nor we cannot assume actors will be attached equally – if at all – to the multiple identities they may possess.

This list is not intended as exhaustive, but it does present the primary ways in which the felt dimension offers alternative pathways through which individuals assimilate lived experience, interactions, and environmental factors – often without intention or even awareness – into their orientations toward others and the world they live in. A key point here is that these stand in contradistinction to the more deliberate and conscious processes of socialisation[46] or learning[47] that inform more cognitivist approaches in the field, suggesting alternative means through which preferences, attachments to identities, and value hierarchies come into being. Also, because these are felt processes, they cannot be intentionally switched on or off at short notice, nor can one simply will them into or out of existence. Crucially, the above discussion of pathways is essential for our arguments later in this article because these pathways offer avenues through which political agents can also seek to generate and reorient affective ties.

Affective ties and structure

For the most part, the preceding description of affective ties pertains to how they are formed and experienced at the individual level. Granted, individual affective ties can conceivably play a role in shaping international politics, for instance through bonds between leaders that transcend national boundaries or in the ways personal attachments to certain places or things may influence policymaker decision-making. There is much to be said for inquiries into such possibilities.[48] Our interest in this piece, however, is not in the precise composition of any individual's affective makeup. Rather, it is in the felt dimension of international structure, in how the international system is shaped by the global distribution of affective ties across the individuals that populate it and the ways in which this is both engaged and altered by political agents.

Structure, within the field of international relations, can and has been understood in myriad ways.[49] Reduced to the simplest of renderings, materialist understandings of international structure ask after the distribution of material capabilities and how this shapes international politics.[50] Ideationalist approaches ask after the distribution of ideas and its systemic implications.[51] In focusing on the felt dimension of structure, we ask after the international distribution of affective ties across actors and its consequences for both the behaviour of political agents and the nature of the international system more broadly.

Why does the felt dimension of structure matter? How affective concerns and dispositions are distributed across the system greatly determines how and in what numbers people within it will react and respond, what feelings and emotions they will or will not experience, and how they may or may not then be motivated to behave. A

[46]Johnston 2014.
[47]Levy 1994.
[48]Abramson et al. 2022; Heimann and Kampf 2024.
[49]Wight 2006, 121–76.
[50]Waltz 1979.
[51]Wendt 1999.

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world without feeling and emotion is difficult to imagine – certainly we would not expect much of what we study as scholars of international relations to unfold as it now does, be it conflict and political violence,[52] social movements and transnational activism,[53] or even standard diplomatic interactions.[54] People act upon, because of, for, and through feeling and emotion. How actors within a system are predisposed towards or against certain emotions and feelings can thus have important implications for how the entire system functions. A structural approach therefore looks at how affective ties are oriented, clustered, and diffused across the system giving rise to certain possibilities and limiting others.

Section summary

To summarise, affective ties are felt bonds of emotional investment that actors can develop towards a wide variety of targets. Affective ties is thus an umbrella term that encompasses a family of affective concerns and dispositions, the most prominent being love and attachment. Crucially, that which engages, impacts, or speaks to our affective ties can tap into our emotions, rousing them to propel us to action, even sacrifice.

Certainly, the composition and salience of any one person's affective ties are uniquely personal. At the same time, these are shaped by experience and environment through certain pathways, and thus also bear the stamp of larger social patterns and structures. The emotional responses that stem from these are themselves reinforced or repressed depending upon the social feedback they receive, processes that can both be personal and institutional.[55] How the ensuing affective ties are distributed across individuals globally constitutes a crucial part of the larger felt dimension of international structure.

Conceptually, we see our understanding of affective ties as fitting within an emerging body of work in the field of international relations that foregrounds human emotional and felt experience.[56] A significant sub-section of such work has sought to create via media between constructivist claims about the socially constituted nature of the world and insights coming out of affective neuroscience that suggest a key role for affective and felt experience in understanding subjective value and motivation,[57] particularly those that argue for the centrality of somatic experience.[58] We are seeking here to build upon general claims about emotions and affective dynamics emerging from this latter effort for the purposes of theoretical innovation within international relations. Unlike alternative approaches in the field that take a more explicitly psychoanalytically rooted view of affective ties,[59] or those that explain human drives on the basis of evolutionary dynamics,[60] ours does not require accepting an

[52]Kaufman 2019.
[53]Jasper 2011.
[54]Holmes 2018; Hall and Ross 2019; Wong 2020.
[55]Crawford 2014, 547.
[56]Mercer 2010; Hall and Ross 2015; Hutchison 2016; Ross 2019; Koschut 2020b; Van Rythoven and Sucharov 2020.
[57]Ross 2006; Koschut 2018.
[58]Damasio 2000; Prinz 2004.
[59]Zevnik and Mandelbaum 2023.
[60]Johnson and Toft 2013.

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overarching and all-encompassing model of the human psyche or its origins. Rather, ours departs from the far more modest and, in our view, relatively uncontroversial proposition that – along with our capacities for cognition and strategic action – we possess dispositions and concerns acquired through lived experience that predispose us to certain feelings and emotions capable of influencing our thoughts and behaviour. Affective ties describe a combination of those felt dispositions and concerns that positively link us to and emotionally invest us in the existence of things beyond ourselves. Where our treatment moves beyond existing work is in conceiving affective ties as power resources from a structural perspective, examining the implications of how they have come to be distributed across the system. It is to that focus that we now turn.

Affective ties in IR: a micro-structural perspective

We begin by approaching the felt dimension of international structure from a micro-structural perspective, that is looking at the distribution of affective ties as it confronts political agents, shaping both opportunities and constraints. Viewed from this perspective, we argue affective ties – as felt bonds that can elicit emotion and motivate action – are valuable resources for the exercise of various forms of power. As Heaney observes, 'emotion and power [are] conceptual twins, both of which are essential to any understanding of social and political life.'[61]

But such linkages have up until this point been relatively under-theorised. Granted, there are some notable exceptions. Koschut, in his work, has examined how constellations of discourse and power can govern emotional expression and experience in the form of feeling rules and structures.[62] Hutchison and Blieker have focused on the nexus of discourse and emotion and how these can both sustain and challenge power relations.[63] Solomon has written about the ways in which affect can infuse the discourse that is productive of social relations with 'force.'[64] Heimann and Kampf have looked at interpersonal commitments as a form of power between diplomats.[65] And Hartnett has discussed how appeals to love can mask power relations.[66] We seek to further contribute to this body of work by spotlighting how affective ties can constitute enabling resources for the exercise of power within the international system.

Adopting Barnett and Duvall's now canonical definition of power as 'the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their own circumstances and fate'[67] we argue that affective ties can be generative of those capacities, both by creating vulnerabilities that can be exploited as well as by producing bonds that are capable of mobilising and motivating willing sacrifice. We thus agree with Koschut, who observes that, 'Barnett and Duvall take affective dynamics for granted without making them explicit… this renders their

[61]Heaney 2011, 260.
[62]Koschut 2020b. See also other contributions in that volume.
[63]Hutchison and Bleiker 2017.
[64]Solomon 2017, 499–500.
[65]Heimann and Kampf 2024.
[66]Hartnett 2024.
[67]Barnett and Duvall 2005b, 3.

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conceptualisation of power incomplete.'[68] Importantly, affective ties make possible certain manifestations of power that work via what Barnett and Duvall call the interactive dimension of power, namely through 'behavioural relations and interactions.'[69] This dimension includes both the categories of compulsory and structural forms of power, which as we outline below include coercive and mobilising relationships, respectively. While we would not claim that all forms of power that Barnett and Duvall specify involve affective ties,[70] at the very least, the interactive dimension of power they describe is one that is shot through with affective relations.

Without contest, the sources of power to be found within the felt dimension are not limited to affective ties – the felt dimension encompasses a diverse collection of antipathies, affinities, anxieties, and more that can be leveraged to exert power. But among these, affective ties stand out in their capacity to produce both exploitable vulnerabilities and mobilisable collective strength. It is the latter, we argue, that is seemingly more significant.

Affective ties and coercive power

On the face of it, affective ties would appear to be clear sources of vulnerability. That which we care about and love is that which others can threaten in order to coerce us.

A widely cited conventional understanding of power is Robert Dahl's characterisation that, 'A has power over B to the extent that [A] can get B to do something B would not otherwise do.'[71] Duvall and Barnett would describe this as a form of compulsory power – direct action by one actor to shape the behaviour or circumstances of another.[72] Within international relations, a key focus has been on the ways in which political agents exert such power through exercising coercion.[73] At its heart, as articulated by Schelling, coercion is 'the *threat* of damage, or of more damage to come, that can make someone yield or comply…'[74] As Schelling elaborates 'the pain and suffering have to appear *contingent* on his behavior; it is not alone the threat that is effective – the threat of pain or loss if he fails to comply – but the corresponding assurance, possibly an implicit one, that he can avoid the pain or loss if he does comply.'[75] This he differentiates from brute force, which can simply impose its will. Coercion depends on 'hurting' and this is 'measured in the suffering it can cause and the victims' motivation to avoid it.'[76]

[68]Koschut 2020a, 13.

[69]Barnett and Duvall 2005b, 9.

[70]Apart from the interactive dimension, Barnett and Duvall also identify a constitutional dimension, encompassing institutional and productive power. As these latter forms of power are more diffuse, working through the indirect operation of institutional settings or general structures of knowledge, they lack the focus on specific people, objects, or things that provide a locus for affective ties and therefore sit outside the current discussion; Barnett and Duvall 2005a. That being said, Solomon does argue that affective investments do give the discourse that constitutes productive power its force. See Solomon 2017, 499–500.

[71]Dahl 1957, 202–3.

[72]Barnett and Duvall 2005a, 49.

[73]Schelling 2020; Jervis et al. 1985; Levy 2008.

[74]Schelling 2020, 3, emphasis in the original.

[75]Ibid., 4, emphasis in the original.

[76]Ibid., 2.

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In other words, coercion works when a target chooses to comply – either to take an action (compellence) or not (deterrence) – in place of enduring 'pain and suffering.' Clearly, the material capabilities highlighted by realists may make the infliction of pain possible, but it is the subjective anticipation of such pain and the adverse psychological reaction thereto that is necessary for successful coercion to occur. Consequently, early works on the intersections of international relations and emotion foregrounded the importance of fear for the workings of coercion. As Crawford observed, 'deterrence theory relies on the deliberate generation of fear under the assumption that the only 'rational' option for the fearful is to back down.'[77] Crawford went on to question whether fear always operates in that manner, and others – such as Markwica – have posited the significance for coercive outcomes of other potentially elicited emotions such as pride, humiliation, hope, or anger as well.[78]

But there is a more fundamental level at which affective ties are in play. Crucially, why would actors experience fear or anguish in the first place? Certainly, 'pain and suffering' are for most something to be avoided. But the pain and suffering to which Schelling refers are, in general, not targeted at the individual, physical bodies of the decision makers in question: it is here first and foremost the threat of psychological pain and suffering anticipated in response to what will be harmed or destroyed. In Schelling's terms, 'one needs to know what an adversary treasures and what scares him…'[79]

Affective ties – the emotional entanglements they present and the emotional reactions they give rise to when their objects are threatened – are a key source of such experiences of value. A party that feels nothing cares about nothing and fears losing nothing, and is thus virtually impossible to deter. Affective ties – by emotionally investing actors in the object of their attachment – are constitutive of the potential liabilities that can render actors susceptible to coercion. Correspondingly, when viewed micro-structurally, the strategies of an agent that wishes to engage in coercion will reflect their understanding of how affective ties are distributed across actors within their environment. They will focus on what they think their targets care about and love. Their targets' affective ties are points of exposure that can be leveraged for coercion.

We can see a brutal illustration of this in the recent Hamas attacks on Israel that involved the capture of Israeli hostages. On the whole, the individuals kidnapped were not significant as major political figures. They included children and the elderly. Hamas was quite obviously not going after so-called 'high-value targets.'[80] The individuals taken captive were, however, significant and valued targets in terms of the webs of affective ties in which they were embedded: significant as family members, friends, community members, and fellow nationals, among others. The Hamas strategy aimed at exploiting those affective ties to its own ends.

Coercion can target affective ties across a variety of scales. On an individual level, the Russian government allegedly averted the armed advance of members of the Wagner military group on Moscow by threatening to harm the family members of its leaders.[81] On a larger scale, in the context of nuclear deterrence, the term 'counter-value' refers to targeting 'cities and things of value to the adversary' in contrast to the

[77]Crawford 2000, 148.
[78]Markwica 2018.
[79]Schelling 2020, 3.
[80]Joint Chiefs of Staff 2013, viii.
[81]Riley-Smith et al. 2023.

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alternative of 'counter-force' targeting of military assets[82] The strategy of counter-value targeting includes a strong affective component, as it threatens death and destruction to said adversary's loved ones, to their fellow compatriots, to their homeland.

In short, from a micro-structural perspective, to identify in one's environment that which others love and care about is also to identify that which can be threatened in order to elicit emotion and exert power. Again, an actor that felt nothing and cared about nothing could not be cowered or coerced. Affective ties constitute vulnerabilities that can make the exercise of various forms of coercive power possible.

Affective ties and the power to bind

But affective ties can also move us to action and sacrifice even when we are not being coerced. In such cases, we do so out of love, care, and concern for a target, and therefore we do so willingly.

Affective ties are thus also productive of a different type of power. Hannah Arendt writes that power is 'the human ability not just to act, but to act in concert.'[83] Affective ties – to the extent that they link actors to other individuals, to communities, or to broader group identifications – also can form a crucial bonding agent for mobilising collective action, even when it may result in personal sacrifice.[84] Affective ties are thus a source of mobilisable collective strength which motivates humans to act for reasons beyond their own simple individual self-preservation.

Indeed, the ability to call upon, to mobilise, to have individuals willingly surrender themselves for something other than their own personal welfare – this proffers a counter to the centrifugal pressures of egoism. It can be invoked to muster action, even coercion, violence, and the sacrifice of others or even the self. As Harnett writes of love, the epitome of affective ties, 'love confers value on a subject or object rendering it desirable; a good; an end-in-itself… Love 'legitimates' coercion, then, in part, because to love a subject or object is to effectively deem it worthy of defence, and in part, because the sacred status afforded to love serves to sanctify what is done in its name. History is littered with examples of killing and saving, punishing and enforcing, avenging and defending, and rebelling and revolting in the name of love.'[85] That which we love and care about is that for which we may be willing to join together to both do and suffer harm.

This can work at the interpersonal level. In the last century, a monumental study of U.S. soldiers in World War II, *The American Soldier*, noted that 'a tired, cold, muddy rifleman goes forward with a bitter dryness of fear in his mouth into the mortar bursts and machine-gun fire… A tremendous psychological mobilisation is necessary to make an individual do this not once but many times…'[86] A key reason, it found, was that many soldiers – apart from wanting to return 'to home and loved ones' (another set of affective ties) – were motivated by the 'the strong group ties that developed during combat.'[87]

[82]Larsen and Kartchner 2014, 16.
[83]Arendt 1969, 44.
[84]Hartnett 2024.
[85]Ibid., 210.
[86]Stouffer 1949, 107.
[87]Ibid., 109–10.

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Or as one study of U.S. soldiers in the Iraq War observed, 'the most frequent response for combat motivation given was 'fighting for my buddies'.'[88] Of particular significance are those who sacrifice themselves for fellow soldiers – throwing themselves on grenades to shield comrades, staying behind to allow fellow soldiers to escape, or even giving up their last parachute to save another.[89] As a survey of Congressional Medal of Honour recipients who rendered their lives to save others noted, 'Feelings that must be extremely intense appear to influence these persons to conclude that their lives are less important than those of others who could survive.'[90]

Alternately, Abrahms has argued that affective ties are both an important motivator for and glue that binds together members of terrorist organisations, in some cases resulting in the persistence of terrorist groups even when the issues ostensibly driving their activity have evaporated.[91] Whitehouse et al. similarly argue that 'visceral, family-like bonds' were critical in motivating 'civilians-turned-fighters' in the Libyan civil war to fight and die for one another.[92] They observe, 'for nearly half of combatants, their bonds to each other were stronger than bonds to their own families… these kin-like bonds to one another predispose them to extreme self-sacrifice.'[93]

Apart from violent actors, social movements can also draw strength from affective bonds among their members.[94] As Fominaya notes, 'Emotional ties between activists can keep activists going through setbacks and help them overcome the effects of repression.'[95] Military units, terrorist groups, non-state combatants, activists – all offer examples of the ways in which affective ties can create not just the power to act in concert, but the willingness to sacrifice.[96]

And this can also work on larger scales – for instance, in the form of the felt attachments actors feel bind them their state and co-nationals. Posen, for instance, argues that the mass army of modern warfare was made possible by the spread of nationalism.[97] Affective ties to the national community create a collective of actors that can be mobilised on behalf of that community.

Viewed micro-structurally, the affective ties in a political agent's environment are thus a potentially invaluable resource for mobilising and generating voluntary action, even sacrifice.[98] Cooperation and compliance exacted through coercion are contingent and given conditionally, grudgingly. It must always fear defection and betrayal. In contrast, cooperation and compliance given out of love, attachment, and concern are proffered willingly. A political agent that can tap into this, harness this, and direct it to their own ends has a tremendous power resource at their fingertips. It should be no surprise, then, to find political agents working to appeal to and invoke the affective ties they find in their surroundings when seeking to mobilise others – be they bonds of

[88]Wong 2003, 9.
[89]Blake 1978; Riemer 1998.
[90]Riemer 1998, 116.
[91]Abrahms 2006.
[92]Whitehouse et al. 2014.
[93]Ibid.
[94]Goodwin et al. 2004, 418–21.
[95]Flesher Fominaya 2010, 395.
[96]Malešević 2016.
[97]Posen 1993.
[98]Malešević 2019, 65–6.

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family, ethnic solidarities, attachments to aspects of religion, or national ties. Such political agents need not be cynical – they may share in and be motivated by the same ties that they seek to rouse within others. But sincerity does not prevent political agents also from seeing the value in utilising affective ties as a means to mobilise.

Importantly, political agents that are at the locus of affective ties or occupy representative stations that allow them to invoke pre-existing affective ties – such as being the perceived leaders of the nation – are in a significant structural power position. Duvall and Barnett describe structural power as producing 'the very social capacities of structural, or subject, positions in direct relations to one another, and the associated interests, the underlie and dispose action.'[99] For Duvall and Barnett, structural relations are constituted through ideas, identities, discourses, and practices. But affective ties can also engender relations of structural power. Attachments, emotional investments, and affective concerns – these can provide social capacities to agents who occupy positions at their centre. Put simply, there is also a structural power relationship between the one who loves and the one who is loved, a relationship whose very bases are the bonds of feeling.

This also explains why, where leaders feel insecure atop new or existing political structures, they will seek to bolster their power by promoting affective ties to their very own person. Indeed, personalist regimes – wherein the great leader is propagated as an object of veneration and love – take cultivating individual-oriented affective attachments as a core element of their ruling strategy. Portraying individuals as possessing characteristics that instil admiration and adoration, generate feelings of gratitude and affinity, or even foster love can work to cultivate affective attachments in the service of political authority. Personalist techniques simultaneously engage multiple pathways that generate affective ties – making the 'great leader' ubiquitous in communal lived experience, making the relationship feel personal, and enveloping the 'great leader' in familial metaphors to transfer affect. Leaders who can draw upon personalised attachments can 'defy the wishes of pragmatic elements around them and succeed in having their followers follow.'[100] (Accordingly, personalised regimes are on the whole also more likely to be weakly institutionalised and engage in armed conflict.[101])

The tactics for cultivating personalist ties – while longstanding – have grown in prominence with the rise of mass media and the tools of mass propaganda.[102] The last century, in particular, saw not a few revolutionary regimes adopt leadership cults, centred around figures such as Stalin, Mao, Castro, and Kim Il Sung.[103] Today, we can observe the ongoing or renewed use of such tactics in states such as Russia, China, and North Korea. Granted, not all in a personalist regime may ever fully internalise the desired affective relationship with the leader; some may just be outwardly faking it, especially given the consequences of non-compliance.[104] But the efforts personalist regimes make to cultivate such attachments attest to a belief in their value. As Leese observes, 'The obvious goal behind the instigation of modern personality cults was to generate a unifying effect… which served to centre loyalties and emotions in the

[99]Barnett and Duvall 2005a, 52–3.
[100]Byman and Pollack 2001, 141.
[101]Colgan and Weeks 2015.
[102]Berenson and Giloi 2010.
[103]Leese 2014.
[104]Wedeen 2015.

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persona of the leader.'[105] Personalist leaders seek to structure the felt environment so as to make themselves the locus of affective ties within their polity.

In sum, affective ties also can be constitutive of a structural form of power, the power to mobilise action in concert and to generate willing sacrifice. This is true at the interpersonal level as it is true at the mass level. From a micro-structural perspective, the extent to which a political agent has access to this power resource depends upon how affective ties are distributed and oriented within their social environment. Agents who find themselves or their station at the centre of a web of affective ties occupy a structurally powerful position. The structure of feeling is not fixed; political agents can and do intervene to cultivate new affective bonds to their advantage. Personalist-focused regimes are one prominent example of this.

Section summary

Realists have focused on how the relative distribution of material capabilities structures the ability of actors to exercise power within international relations.[106] Constructivists have gone on to demonstrate how the structure and distribution of ideas, discourses, identities, and social positions make certain power relations possible.[107] Our argument here is that when political agents survey their environment, they also confront a further distribution of power resources in the form of affective ties. Affective ties create vulnerabilities that can be exploited to exercise coercion, enabling compulsory power. But even more crucially, they also create bonds that are capable of mobilising and motivating willing sacrifice, potentially creating relations of structural power between actors. Such ties are arguably much more significant, for they do not rely on the continual application of threats to mobilise action and compliance. Realising this, political agents can and do intervene to shape the affective environment, seeking to reorient or cultivate new felt attachments for the purposes of producing power. We can observe this within personalist regimes among others. The implications of the international distribution of feeling are not limited, however, to the micro-structural; it also has macro-structural effects. It is to those that we now turn.

Affective ties in IR: a macro-structural perspective

To take a macro-structural perspective on affective ties is to examine how affective ties as a power resource are distributed throughout the system. Certainly, much of this distribution will be organically determined, a function of personal, local, and immediate interactions, experiences and relationships that surround actors. But given that affective ties are a mobilisable power resource that can be drawn upon to motivate collective action, violence, and even sacrifice, we would also expect to see their international distribution shaped by the ways in which political agents compete to cultivate and align them to their advantage. Bluntly, political agents will want to cultivate mobilisation power, and affective ties are a key means to do so. And again, this does not mean that the political agents in question are necessarily acting cynically

[105]Leese 2014, 342–3.
[106]Mearsheimer 2014, 55.
[107]Barnett and Duvall 2005a.

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– they may be motivated by the same affective ties that they are seeking to propagate. All the same, from a macro-structural perspective, this means that the international domain can be understood as an arena shaped by the political struggle not simply for territory and material resources, but also for hearts.

Much scholarship has already examined the historical development of material, informational, and institutional technologies that have shaped the constitution of the international system and the competition for wealth and physical resources.[108] There is, however, a parallel domain of historically emergent *ideo-affective technologies* employed in the struggle for affective ties that arguably are equally as important. For the purpose of this paper, we use the term ideo-affective technology to denote an amalgam of interlocking discourses, practices, and techniques that combines the ideational and the felt to cultivate, align, and shape affective experience in specific directions.[109] On the system level, those ideo-affective technologies that best generate and orient resilient affective ties in ways that win adherents and allow them to be harnessed by political agents should, over time, come to dominate as they crowd out rivals and are adopted by greater numbers of actors. In turn, the global distribution and orientation of affective ties should correspondingly come to reflect and bear the mark of the successes and diffusion of said ideo-affective technologies. Competition between political agents for affective ties will also drive the competitive selection of the different ideo-affective technologies that are most effective in eliciting and capturing said ties.

In what follows, we argue that nationalism has become the dominant ideo-affective technology, serving as a global ordering device that directs affective ties to a shared – albeit abstract – locus, the putative nation. This, paired with the institutional form of the modern state, has proven a highly resilient combination.

Nationalism as dominant

If there were a way to visualise affective ties as they are currently distributed across the system, we would likely see them most intensely clustered around individuals linking them to the immediate personal relationships that they hold dear – to family, partners, friends, and all that would follow under the moniker of 'loved ones.' We would also see other attachments to certain local communities, groups, and organisations. However, the striking pattern that transcends the local would be the linkages upwards towards the nation, dividing the globe into a patchwork of different loci of national attachment.[110] When considering the global distribution of affective ties – and the distribution of feeling in general – it would seem we live in the world that nationalism has made.

Indeed, the nation's station as a focus of identification and affective investment is a key defining feature of the modern international system. As Walt observes, nationalism is 'the most powerful force in the world… [that] has shaped the history of the past 500 years in ways that many people still do not fully appreciate.'[111] At present, we can see it at work in the mobilisation for major conflicts

[108]Drezner 2019.
[109]We take the term ideo-affective from Rosenberg 2017.
[110]Malešević 2019, 22.
[111]Walt 2019.

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such as those now unfolding between Russia and the Ukraine,[112] in the elicitation of populist backlashes against transnationalism such as Brexit,[113] and in appeals for political allegiance in countries as different as the United States[114] and China.[115] And more basically, it is reflected in the ways our world is broken up into nation–states whose raison d'etre is tied to claims to represent corresponding national communities. In contrast to previous eras, imperialist domination of vast numbers of peoples is no longer feasible as nationalism has rendered colonial occupation too costly.[116] And even when states die, as Fazal has found, the continuing strength of nationalism can help explain their later resurrection.[117] Nationalism has come to alter not only just the basic ideological structure underpinning the international construction of legitimate authority,[118] but also the configuration of the felt dimension across the international space. As Mylonas and Tudor observe, 'Nationalism has come to define modernity both by shaping the international system of nation-states and by regulating individual loyalty and solidarity within the confines of a nation.'[119]

So if the modern state form developed out of successful competition in the material realm over resources and institutional capacity,[120] nationalism has emerged as its counterpart with its conquests in the felt dimension. And combined, the two have proven extraordinarily resilient. Arguably, few within the field would challenge the notion that the nation-state composite is significant for how we make sense of the world. As Heiskanen observes, 'The basic theoretical toolkit of IR is deeply intertwined with a nationalist worldview that considers the territory of the earth to be neatly divided into congruent and self-contained nation-states.'[121]

To be clear, an exclusive focus on the nation-state within international relations theory can be questioned. Certainly, the traditional distinction by Waltz between the nation–state as a hierarchy and the international system as an anarchy is far from sacrosanct. Numerous scholars have pointed to the various ways authority is also vested in actors or at levels beyond the state form.[122] And the lines drawn between the domestic and the international are also far from unassailable.[123] Materially, we can see corporations and even individuals with more resources than many nation-states.[124] But all said, there is one domain in which the nation–state does appear to remain without equivalent challengers: the realm of affective ties. Simply, on the international level, it is the nation–state that overwhelmingly serves both as the highest locus of affective ties and their outer limit.

[112]Knott 2023.
[113]Henderson et al. 2016; Hobolt 2016; Henderson et al. 2017; Manners 2018.
[114]Woods et al. 2024.
[115]Gries 2004.
[116]Nye 2009, 19.
[117]Fazal 2007, 153–68.
[118]Hall 1999; Malešević 2019, 7.
[119]Mylonas and Tudor 2023, 1.
[120]Spruyt 1996.
[121]Heiskanen 2021, 247.
[122]Lake 2009; Zarakol 2017.
[123]Milner 1991.
[124]La Monica 2022.

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Explaining nationalism's advantage

Why is nationalism so effective? Undoubtedly, the origin story of nationalism – its historical emergence and spread through print capitalism,[125] language and education policies,[126] and elite intellectual promotion[127] – has received significant scholarly attention.[128] That the nation is 'an imagined community'[129] is also now a well-recognised shibboleth within the field. Decades of scholarship have shown nations to be a product of narration, construction, and imagination.[130] But this only tells us the historical how, explaining little as to why nationalism – among all possible identities and identifications – has had such widespread appeal and such resilience. Nor does it tell us why, in the words of Anderson, the nation appears to 'command such profound emotional legitimacy.'[131] The arguments that we have within the discipline – based on survival-focused materialist ontologies or discourse- and identity-oriented constructivist ones – are insufficient on their own terms. Rather, we believe it is only by examining how nationalism – as an ideo-affective technology – works to harness affective ties that its commanding position can be understood.

To elaborate, realists argue that nationalism is simply one variation of the groupism that characterises the politics of survival on the international stage. As Wohlforth states, 'To survive at anything above a subsistence level, people need the cohesion provided by group solidarity… Today the most important human groups are nation–states and the most important source of in-group cohesion is nationalism.'[132] Or as Mearsheimer posits, 'a social group… is a survival vehicle.'[133] The difficulty with a survival-oriented logic, however, is that it suggests an egotistical and instrumental view of group membership. If that is the case, we should expect to see individuals desert or betray their nation whenever they are confronted with the possibility of suffering death, decrepitude, or even discomfort for reasons of membership in that social group. And yet for nation–states to persist, at times individuals will need to be willing to forfeit their own advantage, welfare, and even lives for the cause of the collective nation. Material approaches cannot explain such sacrifice. Also, it is not clear why we would not see ever larger groups form – approaching a world state – as this would provide the greatest advantage for survival.[134] Indeed, if forming a group is an individual means to survival, why would groups not also seek survival through the creation of even larger groups? A materialist, survival-oriented ontology alone cannot answer why this has not happened either.

Constructivists, in comparison, would treat nationalism as a constructed identity discourse.[135] Without a doubt, how national identities are articulated is a matter of discursive construction. But so in this view are all other identities as well. How then would one explain why national identity is so successful? Human beings are

[125]Anderson 2006.
[126]Gellner 1983.
[127]Greenfeld 1993.
[128]For a review, see Mylonas and Tudor 2023, 17–21.
[129]Anderson 2006.
[130]Eley and Suny 1996; Anderson 2006; Gellner 1983; Brubaker 2009.
[131]Anderson 2006, 4.
[132]Wohlforth 2008, 133.
[133]Mearsheimer 2018, 34–5.
[134]Wendt 2003.
[135]Doty 2011, 127.

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consistently confronted with myriad identities from which to choose. What determines which identity takes precedence? Constructivists might posit a logic of appropriateness, in which 'Action involves evoking an identity or role and matching the obligations of that identity or role to a specific situation.'[136] But what then determines which identities actors see themselves as occupying when considering which obligations to apply in a given situation? Or put differently, if actors behave according to the duties implicated in an identity, what governs the duty they have to act according to that identity when there are always multiple identities to choose among? This then suggests meta-rules as to which identities are relevant under which conditions. But such meta-rules would, in turn, require meta-identities to which they then correspond, and so on ad infinitum. Only by having an exogenous force binding actors to certain identities can one escape the infinite regress of the rule–identity relationship. Moreover, belonging to a group or being ascribed an identity may tell us little about the actual degree of attachment an individual feels towards it; it remains far from clear why, among all possible identities, national identity should be so successful in achieving widespread appeal.

Our argument is that nationalism is not just another survival strategy or identity, and solely materialist or ideationalist ontologies are incapable of appreciating this. Simply, they overlook the felt dimension of nationalism's workings. Nationalism should be understood as an ideo-affective technology *par excellence* – it pairs an ideological outlook with a collection of highly potent techniques for creating affective ties between the individual and putative nation.

This piece follows Freeden in defining the ideological component of nationalism as 'a prioritisation of a particular group – the nation – as a key constituting and identifying a framework for human beings and their practices' that is positively valued, seen as deserving political-institutional expression, is spatially and temporally grounded, and involves a sense of belonging linked to emotion and sentiment.[137] But we diverge from Freeden in treating it only as an ideology, for it also has another component, that is the techniques of discourse and practice it has evolved and honed to the purposes of cultivating, appropriating, and transferring affective ties to the supposed national body.[138] Its techniques work simultaneously across the various pathways through which affective ties can be generated or appropriated.

To begin, one common technique of nationalist practices – particularly when state-propagated – is to insert the nation into both formative, positive emotional events and quotidian experiences. This leverages the pathway of communal experience. Ceremonies, parades, school education, military service and other forms of shared experience foster feelings of national belonging within individuals and communal identifications across them. In Heany's words, 'States can and do engage in public ritual in the hopes of creating what we might call… "state-framed

[136]March and Olsen 1998, 951.

[137]Freeden 1998, 751–4.

[138]Our arguments about the techniques of nationalism thus share affinities with Malešević's understanding of the ways in which nationalism has acheived the 'ideological penetration and the envelopment of microsolidarity' and 'replicate the language and practices associated with the face-to-face intimacy,' although Malešević only thinly theorises the affective dynamics at work, treating them as an attribute of close personal relationships. Malešević 2019, 65–6.

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communities of feeling".'[139] State efforts to impose conformity on domestic language and customs – combined with further collective experiences and sentiments of belonging stemming from state-level spheres of media[140] – also create greater feelings of shared community. There are also techniques less ostentatious and less extravagant. These take the form of numerous small, everyday messages and markers that weave national membership into an individual's daily lived experience, what Billig has termed 'banal nationalism.'[141] Scholars have even shown how nationalism has been interlaced with how we express ourselves in the most intimate of settings.[142] Malešević describes such practices as the 'micro-interactional grounding' of nationalism in the 'micro-world' of 'dedicated, small-scale, face-to-face interactions.'[143] All this works to cultivate attachment through promoting identification and belonging by associating the nation with positive feelings at the communal and quotidian levels.

A second technique is to appropriate and subsume certain easily identifiable, existing affective ties individuals already feel towards intimate and key elements of their lived communal experience – be they ties to family, home, language, religion, social practices, or other shared elements of their social life.[144] This utilises the second pathway of affective transfer. Nationalist discourse will endeavour to take the people, places, and things to which individuals have emotional connections in their immediate environment and claim these as elements of the nation. As Stynen et al. observe, 'nationalism has a powerful ability to recycle and resemanticise previous sentiments of belonging, either to the family or to the territory, absorbing their ways of expression.'[145] The landscape, local practices, myths and legends, language – all will be incorporated into what Anderson calls the 'cultural products of nationalism – poetry, prose fiction, music, plastic arts' that express 'love very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles'.[146] Even food can be commandeered for these ends.[147] Put simply, nationalism finds potency in claiming as its own and being parasitic upon the attachments that emerge out of individuals' life in a community.

A third technique of nationalist discourse and practice is to imitate the relationships to which individuals have strong affective attachments – most prominently familial ones – metaphorically and symbolically on the level of a putative national community. This technique activates both the second and fourth pathways of affective transfer and identification. Indeed, as Malešević notes, those that seek to mobilise a national attachment 'speak in the language of close family ties: they describe the territory one inhabits as 'our motherlands and fatherlands'; they depict mobilised soldiers as 'our brothers who are sacrificing their lives at the battlefields' and they portray citizens who remain outside frontlines as 'our sisters, daughters and mothers who need to be saved and protected'…'[148] Or more concisely, nationalism

[139]Heaney 2013.
[140]Anderson 2006.
[141]Billig 1995.
[142]Stynen et al. 2021.
[143]Malešević 2019, 37.
[144]Malešević 2011.
[145]Stynen et al. 2021, 209.
[146]Anderson 2006.
[147]Ichijo and Ranta 2016.
[148]Malešević 2011, 287.

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aspires to create 'a metaphoric kin group.'[149] Banti argues, 'The strength of the conception of the nation as a family/parenthood lies in the fact that it reduces the abstraction in the idea of nation, and gives it back a simple and immediate intelligibility.'[150] But at the same time, nationalism also clothes itself in the language and imagery of relationships where affective ties are already operative or at least intuitive given prevailing feeling rules in order to benefit from a transfer of sentiment.

A fourth technique is to adapt histories and narrations of the past in ways that encourage individuals to identify with the putative nation.[151] Here, the nation makes use of the fourth pathway of identification. One frequent manifestation of this is through myths of common descent and shared heroes.[152] As Renan observed, 'A heroic past, great men, glory… this is the capital stock upon which one bases a national idea.'[153] Additionally, this also can engage the third pathway of shared suffering, as traumatic experiences can also be scripted in national terms. Individuals will be encouraged to identify with a larger, trans-historical community of belonging that has triumphed together, suffered together, and progressed through time together.

For certain, the techniques nationalism encompasses are diverse and shift depending upon its target community (or perhaps in some instances better said the target community which it seeks to summon into existence). Indeed, despite efforts to find a basis for proto-nations,[154] there exists no set of unified criteria as to what constitutes the basis for nationhood. Claims of ethnic, linguistic, religious, civic, historic, geographic, or cultural community have all at various times and in varying combinations served this purpose. This multiplicity suggests not that there exist different types of nations out there to be discovered, but rather that efforts to stimulate feelings of national community have worked with the different ingredients they find available or manufactured new ones. And over time, these techniques can be self-reinforcing. Shared national attachments will give rise to seemingly shared emotional responses, creating further feelings of national belonging.[155]

Unquestionably, techniques of affective cultivation are never absolute – attempts to appropriate, promote, or seed affective ties within individuals will always confront the diversity of human existence. There will forever be those unresponsive to the affective appeal of nationalism, those who value other ties more, or those who even react adversely. But as affective ties to the nation–state have become normalised, we can also observe the emergence of state-sponsored regimes that discipline emotional expressions that are seen or feared to be deviant. Arguably, it is in no small part the notion that the nation should be the highest locus of attachment (a view often tacitly embedded in by IR theories) that engenders the perception that potential attachments held by actors within a state to other nation-like groups are dire security threats.[156] Consequently, the affective ties cultivated by nationalism have become buttressed by an extensive framework of feeling rules and disciplinary structures.

[149]Eriksen 2004.
[150]Banti 2008, 2.
[151]Lawrence 2013.
[152]Malešević 2019, 38.
[153]Renan 2018, 261. See also Mylonas and Tudor 2023, 21.
[154]Smith 1993.
[155]Mercer 2014.
[156]Baron 2009.

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Koschut, drawing upon the sociologist Arlie Hochschild, has highlighted the significance of '"feeling rules": rules about the verbal and non-verbal expression of emotions in a given situation' and '"feeling structures": institutionalised sets of emotions that show a regular pattern that constrains and compels the affective experience of subjects, thereby producing and solidifying hierarchies' within international politics.[157] Such rules and structures can be imposed by the brute force of the state – such as by mandating oaths of loyalty or criminalising acts insulting national symbols like flags. More often, however, they work in a subtler fashion: through diffuse social rewards and sanctions, criticisms, and shaming. In this manner, even those who do not feel any attachment to the nation may keep this to themselves or feign it in order to avoid social opprobrium. These practices have both resulted in certain emotional and affective responses, as Crawford posits, being institutionalised[158] and diffused throughout society. What Gustaffson and Hall call a 'politics of emotional duty' towards the nation has emerged in many polities with demands that love of the nation is demonstrated beyond doubt, leading at times to excessive and even violent extremes.[159]

All the same, at their heart the core techniques of nationalism are so powerful because they merge the meaning of nationalism as an ideology with the meaningfulness of nationalism as something felt on a visceral level. There are multiple survival strategies we can adopt and multiple identities that are available to us. But nationalism stands out in its ability to also feed upon, insert itself into, and cultivate affective ties, making it a potent tool for mobilising and motivating sacrifice.

Political entrepreneurs and ruling actors are well aware of the strength of nationally oriented affective ties as a power resource for those who stand at their locus, even while they themselves may also come under – or be motivated by – nationalism's influence. Accordingly, albeit presenting in a variety of forms, state-sponsored nationalism has become virtually ubiquitous in the international system: as Malešević observes, 'nationalism [has] proliferated through the ever-increasing organisational power of state institutions.'[160] And nation-state actors – perhaps also especially when themselves sincere nationalists – know to use this love of nation within their people to mobilise support and motivate both sacrifices and violence.[161]

Even those seeking to mobilise against the state or other forms of authority have found nationalism a powerful resource. In some cases, nationalist entrepreneurs have used these ties to rally against existing political arrangements to attain new states for nascent nations. In others, to drive the reconfiguration of political structures to serve the nation. Oppressed actors – combatting the structures of imperialism or minority suppression – have also promoted their own nationalisms to mobilise resistance.[162] In places like Vietnam and Algeria, this has meant that nationalist actors have been capable of defeating far more materially powerful occupying powers. The macro-result of nationalism's potency as an ideo-affective technology has been to both propel and incentivise its wide-scale adoption, driving a massive realignment of affective ties towards the nation form.

[157]Koschut 2020b, 14–6.
[158]Crawford 2014.
[159]Pin-Fat 2019; Gustaffson and Hall 2021.
[160]Malešević 2019, 11.
[161]Posen 1993; Hartnett 2024.
[162]Manela 2007.

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Nationalism internationally

By conceiving of nationalism as an ideo-affective technology shaping the global distribution of feeling, we can also better view it in a comparative fashion and understand what it is a case of. The ideo-affective technology of nationalism is, historically speaking, a relatively recent phenomenon. Some of its predecessors do still endure, even if they do not match nationalism's contemporary potency. Personalism, mentioned above, is one such example of a much older ideo-affective technology that still persists.

Another ancient yet still relevant contender is religion. Akin to nationalism, religious practice and discourse – across a variety of traditions – appropriates, cultivates, emulates, and intertwines itself within the experiences and relationships that give rise to deeply felt affective ties. Indeed, religion offers diverse loci of attachment – love felt toward deities and spiritual leaders, emotional ties within communities of faith, affective investments in religious symbols, rituals, rites, holidays, sites, and ceremonies of passage, and more.[163] These far pre-date the emergence of the nation form and still today remain drivers of individual and collective behaviour within international politics.[164] Correspondingly, we can observe attempts to mobilise across borders on the basis of religion – such as is the case with transnational Islam[165] – but we can equally see political agents seeking to yoke religion to nationalist agendas.[166]

Beyond these, however, other transnational and cosmopolitan efforts to generate affective ties have on the whole been less successful in harnessing the pathways of personal, intimate experience, and existing attachments to generate emotional bonds. Scholars looking at the outbreak of World War I have observed how nationalist bonds and the 'general euphoria in [the] early weeks of war' in Germany as its society mobilised trumped international working-class solidarities.[167] Nye has written about the ways in which states or other actors may engender 'soft power,' which he defines as 'the ability to get what you want through attraction….'[168] But a positive affinity based upon attraction to another's policies, values, or culture remains quite soft at best – it is difficult to cite empirical examples of actors being mobilised to sacrifice everything on the basis of soft power's attraction.

Nor do efforts at transnational community fare well in comparison. 'Who will willingly die for COMECON or the EEC?' asked Anderson rhetorically in his classic *Imagined Communities*, pointing to the failings of these transnational bodies to produce attachments when compared to the nation.[169] Even the arguably most successful example of supra-national organisation – the European Union – struggles with its affective register. As Guibernau observes, 'European identity is best defined as an emergent 'non-emotional' identity, in contrast with the powerful and emotionally charged national identities of our time… So far, the nation retains the emotional attachment of its citizens….'[170] Scholars have also frequently approached security communities from the perspective of explaining how these move state actors beyond

[163]Martin and Runzo 2007.
[164]Fox 2001; Snyder 2011; Toft et al. 2011.
[165]Rubin 2014.
[166]van der Veer 2013.
[167]Paul et al. 2014, 15–21.
[168]Nye 2009, x.
[169]Anderson 2006, 53.
[170]Guibernau 2011, 313.

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anarchy to greater community;[171] but what research there is into the affective practices and ties these generate would appear to show these are primarily confined to elite levels of intrapersonal interaction.[172] Famously, Huntington's claims that larger civilisational affinities would come to structure world politics have found little empirical substantiation.[173] Attempts to mobilise in ways that transcend the nation–state face the difficulty of competing within the felt dimension.

In short, despite the unprecedented collective, global challenges, we now confront – climate change, weapons of mass destruction, pandemics, and more – we live in a world where it seems impossible to fully move beyond the dominance of the nation-state form. Coupled with and promoted by the institutions of the state, it has become the prevailing force shaping the global distribution of affective ties.

Section summary

Assuming a macro-structural perspective allows us to see how competition over affective ties within the international system has led to the almost universal adoption of nationalism and a mass orienting of feeling in the direction of the nation form. Our interest is not in showing simply that nationalism matters per se, but in expanding our understanding of what nationalism 'is a case of.' We believe it is more than just a group identity or survival strategy. It is an example of a set of practices and discourses that has found a way to access and nurture feelings that was unprecedented and still in many ways remains unmatched.

Taking a long historical view, this was not foreordained – other combinations of political ordering and ideo-affective technologies did and do still exist. But neither was this entirely random. Akin to a social media app that attains dominance through an algorithm best catering to emotional rewards,[174] nationalism gained an edge over potential competitors by perfecting the ability to engage the multiple pathways that engender affective ties. Wed to and promoted by the institutions of the modern state,[175] it has become incredibly entrenched – to an extent that the nation–state pairing is often treated as an inherent attribute of international politics as opposed to a contingent development.[176]

We need therefore to treat the nation-state form as not only a material and ideational configuration but also one of feeling. As Berezin observes, 'The institutions of nation-states move the epistemological – citizenship as category – towards the emotional – citizenship as felt identity.'[177] But it is not just, as Solomon argues, that 'investments of affect function as the "force" or bonding that connects subjects to their identities,'[178] affective ties also bind to and infuse with felt meaning the abstraction of the nation itself. The implications of this are that dislodging the

[171]Adler and Barnett 1998.

[172]Eznack 2011; Koschut 2014.

[173]Fox 2005.

[174]Koetsier 2022.

[175]Malešević 2019, 34.

[176]Granted, there also are those who argue for the nation-state form as normatively defensible means of generating solidarity to encourage economic redistribution, but this is an argument for what nationalism should do, not why it has been so resilient. Tamir 2021.

[177]Berezin 2002, 41.

[178]Solomon 2014.

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nation–state will thus require either the emergence of new competitors equally capable of competing for affective ties or, alternately, a breakdown in the emotional investments actors have in the nation.

Conclusions and ways forward

The capacity to love, to forge strong attachments, to care deeply for others – these affective ties are all important and basic elements of the human condition. They underpin relations on the individual level between friends, lovers, and family. It is difficult to envision the functioning of society or even continued human survival without the ability to form affective ties.

But affective ties are also power resources – vulnerabilities that can be exploited for coercion, yes, but more importantly potent forces for mobilisation. For this reason, the manner in which these are oriented and distributed around the international system has major implications for both the strategic possibilities and choices that face political agents as well as the configuration of the system as a whole. Crucially, affective ties are not static but can be cultivated and directed towards political ends.

Consequently, the international realm is not simply one in which there is a struggle over material resources and ideas, there is also an ever-present effort to secure affective ties. At present, the global distribution of affective ties reflects the triumph of nationalism. It has been adopted almost universally as the most potent ideo-affective technology for engaging and orienting feelings.

In this article, we are thus offering ways to conceptualise (1) the potential relationship of affective dynamics and emotion to the workings of power and (2) the implications of competition over the global distribution of feeling. In doing so, we are also proffering a theoretical answer to why nationalism has – despite the existence of numerous other potential competing identities or 'survival strategies' – been so successful in the long term.

While our primary focus has been on theorising, we can also offer the following propositions for future evaluation. The propositions that emerge – and only a sample will be enumerated at this point – are not about what certain individuals might feel toward international others, but rather based upon how the overall distribution of feeling has developed into its present state and might evolve in the future.

A first proposition is that for the foreseeable future nationalism will retain ongoing centrality due to its ability to engage on an emotional level, although religion and personalism will also persist in this domain. We perceive all of these as having in common the fact that they work to cultivate, play upon, and redirect affective ties within the international system. In fact, these ideo-affective technologies are not at all mutually exclusive: as one would expect from our arguments, the combination of nationalism, religion, and personalism constitutes an especially strong cocktail. Indeed, we can currently observe various political agents adopting this mix. Russian leader Vladimir Putin has done so, combining Russian nationalism with a macho 'cult of personality'[179] and an embrace of the Russian Orthodox Church.[180] Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan has also married personalism to an embrace of a nationalist Islam.[181] And possibly most prominently at the time of this writing,

[179]Sperling 2016.
[180]Anderson 2007.
[181]Saglam 2024.

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U.S. president Donald Trump has interwoven American-centric nationalism with the notion of a personal, holy mission, particularly after he narrowly escaped assassination.[182]

Another proposition is that state actors will respond jealously to rival claims upon the affective ties of their citizens.[183] Such challenges may be perceived as stemming from irredentist nationalisms, transnational ethnic ties, and religious movements that cultivate alternative loci of attachment, or any number of other similar attractors. Recognising that affective ties are power resources, states will likely react to perceived competition for these more vigorously when compared to other potential concerns, such as transnational economic interests.

A third is that transnational attempts to mobilise on the basis of identity-focused commitments will continue to fall short if their affective basis remains weak. For security communities or regional arrangements to supersede the nation in affective mobilisation capacity, they will not only need to find ways to better engage the pathways that produce affective ties, but they will also have to contend with how such efforts may actually be undermined or counteracted by state-based practices to preserve nationalist affinities. And any aspirations of progress within the international system to a more secular, less personalist, more globalist world must confront the fact that personalism, religion, and nationalism are in their current forms much better able to tap into the mobilising power of feeling.

Going forward, if there is to be a real challenge to nationalism, it conceivably may come from new ways of organising and ordering feelings in the form of sub- or transnational communities created by emergent forms of technology. Just as print media contributed to the rise of national 'imagined communities' of shared affective experience, the growth of transnational networked platforms in the form of social media applications and forums, for instance, may give rise to new engagements and experiences generative of affective ties that transcend national boundaries. Alternately, these technological developments may also create divisions within existing national communities as separate, virtual spaces of sub-national interaction and affective cultivation emerge and create polarisation.

As for research agendas beyond affective ties, we can further begin to consider the international distribution of other felt concerns and dispositions besides those of attachment. As previously noted, affective ties share the felt dimension with myriad other forms including antipathies, apathies, anxieties, and more. The system-level distribution of hostilities to the United States – 'anti-Americanism' – is one important example. Its sources and forms may be diverse and nuanced, but there is little question that it encompasses a complex of felt components.[184] These, in turn, constitute domestic and international political resources for those seeking to rally disparate actors for any variety of causes. In short, antipathy can also be a source of mobilising power.

But also deserving consideration are those who lack mobilisation power as a result of absences of feeling, whose lives and deaths fall outside politically significant webs of felt attachment. The structural distribution of apathy is also an important factor in determining the international constellation of power and powerlessness.

[182]Bender et al. 2024.
[183]Baron 2009.
[184]Katzenstein and Keohane 2006; Ross 2010.

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This may reflect global racial, class, and geographic hierarchies, as well as imposition of nationalist imaginings of community that mitigate empathy with those perceived to be distant from others.

To conclude, it is difficult to conceive of our lives as human beings without the felt dimension of our existence. We should also start viewing the international system as encompassing a felt dimension in the form of structures of differentially distributed affective dispositions and concerns. This dimension is intricately intertwined with the possibilities for the exercise of power in international politics. Affective ties are key resources within this landscape but not the only ones. International politics is not only shaped by the distribution of and struggle over material resources and ideas but also of and over feeling.

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