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# Security Communities and the Unthinkabilities of War

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## Abstract

Scholarship on security communities often invokes a common goal: for war to become unthinkable. Unthinkable here means impossible, and states are considered to be most secure when war is unthinkable between them. Interestingly, the term unthinkable appears in policy discourse with nearly the opposite meaning, referring to wars that are eminently possible but horrifying to contemplate, such as war with a nuclear Iran. Taking this discrepancy as my starting point, I propose that the social phenomenon of unthinkability is not well understood and that a deeper understanding of it can point toward new directions for research on security communities. I conceptualize unthinkability along two dimensions, empirical availability and normative acceptability, combining these to create four distinct types of unthinkability. I then use this typology as a heuristic device to identify research directions on security communities and on the phenomenon of unthinkable war.

## INTRODUCTION

It is a frequent refrain today that in some parts of the international system war has become “unthinkable.” This is sometimes presented as a descriptive statement indicating that decision makers do not actively anticipate war with each other. But the statement carries an implicit causal assumption that war’s unthinkability makes it impossible, i.e., that there is a mechanism connecting the ability to think about war with its likelihood. Indeed, Adler & Barnett (1998b) conceptualize security communities in this way, drawing especially on mechanisms of learning and social trust. Among the member states of a mature security community, war is not considered an option, and that is why it does not happen: Members habitually settle their disputes nonviolently. Even in the absence of the trust and norms we associate with a security community, however, war’s unthinkability is invoked in discussions of the obsolescence of a great power war. Jervis (2002) and Mueller (1989) have each argued that in addition to being prohibitively costly, war among nuclear powers is unthinkable because of economic interdependence, international institutions, and the shared sense that nuclear war is simply not rational. Mueller’s and Jervis’s mechanisms are different from those of Adler & Barnett, but all share the premise that war’s unthinkability makes it less likely.

Although that might seem trivially true, war’s unthinkability is not always associated with a low likelihood. When Pollack (2013) calls on the United States to confront the unthinkable prospect of a nuclear Iran, or Carafano (2015) admonishes the United States to think clearly about a possible nuclear confrontation with China, unthinkability is being invoked to describe relationships in which the possibility of violence is thought to be close to the surface. Nuclear war is unthinkable in the sense that it is horrifying to imagine. These contemporary policy analysts are evoking Kahn’s (1962) famous warning to Americans in the Cold War *not* to treat nuclear war as unthinkable. Kahn argued that although it was tempting to banish that possibility from our minds, if leaders did not actively plan to fight a nuclear war then the United States would be more vulnerable to one. Unthinkability here is associated with making war more likely, not less.

In addition, the unthinkability of political violence also has been linked in IR scholarship to normative concerns about political responsibility. For example, Edkins (2003) proposes that rhetorically invoking the unthinkability of a form of violence can be a strategy by those in power to avoid confronting it. Focusing specifically on the phenomenon of genocide, Edkins argues that labeling a horrific event as unthinkable can both buffer the speaker against the pain of articulating what happened and mute political responsibility by making the phenomenon seem to be beyond politics. Such rhetorical use of “unthinkability” could therefore contribute to perpetuating cycles of violence and war.

Unthinkability thus is an ambivalent phenomenon. Whereas the security community literature treats it in positive terms, scholarship on nuclear war and on genocide suggests that unthinkability might sometimes make war more likely and politically easier to get away with. In my view, what accounts for these different conclusions are different mechanisms, rooted in different dimensions of thinkability, which link thinking to its political effects. In short, unthinkability is a complex social phenomenon worthy of study in its own right. A framework clarifying it certainly could be productively applied to many different domains, but in this article I limit the focus to scholarship on security communities.

To understand the analytics of unthinkability, a good place to start is Kuran’s “The Unthinkable and the Unthought” (1993; see also 1995). At first glance, the title appears to offer a distinction without a difference: How could an unthinkable idea—by definition—cross our mind at all? Kuran defines an unthinkable belief as “a thought that one cannot admit having, or characterize as worth entertaining, without raising doubts about one’s civility, morality, loyalty, practicality, or sanity.

An unthought belief is one that is not even entertained” (Kuran 1993, p. 474). What Kuran is doing, following Arkoun (e.g., 2003), is separating out a normative from an empirical aspect of thinking. Although he does not put it precisely this way, Kuran treats thinkability in normative terms, as a way to capture an idea’s social acceptability. When he refers to an idea being thought, on the other hand, he treats it as an empirical phenomenon: The idea is invoked in speech or written discourse and is therefore available to members of the society. Kuran focuses (as did Arkoun) primarily on the process by which unthinkable ideas (normative) become unthought (empirical). Drawing on individual and social psychology and rational choice theory, Kuran develops mechanisms to show how, over time, ideas for the expression of which speakers will pay a social cost become unavailable—first in public discourse and then, through additional mechanisms, in private thoughts as well.

Using Kuran’s (1993, 1995) conceptualization as a starting point, in this article I go beyond it in two ways. First, I distinguish more explicitly than he does between the empirical and normative dimensions, which I call (for reasons that will become clearer below) availability and acceptability. Disentangling these reveals that ideas may be unthought in different ways, including one Kuran does not identify, i.e., they may be repressed at a societal level. Second, Kuran’s mechanisms are cognitive, whereas I introduce the role of affect, which appears mainly in the concept of acceptability and makes some ideas more or less unthinkable.

Unlike Kuran, then, I see two distinct dimensions to unthinkableity: availability and acceptability. Combining them yields a  $2 \times 2$  typology, which I use as a heuristic device to map the current literature on security communities. Security communities have generally been associated with situations where nonviolent modes of conflict resolution are taken for granted (violence is unavailable but acceptable) or when violence is treated as taboo (available but unacceptable). Pulling in the other two possibilities (available and acceptable, unavailable and unacceptable) helps point toward research directions that have not yet been part of the security community debate but that are relevant to its central concern of creating conditions for stable peace among former adversaries. It turns out that the mechanisms that produce violence and war can be very much in play even in places where war is currently off the table.

## VARIETIES OF UNTHINKABILITY

In this section I develop an account of unthinkableity that builds on Kuran (1993, 1995) but more explicitly distinguishes an idea’s availability from its acceptability.

### Availability

An idea’s availability is an empirical phenomenon. The term refers to the extent to which the idea is explicitly articulated, engaged with, and reflected on by members of a given society. Availability of ideas lies on a continuum. At one end, the set of available ideas comprises those that are the most salient, i.e., easily/readily recalled or articulated, such as in Tversky & Kahneman’s (1973) availability heuristic. But there is a difference between articulated and articulable. Not every available idea relevant to an issue is articulated in each discussion. Sometimes it is difficult to figure out what to do or how to solve a problem, because issues are complex and we are boundedly rational.

Unavailable ideas, in contrast, are not only unarticulated in some social settings; they are not readily articulable at all. It might be that the words to describe the ideas informing our practices are not at the tip of our tongue, but if prompted by an interlocutor we likely would be able to articulate them. Or unavailability might be deeper: The ideas might be deeply engrained in practices and

taken for granted as common sense. In this case, the knowledge these practices reflect orients behavior and shapes receptivity to ideas and beliefs, but it is not readily accessible to conscious thought. Societal tacit knowledge has been theorized in various ways—e.g., Bourdieu's habitus, Habermas's lifeworld, Giddens's practical consciousness—the differences between which I do not mean to minimize. But each refers to embedded ideas that are, in principle, articulable within the vocabulary of a society and capable of being made an object of reflection, but in practice are not available in a given set of circumstances.

Ideas fail to enter conscious awareness for different reasons and in different ways, some psychological and some sociological. At the individual, psychological level, a sphere of day-to-day habitual practices plays an important role in sustaining our self-understandings and enabling agency and choice. This is true for cognitive reasons, because it simply is not possible for us to think through everything all the time. But it also is true for emotional reasons, because a sense of certainty about how the world works helps us feel secure in our identities; it gives us ontological security (Giddens 1991). All individuals need a sense of themselves as continuous persons in time, and this is secured in part through stabilizing (routinizing) our relations with others. On some level we know that those routines are ultimately arbitrary and that on the other side of them "chaos lurks" (Giddens 1991, p. 36). But if we were constantly aware of that chaos, we would be riddled with anxiety and unable to go on with our lives. Thus, day-to-day routines, as they reproduce the tacit knowledge that constitutes society, also serve an important psychological function. Even those members of society who do not benefit from these routines derive ontological security from them, and breaking from routines can cause profound anxiety (e.g., Mitzen 2006). An example of this is the battered spouse who holds her- or himself responsible for the violence, finding it impossible to place responsibility anywhere else. The fact that such "unavailable" knowledge fills both cognitive and emotional needs helps account for the stability of routine practices, including detrimental ones, and the difficulty of effecting change.

There also are sociological explanations for why and how ideas are kept out of the conscious awareness of members of a society. For example, there is the Gramscian argument that a dominant class projects its hegemonic ideology, which the subordinate classes implicitly consent to, treating it as common sense despite the fact that it rationalizes their subordination (for IR applications, see Cox 1983, Gill 1993). The concept of epistemic ignorance offers a related, less Marxian-inflected pathway (e.g., Sullivan & Tuana 2007). Where there is epistemic ignorance, some ideas are not available because societal practices and institutions inhibit their development and expression. In this case, "ignorance is often an active social production" (Bailey 2007, p. 77), even though it is not consciously intended by its practitioners. Epistemic ignorance is stubborn: Because it is not intended, members of a society are unlikely to feel a sense of responsibility for it, and it cannot be solved simply by making information available (Sullivan 2007).

These psychological and sociological considerations open the door to critical political questions. The notion that ideas could be actively kept out of consciousness and discourse suggests that wherever we see social order, we need to inquire whose interests are served by it and whose are neglected. We need to ask, if a person or group's interests are neglected or undermined, why they do not rebel, but rather justify the system that oppresses them (e.g., Jost et al. 2004)? Are they unaware, or blind to their situation through an ignorance actively constituted by the powerful? Or have they internalized the power structure in a way that rationalizes their position so that they prefer it? As Lukes (1974, p. 23) puts it, "[I]s it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have?"

Stepping back, of all available ideas, some are articulated and others are readily articulable, whereas a third category would require some social work to bring to consciousness. There also is the limiting category of ideas that are completely unavailable because they have "disappear[ed]"

from human consciousness” (Kuran 1993, p. 474). This is what both Kuran and Arkoun mean when they refer to the unthought, and it is different from tacit knowledge. For Kuran (1993, p. 495) ideas disappear through an intergenerational process in which the unspoken at time T1 becomes entirely unavailable to be thought at T2. I will venture to say that the idea of war is available enough in the international social system that Kuran’s and Arkoun’s limiting case does not apply to the topic of the present article. For our purposes, then, availability can be dichotomized into readily articulable and sometimes articulated, on the one hand, versus unarticulated common sense on the other. Where ideas become unavailable, either deeply embedded in or excluded from common sense, there are questions to ask not only about the process through which this happens but about the workings of power and affect in that process.

## Acceptability

The other axis in the matrix is acceptability, which is a normative rather than an empirical category and is more rooted in affect. The fact that what we can think is partly a function of what is acceptable to think draws analytic attention to communities as bounded social phenomena, whose boundaries are intersubjective as well as physical. Acceptable ideas are ideas that members of the society generally condone. They might condone them by explicitly agreeing, which is one indicator of acceptability. But not all acceptable ideas are always agreed with. An individual might not agree, for example, that a crisis in public education or mental health provision is relevant to explaining the 2015 mass shooting in Charleston, South Carolina, but it is nonetheless acceptable to argue in a public forum that these social problems might have contributed to this crime. Ideas enacted in habits and practices must also be seen as acceptable insofar as the habits persist. That is not to say all practically accepted ideas would be actively accepted if brought to light and debated, but their persistence is an indicator that they are nonetheless socially acceptable.

An unacceptable idea, in contrast, is one that will be met with, or potential speakers think will be met with, widespread disapproval. Unacceptability encompasses a range of normative prohibitions, from illegitimacy to revulsion to repression. When Kuran (1993, p. 474) refers to an unacceptable idea as “a thought that one cannot admit having, or even characterize as worth entertaining, without raising doubts about one’s civility, morality, loyalty, practicality, or sanity,” he means to capture cases where, for example, 95% of the people in a social setting believe one idea and you believe another. Your idea is out of sync, and to “get by” and not feel uncomfortable in that setting, you might self-censor or withhold your true belief (see also Eliasoph 1999). But with this strong language, Kuran also points to something beyond the situational discomfort of feeling different from the majority, that is, a deeper sense of normative unacceptability, where a particular belief or idea is rejected as beyond the pale or deviant. The concepts of stigma, taboo, and repression address these aspects of unacceptability.

The term stigma, according to Goffman (1963, p. 3), applies to an attribute of a person that is “incongruous with our stereotype of what a given type of individual should be” in a given social setting and therefore is “deeply discrediting” of that individual. For example, the idea that human intelligence is biologically determined by race or gender is stigmatized in contemporary US discourse. When former Harvard president Larry Summers publicly argued that gender and intellectual capacity were related, he was widely criticized, and his character was called into question.

Taboo refers to a strict, categorical prohibition on behavior or ideas that inspire revulsion among members of a society. As Olick & Levy (1997, p. 923) put it, “avoidance [of the taboo] is not merely practical or morally neutral; rather, the designated object is treated as dangerous, disgusting, dirty, morally repugnant, contagious, degenerate, or as embodying some combination of these qualities.” Douglas (1996 [1966]) shows how taboos protect societal boundaries by promoting

a particular vision of a good or virtuous community. Within that society, there is a moral responsibility to uphold certain behaviors and punish those who engage in taboo behaviors or promulgate taboo ideas. Consider, for example, the social revulsion that might be expressed if a person expresses a commitment to an incestuous relationship.

Repressed unacceptable ideas are the deepest rooted of all. Like ideas that are stigmatized or taboo, repressed ideas are linked to profound negative affect; but stigmas and taboos are consciously shunned, whereas an idea that has been repressed is so unacceptable that the conscious mind cannot admit to having it. The rape victim, the murder witness, or the combat veteran might feel such pain, horror, guilt, or perhaps even a shameful excitement, that it becomes impossible to recall the event at all. Psychological defense mechanisms operating “behind the back” of the conscious mind prevent engagement with relevant ideas. For example, one who experiences unacceptable feelings or ideas might unconsciously attribute them to others in a mechanism of projective identification (Ogden 1979, p. 357), focusing intense affective revulsion toward those others and not recognizing that what she is reacting to is an aspect of her own personality or experience. Because she is not aware of the projection, it is difficult to confront the experience and change her own behavior. Psychologists distinguish between suppression, which refers to consciously removing mental content from our minds, and repression, which removes content unconsciously, and they note that the latter is particularly pernicious and hard to resolve.

Unacceptability, like unavailability, is produced and sustained by two levels of mechanisms. At the psychological level, individuals are vulnerable to self-censorship and defense mechanisms; at the sociological level, societies constitute and distinguish themselves in part by enforcing the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Like unavailability, unacceptability can be thought of as existing on a continuum, but for my purposes, it can be dichotomized. Here, the notion of an unacceptable idea encompasses a range from ideas that are disapproved of, to ideas whose expression inspires disgust, revulsion, and even social ostracism, to ideas that are so unacceptable—tabooed taboos, in a sense—that they cannot be thought about and would require emotional work to bring to conscious awareness.

In summary, availability is an empirical consideration that is mainly associated with cognition, whereas acceptability is a normative consideration that is mainly associated with affect. The intersection of the two yields a  $2 \times 2$  typology offering four types of unthinkability.

Before describing each of these possibilities, two issues are important to flag. First, there are unit-of-analysis issues. To whom are these ideas unavailable and unacceptable? Are we interested in individuals or groups, and among groups, are we interested in elites, some subset of elites, or publics/masses? On this, it is important to keep in mind that unthinkability can vary across members within a group and across groups in a society. Because my substantive concern in this article is collective violence and war, which is between groups/states, a related unit-of-analysis question is how to think about collective unthinkability: Is it an aggregate of the ideas each individual in the society is able to think, an emergent property of the interaction of individuals in a group, an outgrowth of intersecting dynamics (as for Kuran), or something else? And if we treat the “state as person” (e.g., Wendt 2004), then is it productive to posit states as thinkers, subject to all four forms of unthinkability? All of these considerations are relevant to any application of the typology to a case; but it seems to me that these are empirical questions, the answers to which will vary from case to case and in different research projects. As we shall see, most of the security communities literature treats states as unitary actors capable of collective identity formation, although a few scholars have distinguished between unthinkability of war among elites and unthinkability of war among societies (e.g., Tuscisny 2007, Boas 2000).

A second issue is location. Where is the idea being thought? Is it being contemplated privately, in individuals’ minds, or discussed in public debate? Kuran’s (1993, 1995) focus is the dynamic

through which ideas move from unacceptable to unavailable. Specifically, he begins with the notion of a mismatch between individual preferences and socially acceptable preferences, and then theorizes the social effects of this mismatch. Eliasoph (1999) also begins with the idea of a mismatch, but her focus is squarely on the public, conversational setting with its implicit norms of conversational interaction. Different conversation contexts have distinct norms of speech, and the etiquette surrounding a topic in one context can produce awkward situations, making certain ideas or beliefs taboo to express or to criticize, whereas in another context that same idea might be perfectly acceptable. Billig (1997, 1999) takes the phenomenon of repression out of the heads of individuals altogether; he argues that it is dialogically produced and can be discerned in conversation.

In my view both levels are important, but in this article, whose purpose is to shed light on the phenomenon of security communities, I follow Eliasoph and Billig more than Kuran and treat unthinkability as public and shared. In our everyday conversations, we choose to engage on some topics and not others. Some topics we self-consciously avoid, whereas others we push aside without necessarily knowing that we are doing so, much less why. At the societal level, in our deliberative institutions, such as Congress, there are explicit and implicit rules of engagement that permit some topics and ways of talking while punishing others (e.g., Young 2002). Treating unthinkability as a public, shared phenomenon has the virtue of translating more readily to the state level and international context, because it reduces the burden on individual psychology and mental states and brackets debates about whether corporate actors such as states have “minds.”

In a given society, there are many different unthinkabilities over a range of issues and in different contexts. This suggests that when considering a political possibility that is not publicly discussed, such as war, we should inquire into why it is not discussed and how it is kept out of political discussion. The answer might be that the idea simply has not yet been raised; but it could be that the idea is not acceptable—it is a stigmatized or taboo topic. It might be that “no war” is embedded in the habits of the society as tacit knowledge; or it might be that the very thought of fighting is fraught with such discomfort that it cannot be expressed. I define the four types of unthinkability as follows: available/acceptable, unavailable/acceptable, available/unacceptable, and unavailable/unacceptable (Table 1).

## Available/Acceptable

Ideas that are available and acceptable are discussed publicly and are the currency of social life at all levels, constituting and populating public discourse. They are part of a society’s discursive consciousness, in that members of the society can provide “discursive interpretations” of actions or policies arising from them (Giddens 1991, p. 35). They are subject to cost-benefit calculations,

**Table 1** Varieties of thinkability

	Acceptable	Unacceptable
<b>Available</b>	The idea is discussed openly, e.g., in a policy debate Example: state funding of mental health programs	Stigmatized or taboo topic The idea is treated as wrong or immoral when raised, but still can be talked about Example: incest
<b>Unavailable</b>	Habit, practice, tacit knowledge, common sense The idea is not consciously reflected on or publicly debated but is assumed Example: slavery is wrong	Repressed idea The idea cannot be articulated although there is an unconscious or prelinguistic awareness of it Example: the intense affect associated with trauma such as rape



and members of society argue and bargain with and about them. This does not mean the ideas are uncontroversial. The category does not merely refer to the winning ideas of a given discussion or the contours of a prevailing consensus.

For example, in current international political discourse, a great power acting as global policeman to protect civilians is an available, acceptable idea, even if arguments are made for or against it in a particular case, and some might disagree vehemently that any state should take on that role. Great power military intervention to establish a colony or to collect debts owed to it, on the other hand, is not an option. Colonialism is certainly no longer acceptable, and debt collection as a rationale arguably is no longer even available among sovereign states (see Finnemore 2003, ch. 2). Kahn's admonition to "think the unthinkable" was an admonition to make nuclear war an available, acceptable policy option.

### Unavailable/Acceptable

Unavailable/acceptable ideas are neither articulated nor reflected on but are nonetheless socially acceptable. This may seem like an odd combination: How can we accept an idea we cannot consciously entertain? The answer is that these ideas exist tacitly in our practices, habits, and institutions. They might reflect tradition or shared background knowledge, as discussed above; or an idea once articulated and debated may have been internalized into habit over time, such that the debate has receded from conscious thought. An example in the international context might include human rights norms, at least for liberal states (e.g., Risse et al. 1999).

An interesting, provocative example of an unavailable but acceptable idea in international politics is the notion that some soldiers are more morally culpable than others in a war. According to just war theory, this cannot be: The moral symmetry of combatants, or the "equal right to kill" for soldiers on both sides of a conflict, as McMahon (2004) evocatively puts it, is a long-standing assumption. As long as both sets of combatants are following the rules of *jus in bello*, the thought that some soldiers are murdering people while others are engaging in rightful conflict is unavailable. But McMahon points out that the symmetry assumption makes no sense. If some wars are fought for unjust causes, then certainly killing to promote that unjust cause is not the moral equivalent of killing to defend a just cause (McMahon 2004). Whether or not we agree with McMahon's reasoning, the premise he articulates is clearly one where an idea—moral asymmetry of combatants—has been unavailable in just war, and yet it is, according to his reading of just war theory itself, acceptable. If some wars are unjust, then fighting them is fighting for an unjust cause.

### Available/Unacceptable

An idea might be available but unacceptable to articulate publicly. Such ideas fall in the realm of stigma or taboo, ideas that a society finds immoral or otherwise not worthy of engagement. By identifying taboos, and then shaming and ostracizing those associated with them, a group expresses its solidarity and affirms its boundaries.

In the IR literature, there has been some attention to how dynamics of stigmatization and taboo function in the international community. Adler-Nissen (2014) points out that stigmatizing behaviors serves an important social function of reinforcing notions of what is socially normal or accepted (see also Zarakol 2011). Social acceptability then can adhere to an identity as much as a behavior, and a stigmatized social actor can remain ostracized even if she changes her behavior. In the contemporary international community, UN-sponsored sanctions have been analyzed as a tool for expressing stigmatization. Tannenwald (1999) has analyzed nuclear first use as a case of a taboo: The use of nuclear weapons is discussed, but part of what it means to be a civilized state is to possess but not use nuclear weapons (see also Price 1997 on the chemical weapons taboo).



## Unavailable/Unacceptable

Some ideas are socially neither available nor acceptable. They cannot be thought about, much less articulated, and a great deal of emotional work goes into holding awareness of them at bay and keeping them unconscious. The unconscious is not accessible to reflection, except through some kind of therapeutic process that creates conditions for its safe expression. Cognitive barriers separate its contents from the realm of “practical consciousness” (Giddens 1991), where ideas can in principle be articulated and reflected on. “Unconscious modes of cognition and emotional governance, as a matter of definition, specifically resist being brought into consciousness, and appear there only in a distorted or transposed way” (Giddens 1991, p. 36). These ideas are deeply unavailable, and the difficulty in retrieving them is rooted in the fact that they are so unacceptable.

There are two ways to think about the kind of idea that gets repressed. First, topics that are considered shameful to discuss might be nonetheless alluring. As Billig (1997, p. 150) points out, “all social restrictions are accompanied by the desire . . . to transcend the restriction.” If taboo evokes acknowledgment of shame, repression is associated with desire, especially a desire that the speaker is ashamed to acknowledge. A member of an outcast group might fear and hate the majority, yet harbor an unacknowledged desire to belong to it. A conservative politician might take an aggressively antigay stance but harbor unconscious same-sex attractions. Second, there are some experiences so traumatic that the conscious mind cannot bear to encounter them, such as witnessing genocide or murder. The inability to “think” a trauma means that the trauma cannot fully register in the subject’s consciousness, and the result is a numbing of the self. It is as if time stands still for the traumatized subject, who then develops systems of routinized relationships and practices that amount to chronic repetitions of the trauma. Those routines protect the subject from awareness of the dreaded event and thereby prevent her from confronting it (Fierke 2004, p. 473). Edkins (2003) proposes that even if repressed events break into consciousness, they are difficult to think politically about because of the limitations of thought and speech. Language fails the victim because the only words available are in the language of the power structures—the same power structures that made possible the traumatic harm in the first place (Edkins 2003, p. 7).

In both kinds of cases, bringing repressed ideas into conscious awareness is unconsciously resisted. Speakers might “collaborate to avoid” a topic, for example by conveying the impression that it is irrelevant when in fact it is highly germane to the topic they are discussing. The speaker’s emotional connection to the behavior, whether the desire to engage in it or the pain of remembering it, is withheld even from the speaker herself. Billig (1999, ch. 8) develops the example of Sigmund Freud and his analysand Dora. They were able to openly discuss sexual topics, which was noteworthy given the social conventions of the time; however, they collaborated to avoid an issue that deeply affected them both but was too difficult to talk about—the impact of anti-Semitism in Vienna. Avoiding the topic made it seem as if it was irrelevant to their therapy. But Billig finds traces of the topic of religion in the therapy notes, such as references to Christmas gifts and to a two-hour contemplation of a painting of the Madonna. In the context of the sociopolitical situation of Freud’s time, the fact that neither discussed religion suggests resistance—“a conflict between a social convention and a desire which cannot be openly admitted” (Billig 1999, p. 242). Freud or Dora, in this account, wanted to be Christian on some level, whether because of the beauty of the imagery or the social privileges that came with it, or they desired to do away with their own Jewishness.

Similarly, Wendt & Duvall (2008) argue that the possibility that unidentified flying objects (UFOs) indicate the existence of alien life forms in our solar system is repressed in contemporary public discourse. In their account, the state’s authority is threatened by the possibility of nonhuman life forms powerful enough to reach Earth, because it calls into question the human status as

sovereign and the state's status as provider of physical and ontological security. This profound existential threat is more than we emotionally can bear, and we shut it out of conscious reflection. Wendt & Duvall argue that there are compelling scientific and security reasons to study UFOs but that the UFO taboo prevents the state from doing so, and indeed there is such intense social sanction on expressing the idea that references to aliens are often the subject of jokes and ridicule. What Wendt & Duvall call the UFO taboo is partly taboo, a shunning of those who believe UFOs could indicate alien life, but it also would seem to be produced by a combination of a state-sponsored epistemology of ignorance and perhaps repression on a societal scale not dissimilar to the Freud–Dora example above.

I have offered four possible, ideal-typical configurations of thinkability. The way the typology is set up, the four cells seem to be mutually exclusive. But as the UFO illustration makes clear, when we apply the typology to a case, more than one cell can be in play producing societal unthinkability. As we turn to consider the case of unthinkable war, then, it is important to keep in mind that this unthinkability operates at a societal level. Many actors in many locales deal with the question of war, and the unthinkability of war is a phenomenon that suggests a long, intergenerational time horizon. This opens up the possibility that all four logics could be operating in a society to produce war's unthinkability. Another way to say this, drawing on Wendt (1999, ch. 4) is that war's unthinkability is a macro-level phenomenon which is multiply realizable at the level of micro logics and mechanisms. Nonetheless, it is useful analytically to distinguish them because the four different types of unthinkability have different political implications for the likelihood of war and violence in a given case. The analytical distinction also opens up new directions for research.

## SECURITY COMMUNITIES AND UNTHINKABLE WAR

In this section, I apply the typology developed above to the scholarship on security communities, which has associated the unthinkability of war within a group of states to the outcome of nonwar among them. A security community is a group of states among which there are dependable expectations of stable peace. The original idea comes from Deutsch et al. (1957), who proposed that a political community was forming in the North Atlantic area, making war increasingly unlikely. Adler & Barnett (1998a,b) resurrected the concept in the wake of the end of the Cold War (also Risse-Kappen 1995, Crawford 1994). They focused specifically on pluralistic security communities, groups of states that retained sovereignty rather than unified (Adler & Barnett 1998a, p. 5; 1998b, p. 30), and systematized the logic in a way that linked the concept to then-current debates in IR scholarship on the production of order. Security communities are social facts, which means that they are neither psychological phenomena in the minds of individual decision makers, nor epiphenomenal effects of the (material or normative) costliness of war (Adler & Barnett 1998a, pp. 9–15; 1998b).

Adler & Barnett do not specifically attribute a causal role to war's unthinkability. But when unthinkable war is invoked, it is associated with what they call a mature security community (as opposed to a nascent or ascendant one), in which peaceful conflict resolution practices are institutionalized at the domestic and supranational levels (Adler & Barnett 1998b, pp. 55–56). To consider that claim in context, as well as the timeliness of Adler & Barnett's intervention, it is worth keeping in mind Mearsheimer's (1990) prediction at the end of the Cold War that it was just a matter of time before Europe would be at war again (see also Williams & Neumann 2000). Making war unthinkable, or showing that war already was unthinkable in Europe, was seen by many as a way to prevent that reversion back to war. Adler & Barnett laid out how it could be possible.

Since 1998, a substantial research program has developed, largely building from their framework. Much of the scholarship is empirical, applying the framework to a variety of locales, but

there have been theoretical contributions as well. I focus on the latter and organize the literature into the typology developed above (**Table 1**). Part of my agenda below is to show that the literature can be grouped into two main strands, one focusing on war as unavailable but to some extent still acceptable and the other focusing on war as unacceptable but to some extent available. Causally these two cells are connected: Some mechanisms make unavailable war unacceptable; others make unacceptable war unavailable. But the mechanisms are analytically distinguishable. A second part of my agenda in this section is to demonstrate that although the two categories into which most scholarship falls treat unthinkable war as a good thing, the two other categories show that there are mechanisms linked to unthinkable war that can in some incarnations work against the political goal of reducing violent conflict.

### **War Is Acceptable and Available**

If war is available and acceptable as a policy option, then there is no security community. However, two things are important to point out nonetheless. First, “no war” outcomes are possible and even sustainable in conditions where war is actively considered. States might simply be repeatedly able to avert or defuse crises, or they might calculate that the costs (material or normative) of a particular war are too high. Indeed, one mode of security community formation mentioned by Adler & Barnett (1998b, pp. 50–55) is precisely this: States begin to solve conflicts without force and over time come to reflect on their accomplishment and self-consciously form a security community (see also Browning & Joenniemi 2004, 2013).

Second, even in cases where war is empirically thinkable, a rhetoric of unthinkable war can be found whose political effects are worth exploring. For example, the word unthinkable is invoked in contemporary policy and media discourse about the possibility of war between the United States and current rivals such as China or Iran. Since war is certainly thinkable in these cases, labeling it as “unthinkable” could mean many things, such as that war is undesirable or prohibitively costly. Invoking unthinkable war might alternatively serve as an exhortation to use all possible means to find diplomatic solutions or as a strategy to marginalize the opposition to a diplomatic initiative. Or, rhetorically invoking war’s unthinkable could be an act of coercion (e.g., Krebs & Jackson 2007) or what Buzan et al. (1998) would call a securitizing move, a discursive framing of an issue as an existential threat to the collective that permits the state to take extraordinary measures in the name of addressing the problem and providing security. If war with nuclear Iran is unthinkable, then the United States must do everything in its power to prevent it; debating whether to act, much less what to do, is an unaffordable luxury. All of this suggests that at the level of policy discourse, the rhetoric of unthinkable war might be associated with a greater rather than a lesser likelihood of it.

### **War Is Unavailable but Acceptable**

The bulk of what is considered the security communities literature looks at war in the unavailable/acceptable category. It builds from Adler & Barnett’s (1998b,c; 2000) framework for security community formation, which outlines a process in which practices of nonviolent conflict resolution are increasingly institutionalized, making the war option unavailable through processes of social learning. Adler & Barnett acknowledge that the process through which states move from rivalry and enmity to a community of self-restraint can be difficult. Each state must initially take a leap of faith. Neither knows how the other will respond, and their history of conflict makes each gesture an experiment and each acceptance an acknowledgment of vulnerability. Over time, however, this gap of uncertainty closes, and each party becomes confident that others will respond with restraint.

Repeated positive interactions over time foster trust, and thoughts of war fade from consciousness. States move from a habit (iteration) of nonviolent conflict resolution, and/or institutions that facilitate it, to reflection on those habits and then collective identification (Adler & Barnett 1998c, p. 414; Adler & Barnett 2000, pp. 325–26).

Adler & Barnett likely would agree that war also would be considered unacceptable among security community members. But their logic foregrounds the unavailability of war ideas, and when they treat acceptability it is mainly in cognitive terms, where the salient shared values are toleration and self-restraint. They are careful to point out that security communities are not necessarily rooted in deep solidaristic ties. By not developing the constitution of communal solidarity and largely bracketing affect, their logic at least implies that war is acceptable even if no longer available as a policy option (e.g., Adler 1997, p. 250; Adler 2008, p. 205; Adler & Barnett 1998b, pp. 47–48, 56; Adler & Barnett 2000, p. 323; see also Kitchen 2009).

This approach has had several empirical offshoots, especially the debate over its application in the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) context (e.g., Acharya 2001, Khoo 2004, Peou 2005, Collins 2007). It also has been applied in the contexts of the League of Arab States (e.g., Dakhllallah 2012), Africa (e.g., Franke 2008), and North America (e.g., Massie 2007). Theoretical innovations consistent with the Adler & Barnett approach include knowing when a security community can be considered mature (Vayrynen 2000), the relationship between domestic stability and the security community (Hammerstad 2005, Nathan 2006), and the relationship between conflict-resolution practices inside security communities and how they treat outsiders (Bellamy 2004).

Two aspects of Adler & Barnett's original framework have received the most analytic attention. First, they propose that security communities tend to be constituted around powerful core states that act as attractors. The core state's power is experienced by security community members as legitimate, i.e., as authority (Adler & Barnett 2000, pp. 325–26). Bially Mattern (2005a,b) develops the coercive dimension of such attraction. Mouritzen (2001, 2003) distinguishes that top-down model from a bottom-up model where societies and transnational groups take the lead in security community formation. Second, Adler & Barnett treat social learning as a generally frictionless process of merging. They do not consider how difference is managed as the community comes together, which suggests an implicit assumption in their work that the initial differences among security community members do not run very deep.

The second stage of security communities theory, generally associated with Adler and his student Vincent Pouliot, adds an explicit grounding in Bourdieu's (1990) concept of practices (see Pouliot 2008, 2010; Adler & Pouliot 2011). On this account, a security community can be described as a "community of practice," in which members share a disposition of self-restrained relations (Adler 2008, Pouliot 2008). Practices are "knowledge-constituted, meaningful patterns of socially recognized activity embedded in communities, routines, and organizations that structure experience" (Adler 2008, p. 198). Communities of practice, then, are "like minded groups of practitioners who are informally as well as contextually bound by a shared interest in learning and applying a common practice" (Adler 2008, p. 196). Practices are not merely iterated behaviors, or habits (cf. Hopf 2010), but collections of actions that can be judged as being done right or wrong, or having been done better by one actor than by another. Power remains central to security community constitution, but it is "symbolic power," i.e., "the power to constitute the given by stating it, to make see and make believe, to confirm or transform views about the world and, from there on, actions in the world" (Bourdieu, cited in Pouliot 2006, p. 124). Bjola & Kornprobst (2007) also draw on Bourdieu, arguing that a "habitus of restraint" accounts for the emergence of security communities. The idea is that a set of deeply internalized predispositions against the use of force drives a culture of peaceful change. Because these predispositions are second nature and

not reflected on, they are not easily scrutinized. What these approaches share is their treatment of peaceful exchange as a common-sense habit, in which the possibility of war fades from view.

Stepping back, what is missing in both the original framework and the practice-based approach is a well-developed mechanism for keeping war out of mind. Security community members will not always agree, and when there is disagreement or a political crisis, understanding how the community is constituted to avoid war can offer insight as to whether the crisis points to the workings of a security community or indicates its unraveling. The lack of an explicit mechanism of this sort became an issue in analyses of the transatlantic security community's friction in the early 2000s. Some proposed that dissent among members signified the demise of the community (e.g., Cox 2005, 2006; Adler & Greve 2009). But Pouliot (2006) pointed out that the ability to express dissent could be a healthy sign of the recalibration of power (on the role of dissent in ASEAN, see Peou 2005).

Either of these possibilities might be true, and to properly adjudicate between them would require a better sense of what holds war in the background for a given group, which neither approach to security communities provides. One possibility is that the idea that war is a legitimate mode of conflict resolution might be suppressed by structures of power. Some scholars have explored power dynamics that keep war unavailable in mature security communities (a line of research suggested in Adler & Barnett 1998c, pp. 424–25). Pouliot's (2006, p. 122) work is a start: He argues that where consensus occurs, it often is accomplished through massive power imbalances. But the literature could go further. If consensus reigns, we should be attentive to the fact that war's unthinkability might be part of an epistemology of ignorance, where dominance is maintained by keeping some ideas systematically unavailable to some members. It could be interesting to examine liberal security communities through such a lens, perhaps building on Williams's (2001) argument for how liberal subjectivity undergirds the liberal democratic security community. It also might be productive to critique the concept of security communities through this lens, building on Moeller's (2003) argument that Adler & Barnett unduly narrowed Deutsch et al.'s (1957) original formulation such that the concept now reflects a deep implicit liberalism.

Other mechanisms keeping war in the background might be rooted in security community members' identity needs. Because these mechanisms are rooted in affect more than cognition, they would seem to occupy a more transitional space between unavailable and unacceptable knowledge as I have defined them. First, Bially Mattern (2005a) develops the discursive mechanism of representational force, through which security community members keep one another in line. Insofar as security community members are invested in their identity as peaceful partners, each might interpret the prospect of fighting each other as an identity threat. In such cases, a state can rhetorically exploit any contradiction between another's behavior and their shared identity to generate fear of losing the relationship.

Second, Browning & Joenniemi (2013) develop a mechanism rooted in the need for recognition. They are critical of Adler & Barnett's implicit assumption that mature security communities entail value convergence, pointing out the fundamental tension inherent in identity formation between the desire for distinction and the desire for merging. Group members who feel too merged might become ontologically insecure and could lash out against one another, resorting to violence in order to re-establish boundaries (Browning & Joenniemi 2013, p. 491; see also Rumelili 2015). If security community formation entails such merging, then, it could backfire. Browning & Joenniemi propose that the ideal situation is one where not just war but the entire security discourse is unavailable. They call this a situation of asecurity, and it is exemplified by Norden, the community of Northern European states (Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark). These states did not erase their differences but rather reinterpreted them as benign. Indeed, the authors argue that difference is what holds the Nordic security community together; too much

sameness was the existential threat (Browning & Joenniemi 2013, pp. 490, 505; see also Wiberg 2000, Mouritzen 2001). There is certainly room for further work on the logic and dynamics of recognition in security partnerships (on recognition in an IR context, see Ringmar 2002, Wendt 2003, Greenhill 2008, Lindemann & Ringmar 2016) and on management of difference more generally.

Linking unthinkable war to the unavailability of war knowledge thus raises questions for research that have to do with the power and the constitution of knowledge (and ignorance). Where there is stable peace among former adversaries, power produces it, interests uphold it, and identities are invested in its practices. In other words, noticing that war has become an unavailable policy option is only the first step toward understanding the politics of peace.

### War Is Available but Unacceptable

The available/unacceptable cell of **Table 1** presents a form of unthinkable in which war is a policy option, but has become a taboo or stigmatized practice among a particular group of states. Waever (1996, 1998) has developed this notion of unacceptable war in the EU context. He argues that European states cohere through a shared relationship to their past. Rather than celebrating prior glories, Europe casts out its destructive past, incorporating this temporal Other as part of its sense of self. Temporal “Othering” arguably functions as a stigmatization—yesterday’s balance-of-power practices are regarded with revulsion as backward and morally wrong, and communal cohesion is secured in part through this agreed-on expulsion or shunning of old, violent practices (cf. Moeller 2003). War is still available: It is talked about, even if only to be delegitimated. Indeed, the mechanism of unthinkable here is different from that of unavailability precisely because, generally speaking, it can involve a lot of war talk, and it also entails mechanisms of affect.

Othering one’s own violent past has been celebrated as a way to overcome more problematic Otherings of geographical others. But as Waever points out, this kind of Othering is nonetheless a form of securitization (e.g., Waever 1995). The existential threat it refers to is fragmentation of Europe, in that fragmentation is assumed to bring back the European balance of power. Securitized in this way, European integration becomes a project to be embraced without reflection. Uncritical acceptance of the superordinate identity of the European Union is seen as the only way to prevent the return of violence and war (Waever 1996, p. 123). Williams & Neumann (2000) discuss attitudes toward NATO similarly. When past behavior is stigmatized, so that the present superordinate self-identity coheres through maintaining that stigmatization, the extent of integration versus fragmentation is no longer a practical, political question about how to organize the European Union. It becomes an existential question about European survival (Waever 1996, p. 128). Othering the past then can have the perverse effect of freezing a certain subjectivity and rendering it more difficult to reflect on contemporary European practices. Arguably, dynamics of violence are more possible when subjectivity is frozen in this way (on the securitization of subjectivity, also see Kinnvall 2004).

In addition, such Othering of one’s own violent past makes that behavior taboo, and making a behavior taboo among “us” may well rationalize punishing it wherever else it might be found. Diez (2005) points out that in the 1990s there was a rise of geographical and cultural Othering by EU member states and proposes that something about how the European “we” is constituted seems to have produced this. Williams (2001), too, warned that casting out the old, bad European selves can translate to an uncritical self-satisfaction and sense of superiority relative to outsiders. Rumelili (2003, p. 225) argues that Greece and Turkey have been treated in this way. As liminal members of Europe, they can be cast into the role of uncivilized, and the desire of foreign policy



elites in those states to be included has “reinforced and legitimated” tension between Greece and Turkey. This makes war between those two states more thinkable than it otherwise would be, and more thinkable than it ought to be given the aspirations of the EU security community and Turkey at inclusion.

In the argument that the European Union coheres by Othering its conflictual past, war is unthinkable among member states in the sense that it is a stigmatized or taboo practice. It is available as an idea: The notion that these states might revert back to that behavior is often found in EU policy discourse. But leaders actively fear and reject that outcome; it is deeply unacceptable. This makes it different from the unthinkability of war in Adler & Barnett’s (1998b) framework. There, war is unthinkable in the sense of not being talked about; conflict-resolution practices have erased its possibility and turned self-restraint into common sense. The process described by Adler & Barnett is a relatively passive process of war disappearing underneath a thickening fabric of benign practices. In contrast, here the mechanism of unthinkability is explicitly oriented around an attitude toward war with security community partners. It is laden with revulsion and moral disapproval; and it entails a self-conscious, active expulsion of war from the group.

At the same time, here, as with the case of unavailable war, we see that when war is made unthinkable by being constructed as unacceptable, the resulting community is not ideal. At least in this case of othering a conflictual past, the negative affect associated with past violence and war might either translate to an anxious attachment to the current identity that is vulnerable to securitizations or get externalized to outsiders.

## War Is Unavailable and Unacceptable

For the security communities scholarship considered so far, the road to durable expectations of non-war entails deepening the unthinkability of war among security community members by making war either an unavailable or an unacceptable option. But although it might be true that unavailability and unacceptability each on their own produce a lower likelihood of war, when the two considerations are found together, then war’s unthinkability may actually have the perverse effect of making it more, not less, likely. Security community scholars have yet to contemplate the possibility that war could be unthinkable by virtue of being repressed or blocked from states’ conscious awareness. That is, war could be unavailable in that it is not discussed and avoiding its discussion is deeply embedded in practices. At the same time, thematizing the practices that keep war unavailable might be inhibited because the memories of war are so unacceptable, fraught with overwhelming affect.

In other words, the experience of war might be vulnerable to the dynamics of personal, and arguably collective, repression. First, participation in war can be a source of shameful desire for the soldiers who may have felt a kind of pleasure or exhilaration in the face-to-face killing of wartime (Bourke 1999), or for members of a society who might have been swept up in the comforting feelings of merging with compatriots through shared intense hatred and satisfaction over the violence. Second, war is a source of trauma to those who experienced it firsthand, whether as soldiers, witnesses, victims and their families, or even decision makers. When the conflict is over, neither of war’s affects is safe. This suggests that psychologically, the traumatized individual’s priority is to ward off the emotional, existential pain associated with awareness of that shame or trauma, whether by falling back on familiar routines or obsessively taking on new ones. Many scholars have begun to extrapolate this psychological phenomenon to the collective level (e.g., Edkins 2003, Fierke 2004, Pia Lara 2007, Kinnvall 2012), although none have yet interpreted the routines of security communities in this way.



The idea that war might be a repressed possibility is similar to the argument that political practices help actors avoid war. But now the practices are viewed as symptoms of an underlying fundamental anxiety more than indicators of a healthy security community. When there is repression, unthinkable war is not a product of politics; instead, the political practices manifest a response to war's unthinkability. Viewed in this way, the institutionalized practices of nonviolent conflict resolution that are highlighted in security community scholarship appear less benign—as chronic repetitions of routines that hold back awareness of paralyzing trauma. Actors in these situations can be obsessively aware of the routines and even of their fear of war, but they cannot access the trauma to verbalize or come to terms with it. Warding off the pain of awareness is a different priority than avoiding war and violence, and if shared practices can exemplify the former, then it is not too farfetched to suggest that war's unthinkability could be a cause of war. You can make war without thinking it by succumbing to the need, rooted in anxiety, to shut out awareness of its implications. Thus, bringing this form of unthinkability into focus helps raise the possibility that even where stable, institutionalized practices of nonviolent conflict resolution exist among former adversaries, war could be lurking beneath the surface in ways that politics may not be able to contain.

## CONCLUSION

The point of this review has been to categorize and raise questions about the concept of security communities through another concept, “unthinkability,” that appears, unthematized, in its scholarship. I unpacked unthinkability into two dimensions, availability and acceptability. It turns out that when viewed through the lens of unthinkability, most work on security communities is concentrated in the cells associated with “unavailable but acceptable” war and “available but unacceptable” war. In each of these cells, the lens of unthinkability is helpful for identifying new work to be done, as the unthinkability of war can entail suppressions of political voices or concerns that we might prefer to be expressible. But perhaps the most interesting areas for new research come into focus by bringing in the other two possibilities. When war is available and acceptable in political discussion, the phrase “unthinkable war” might be a powerful rhetorical device deployed by elites, which might narrow the political space for deliberation and nonviolent conflict resolution. When war is unavailable and unacceptable, the mechanism repressing awareness of it might make war more rather than less likely, as scholars of genocide and trauma warn us that dangerous politics must be directly thought about and discussed in order to be overcome. Research on unthinkability as repression might help identify vulnerabilities in security communities and point the way toward strategies of confronting the past and managing their differences.

The message we are left with is that the unthinkability of war is actually a double-edged sword. It can anchor and stabilize practices of nonviolent conflict resolution, but in doing so it might hold back awareness of the deepest sources of discord, not to mention domination, trauma, and even desire, any of which can inspire or cause violence. This suggests that the cell that is most fearsome from the standpoint of security community scholarship, i.e., where war is actively thought about and discussed, could be, paradoxically, the cell most associated with security community scholars' highest goal (Table 1). It might be the case in some contexts that if we want to minimize political violence and war, we need to think *more* about them.

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