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Interrogating the imaginary turn: Technology, war, and world politics in an era of great power competition

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ABSTRACT
References to the "imaginary" have become prevalent in the study of technology and war in contemporary world politics. As an introduction to this special issue, this article interrogates the "turn" to the "imaginary" by tracing how the concept has been deployed across three overlapping research traditions pertaining to social imaginaries, sociotechnical imaginaries, and security imaginaries. The article addresses two key questions at the heart of this research agenda: what are the core analytical properties of the imaginary, and which research methods can be used to study this concept? In contextualizing the core themes examined throughout the special issue, the article seeks to spur debate on the "value-added" of imaginaries in the study of technology, war, and security in (critical) IR and Security Studies scholarship at a time of renewed great power competition.

Our ability to imagine is indispensable to our efforts to understand, pursue, and realize international security. The imagination has been defined as "a cognitive faculty, actively engaged by the subject, capable of both forming and integrating new ideas not present to the senses or reducible to sensate data" (Sparks et al., 2022, p. 2). These attributes are highly prized within International Relations (IR) scholarship. Described by some as "acts of imagination" (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2013, p. 466), IR theories reflect the creative ways in which scholars interpret global politics. The Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz similarly highlighted the importance of

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imaginative thinking in military command (Howard & Paret, 1976, pp. 109–110). An absence of imagination can also have harmful effects. The commission set up to investigate the US national security community's inability to anticipate the 9/11 attacks, for example, cited a collective "failure of imagination" (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004, pp. 339–340). Consistent with these understandings, the imagination has been identified as a constitutive feature of the "formation of social and political life" (Ferl, 2024, p. 143).

Given impetus by the increased focus on the technological dimensions of contemporary great power competition (Krepinevich, 2023; Ryan, 2022), research on the imagination has gradually shifted toward an interest in the *imaginary*. The imagination is located mainly within the capacity of the individual. The imaginary, in contrast, is shared, collective, and therefore inherently social. Given IR's focus on inter-subjectivity and "the international" as an inherently social space, this distinction reinforces the potential contributions of IR to this broader intellectual discourse on the imaginary. Imaginaries also feature a temporal dimension that allows for the interplay of the past, present, and future, both in social contexts (Jasanoff, 2015; Taylor, 2004), and as it relates to defence and security issues (Csernatoni & Martins, 2024; Stevens, 2016; see also Mawdsley & Martins, 2026). This holds considerable potential for a field that has frequently looked to history to extend the study of security.[1]

IR scholars have drawn from the Science and Technology Studies (STS) and social science literatures on this notion to examine the various social meanings associated with technology, and how these can be studied as culturally distinct "way[s] of sense-making, and thus world-making" (McCarthy, 2021, p. 297). Amongst other contributions, scholars have studied the imaginaries associated with technologies including artificial intelligence (Bareis & Katzenbach, 2022; Ferl, 2024; Jacobsen & Nørgaard, 2024; Ølgaard, 2025; Suchman, 2023), autonomous weapon systems (Bächle & Bareis, 2022), drones (Van der Maarel et al., 2024), cloud computing (Baur, 2024), cyber-security (Stevens, 2016), energy production (Berling et al., 2022; Berling et al., 2024), tanks (Ruppert, 2024), sensors (Johnson, 2024), and space rockets (Klimburg-Witjes, 2024). Other accounts have probed the imaginaries associated with disruption (Csernatoni & Martins, 2024), European defence policy (Csernatoni, 2022; Martins & Mawdsley, 2021; Monsees & Lambach, 2022), future war (Depledge et al., 2025), global governance debates (Ferl, 2024; Watts & Bode, 2024), military isomorphism (Pretorius, 2008), innovation (McCarthy, 2021), and platform security (de Goede, 2025).

The rapid growth of this literature complements Winkler's (2025, p. 2) understanding that the study of imaginaries can drive analysis of how social and cultural forces shape the importance placed on technology in

contemporary great power competition. Where scholarship builds on the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff, 2015; Jasanoff & Kim, 2009), this literature also speaks to a wider disciplinary trend: a push by IR and Security Studies scholars to draw analytical insight from STS (Bellanova et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2021; Haddad et al., 2024). In the context of IR and Security Studies, where the proclamation of "turns" has become a major feature of the discipline (Baele & Bettiza, 2021; Epstein & Wæver, 2025; Heiskanen & Beaumont, 2024; McCourt, 2016), scholars have yet to proclaim an "imaginary turn." When considering that the vocabulary of imaginaries is interwoven into a number of the more prominent turns, including the affective (Clément & Sangar, 2017), practice (Bueger & Gadinger, 2015), and visual turns (Bleiker, 2001; Grayson & Mawdsley, 2019), all of which feature notion(s) of "imagining" and "imagination" alongside the primary conceptual axis at the center of their respective turns (Baele & Bettiza, 2021), this may appear puzzling.

As the introduction to this special issue, we situate imaginaries within this "turning" discourse. For many scholars, particularly those working in critical theoretical traditions, "turn talk" has empowered the discipline to challenge the positivist mainstream. Although it would be imprudent to generalize across all the turns pronounced by IR scholars, we are sympathetic to the reflexive orientation of much of this scholarship. It has fostered critical self-examination of the discipline while bringing new ontological objects under investigation (Heiskanen & Beaumont, 2024). This form of "turning" can help researchers "take stock" of existing work and emerging trends. But, for reasons articulated in recent critiques of the "turn to turns" (Epstein & Wæver, 2025), the mere proclamation of a new turn cannot be expected to move the discipline in a productive direction on its own. A turn toward any concept or framework is a turn away from something else. Beyond any initial turning move, then, those involved in such an endeavor must lay strong analytical foundations to ensure they are not "stuck with/in a turn" (Vasileva, 2015). This move requires not only an interrogation of the ideas internal to the turn but a reflection on the logic and position of the turn in the broader disciplinary terrain.

This article uses the turn metaphor as a starting point to explore and categorize the existing research around the imaginary within IR and Security Studies. This allows us to contextualize the contributions to this special issue, which is thematically organized around a series of interlinking questions: How can studies of the imaginary contribute to scholarship examining the relationship between technology, war, and world politics at a time of renewed great power competition? Where do the different intellectual traditions that inform IR scholarship on imaginaries converge or diverge in their understanding and application of the imaginary? How do disruptive and emerging military technologies challenge existing understandings of

civil–military relations, defence policy, risk, and technological design, amongst other topics, at a time of renewed great power competition?

This article contributes to the debates on these topics by tracing the adoption of the imaginary as an analytical notion.[2] Concretely, we observe a clear turn toward the study of the imaginary as an object of analysis across IR and Security Studies. We aim to critically interrogate the theoretical and conceptual assumptions embedded in this emerging turn. To this end, we make three core arguments. First, rather than constituting a unified conceptual framework, this burgeoning research agenda in IR and Security Studies draws from three distinct yet complementary traditions on social imaginaries, sociotechnical imaginaries, and security imaginaries. Second, whilst recognizing that these traditions share a common grounding in constructivist and interpretivist approaches to the social sciences (Hendriks et al., 2025, p. 2), we argue that the concept's importation from multiple fields— history, philosophy, sociology, and STS—presents a key analytical challenge: collectively, the use of the term "imaginary" in IR and Security Studies scholarship has so far outpaced efforts to take stock of its meaning. Consequently, despite the growing interest in imaginaries, the relationship between (and trade-offs associated with) these different traditions remains underspecified. And third, the scholarship on imaginaries has been largely inattentive to the methodological dimensions of this area of study. This move risks generating significant analytical bottlenecks that, if left unaddressed, could derail the further development of this area of scholarship. Whilst debates around epistemology, ontology, and methodology have at times split Security Studies scholars, they have also produced important insights that have advanced the (sub-)field (Dunn Cavelty & Wenger, 2020, p. 13).

Through these interventions, we work across the various traditions that engage with the notion of the imaginary within IR and Security Studies scholarship. We pose two core questions that invite critical reflection on how the imaginary can serve as a productive framework for studying technology, war, and world politics in today's era of great power competition: What are the core analytical properties of the imaginary, and which research methods can be used to study this concept? Offering some initial responses to these questions, our aim is not to fully resolve these issues, nor can we provide an exhaustive analysis of all social science research on this concept. Taking inspiration from earlier efforts to map the genealogy of the imaginary in STS research (McNeil et al., 2017) and assess the overall state of sociotechnical imaginaries scholarship (Hendriks et al., 2025), our aims are more modest: to support the process of conceptual elaboration by highlighting some of the most pressing challenges confronting this growing research program.

The article is structured into four parts. The first section reviews the proliferation of "turns" in IR and Security Studies scholarship. It presents the "imaginary turn" as a stock-taking move that simultaneously draws attention

to a promising line of inquiry on war and technology at a time of geopolitical change. Given IR's longstanding concerns with strategy, security, the future, temporality, and aspects of the imagination more broadly, this "turn" may not be as sharp as it first appears. Nevertheless, this only highlights the need to identify its radius. Building on this discussion, the second section surveys the complex origins of scholarship on imaginaries, providing a descriptive account of how the notion has been developed across debates on social, socio-technical, and security imaginaries. The third section returns to the critiques and core questions of the imaginary as an analytical framework. By examining the shared analytical qualities of the imaginary, we work to provide the foundation for deeper interdisciplinary dialogue. The fourth section integrates the specific contributions made by the articles that comprise this special issue. We conclude by highlighting possible future directions for research.

Why claim a turn?

IR and its subfields have been characterized by an increasing number of "turns" in recent decades. The proclivity for IR scholars to proclaim "turns" connects to the "end" of the most recent Great Debate over positivist and post-positivist approaches that began during the 1980s—or more specifically, as an attempt to disrupt the ontological and epistemological status quo that has followed (Baele & Bettiza, 2021, p. 322).[3] This is especially evident in post-positivist and interpretivist research, which often centers a reflexivity that can be traced to the earliest turns of the 1980s and 1990s: namely, the ontological, critical, linguistic, postmodern, poststructural, and constructivist turns (as listed chronologically according to Heiskanen & Beaumont, 2024; see also Baele & Bettiza, 2021, p. 317). Led by post-positivist scholars, a second wave of turning began in the 2000s. This widened the range of ontological objects studied by IR scholars to demonstrate their ability to produce systematic empirical research.

Whilst many of these turns dealt with security issues in a broad sense, Security Studies did not "turn" at the same rate as IR. Instead, often in response to geopolitical re-orderings, including the end of the Cold War and the 9/11 attacks, (sub)disciplinary changes in Security Studies were usually framed in relation to the "broadening" (or "widening") and "deepening" metaphors (Buzan & Hansen, 2009, pp. 187–225; Jarvis, 2019). The use of these metaphors played a similar role to IR's "turn talk"(Browning & McDonald, 2013), providing "a flag to rally and organize followers around" (Heiskanen & Beaumont, 2024, p. 14). "Broadening" the agenda meant drawing in "new" social and political issues *as* security concerns. According to Ken Booth, of the two metaphors deepening was the "more basic move," in part because it "reveals the political theory in which conceptions of security are anchored, and so the priorities that will shape the associated political agenda" (Booth, 2007, p. 149).

As Security Studies scholarship was reconstructed following this pattern, the broadening and deepening trend, which became something of mantra in Critical Security Studies, may have removed the rationale for proclaiming the kinds of high-profile "turns" seen elsewhere in IR. Nonetheless, there is sufficient overlap between these (sub-)fields to make "turn talk" a shared concern for scholars working at the intersection of security, war, and international politics (see, for example, Croft & Vaughan-Williams, 2017; Jarvis, 2019). Across this interdisciplinary terrain, persistent "turning" can create a dizzying sense of disorientation (Bell, 2001, p. 124; Epstein & Wæver, 2025). What can be gained by invoking yet another turn?

At its most basic level, "turn talk" focuses disciplinary attention on an idea, problem, or approach. It can function as a call to prioritize a particular set of conceptual, theoretical, and/or methodological avenues of research . In some cases, the progenitors seek to (re)construct a research community around a given turn. In other cases, the focus is on redirecting existing research patterns, bringing coherence to a nascent agenda, and/or identifying the pathways toward future projects and questions. These activities are not restricted to the generation of "new" forms of knowledge. They can also be premised on a return to earlier theoretical and conceptual innovations that were misinterpreted, misused, or fell out of fashion (McCourt, 2016).

With some exceptions (McCourt, 2022), there has been minimal effort to amalgamate or explicitly differentiate these turns or to think systematically about how they might be connected, beyond a vague sense of their contribution to critical IR and the institutionalization of non-mainstream perspectives (Baele & Bettiza, 2021; Heiskanen & Beaumont, 2024). With IR scholars professionally incentivised to produce field-defining scholarship, the "turns" partly reflect the imperatives to signal research success. It can be argued that this has resulted in the fragmentation of critical scholarship in a manner that reproduces some of the unfortunate "siloing" that affects the wider discipline. Turns can quickly become niches, quite apart from the intentions of those proclaiming them, even if the goal is to consolidate certain research programs in a way that allows scholars to draw linkages across different strands of the literature(s).

Drawing on Bourdieu's understanding of social fields, Baele and Bettiza (2021) argue that "turns ought to be understood as a position-taking move, which by rhetorically displaying a radical critical stance, allows scholars to establish or renew their 'social capital', defined in this context as 'scientific authority' within a specific subfield of the discipline, namely that of 'critical IR'" (p. 316). Chronicling the rise of turns in IR, Epstein and Wæver (2025) maintain that the logic and language of turning has led to a worrying depoliticization of the discipline. They call on would-be turners to "slow-down" in a "self-reflective" manner. As the title of their article suggests, however ("The Turn to Turns in International Relations"), the

metaphor has merit to the extent that it can focus attention on "what counts" as innovative in the field. Our intentional and circumspect discussion of the utility of "turning" is in the spirit of their intervention. Aware of the pitfalls of the turning phenomenon, we aim to interrogate our own use of the metaphor.

The special issue project began with two observations: first, that often by way of drawing analytical insights developed within STS, Security Studies scholars were increasingly "turning" toward imaginaries to inform their study of technology, war, and global politics at a time of renewed great power competition; and, second, that the wider field was "moving" or "shifting" in this direction. This "turn" is not merely an example of IR playing "catch up" with other fields. It reflects, in part, the discipline's wide-ranging (and ever-expanding) empirical focus, which has informed a range of new theoretical and methodological approaches to study technology and its impact on the future of war, amongst other topics. As a means of metaphorizing change, we appear "[s]tuck with/in [the] turn" (Vasileva, 2015). As Heiskanen and Beaumont note, "the turning phenomenon can be read as an especially salient incantation of the practice of the modern academic: all published manuscripts necessarily make claim to novelty some would consider exaggerated" (2024, p. 21, endnote 11). Although turning suggests its own logic, it is not entirely dissimilar from the proclamation of "schools," "paradigms," or "isms" (Epstein & Wæver, 2025), all of which present problems of their own.

Considering the recent critiques of the turning discourse, we acknowledge the need to avoid the grandiosity that is often attached to the metaphor. We are *not* arguing for a move to reorient the entire axis of (critical) IR or Security Studies scholarship around the study of the imaginary. In a more modest sense, as the contributions to this special issue evidence an ongoing move toward the use of imaginaries, the turn claim allows us to trace the patterns that are emerging in this vein of research. This requires engaging with the turn's antecedents and the core analytical properties that bind the study of the imaginary together. Additionally, in taking stock of how imaginaries have been deployed, we aim to delineate its broad contours as a distinct analytical construct. Moving forward, this will require differentiating the imaginary from discourse, narrative, practice and other key concepts in cultural, ideational, and interpretivist approaches in IR.

Imaginaries in IR and Security Studies: Uses and traditions

An import to IR, the imaginary has been deployed in a variety of fields (Hendriks et al., 2025; McNeil et al., 2017; Vandevoordt et al., 2018). Key contributions originate in the works of Castoriadis (1975/2005), Taylor (2004), Anderson (1991 [1983]), Jasanoff (2015), and Sang-Hyun Kim (Jasanoff &

Kim, 2009), amongst others. As a result, scholars have developed diverse approaches which, we argue, can be grouped under the broad umbrellas of *social imaginaries*, *sociotechnical imaginaries*, and *security imaginaries*. In synthesizing this scholarship, we provide a foundation for critically reflecting on the scholarly value of an "imaginary turn," as well as the tensions, questions, and issues that such a turn must ultimately address. Given the tendency to study imaginaries in multiple (and, at times, competing) ways, rather than as a static or ossified category, our aim is not to delineate the conceptual–theoretical parameters of the imaginary in a pre-determined way, but to initiate a more reflective conversation about the merits of its use across IR and Security Studies scholarship.[4] In this guise, it falls beyond the scope of our discussion to offer a singular model for measuring, operationalizing, and/or representing the imaginary—as a framework or empirical referent of analysis. Imaginaries have an overlapping function as frameworks for analysis that also exist as something "out there" and observable to study.

Our investigation requires two important qualifications. First, the debates on social imaginaries predate, and in some instances have directly informed, later scholarship on sociotechnical imaginaries and security imaginaries. From this perspective, our decision to review these traditions separately should not be interpreted as a move to create artificial boundaries between them. By organizing our analysis in this way, we draw out differences in how the imaginary has been studied to ascertain how certain understandings of this notion have (or have not) traveled across different fields and into IR and Security Studies scholarship more broadly. Second, when coupled with the notion's complex genealogy, the richness of its study limits the breadth of our analysis. As others note, "[m]apping a body of research is no trivial and certainly no purely objective undertaking." It requires the authors to make difficult analytical choices regarding what material should be included, and why (Dunn Cavelty & Wenger, 2020, p. 7). As such, we cannot provide an exhaustive account of all relevant scholarship on the imaginary. In a more modest fashion, we seek to decipher "the signal through the noise," narrowing our analysis to those aspects of the literature that provide the clearest insight into the challenges and opportunities the notion presents for IR and Security Studies scholars.

Social imaginaries

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the adjective "imaginary" has two principal meanings. It is used to denote something *not actual* and something *relating to the imagination*. There are also two obsolete listings for the adjective "imaginary": as something *imaginable* and as something that reflects *the nature of an image or representation*. In the social sciences and humanities, (the) "imaginary" is often a noun, which the

OED defines as "an imagination; a fancy; [or] something imagined," noting that it is frequently used in the plural (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). In their conceptual genealogy of imaginaries in STS, McNeil et al. (2017) contend that "all imaginaries are necessarily social in some way" (p. 438). They map diverse clusters of imaginary-based STS approaches from various philosophical and theoretical antecedents. Their review covers thinkers that underpin use of the concept in IR, including those who begin from a more subjective or individualist orientation. Our decision to begin with *social* imaginaries reinforces the point that these are inherently shared and collective phenomena, even if the concept can be traced through the creative capacities of individuals as well.

Building on the work of Jacques Lacan, the philosopher Castoriadis (1975/2005) developed the psychoanalytic view of the imaginary and extended it in more contingent and radical directions. Castoriadis posited that imaginaries are both deeply creative and thoroughly cultural. This further established an understanding of imaginaries as a collective social force beyond individual self-consciousness. In these ways, the methodological approaches to studying imaginaries in IR run through, and have been influenced by, the interpretivist and post-positivist turns discussed previously.

Taylor's (2004) *Modern Social Imaginaries* has also been influential in both STS and IR. Taylor focuses on the everyday realm. He eschews an emphasis on ideas and institutions in favor of a more practice-driven orientation to the study of imaginaries that is grounded with a concern for the overarching socio-political structures that invest them with meaning (Vandevoordt et al., 2018, p. 180). Taylor's account draws heavily from Benedict Anderson's study of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*. The nation, for Anderson (1991 [1983], p. 6), constitutes an "imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." The act of imagining creates shared social meaning while simultaneously placing boundaries around this core creation.

There is a strong focus on the relationship between social imaginaries and ordinary people that connects the theorizing of Taylor and Anderson. In their shared account, imaginaries are akin to stories, myths, or legends. This makes them distinct from theories or paradigms. Imaginaries provide "common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). This idea was also developed in strands of globalization theory and was central to Appadurai's (2000) work on the role of collective imagination in the globalization of knowledge.

In investigating the subjective layers of globalization, Steger and James (2013) contrasted imaginaries with ideologies and ontologies, defining the former as "patterned convocations of the social whole" that provide "largely pre-reflexive parameters within which people imagine their social

existence—expressed, for example, in conceptions of 'the global,' 'the national,' 'the moral order of our time'" (p. 23). To the extent that they are common-sensical, Gramscian theory would remind us that imaginaries are also ideological, insofar as they consolidate the forms of (cultural) hegemony that produce the social existence and expectations foregrounded by Taylor (Steger & James, 2013, p. 31). A more ideological understanding of "imagining" is also prevalent in Said's *Orientalism*. For Said, the cultural-geographical categories of "the West" and "the Orient" were largely the imperial constructs of an "imaginative geography and its representations" (Said, 1994 [1978], p. 49).

The expectations that feature in Taylor's definition of the social imaginary are about the future as much as the present. This is related to the normativity and sense of moral order that gives rise to new possibilities in what he refers to as the "long march" toward social transformation (Taylor, 2004, p. 23, 28-30). As stated by Mhurchú and Shindo (2016), "considering that any academic theorizing is a political act, it is crucial to ask what sorts of politics IR scholars are involved in when they explore alternative possibilities of politics and call for the need to 'imagine' the world differently" (p. 7). This was precisely the rationale behind Ling's (2014) unorthodox book *Imagining World Politics*, based partly on a fable, which equated to imagining world politics *otherwise*. Ling's Daoist-inflected work illustrates how the innovative aspects of "the imaginary," broadly defined, are often entwined with a dialectical drive to challenge and transgress existing categories, particularly the taken-for-granted binaries that structure much of the theorizing in IR.

The different worlds imagined by scholars and practitioners can be good or bad—or better or worse than our own. These competing alternative sensibilities are expressed in research on utopian and apocalyptic imaginaries. For some authors, a reclamation of the utopian imaginary is not only warranted, but crucial to the prospects for a more critical IR theory. Even if debates about the future are mainly about the present, the discipline can and should actively "imagine and work towards alternative ways of being that are envisioned to be normatively, ethically and materially superior to our current ways of existence" (Brincat, 2009, p. 608). The flip side of this would seem to be the discursive focus on apocalypse in IR, which ebbs and flows alongside pivotal world events, such as the 9/11 attacks and the Covid-19 pandemic. If the utopian imaginary can serve as a call for hopeful change, the apocalyptic imaginary is a reservoir of fears, anxieties, and dystopian possibilities on the horizon (Ferl, 2024; see also Aistrope & Fishel, 2020; Baldus & Ferl, 2026). This use of the imaginary as an organizing device for studying the interplay of notions including "the self/the other," "winning/losing," and "hope/despair" (Winkler, 2025) is also a feature of the growing study of sociotechnical imaginaries in IR and Security Studies.

Sociotechnical imaginaries

Building on themes explored in the sociology of expectations in science and technology (Borup et al., 2006), the sociotechnical imaginaries framework was introduced into STS research by Jasanoff and Kim (2009). The concept was first defined as the "collectively imagined forms of social life and social order reflected in the design and fulfillment of nation-specific scientific and/or technological projects" (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009, p. 120). This move was intended to distinguish the study of sociotechnical imaginaries from Marcus's (1995) earlier work on "technoscientific imaginaries" which was framed as being more narrowly focused on the visions of desired technological futures promoted within scientific communities (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009, pp. 122–123). Jasanoff and Kim's (2009) study of sociotechnical imaginaries built on earlier contributions by Anderson (1991 [1983]), Appadurai (2000), Castoriadis (1975/2005), and Taylor (2004)—more specifically, the understanding that collective forms of imagination had far-reaching political implications as well as the capacity to shape shared understandings of social identity and reality (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009, p. 122). Hence, what sets this framework apart from the earlier literature on social imaginaries was its explicit focus on the role of science and technology in shaping the collective imagination and visions of desirable futures (Hendriks et al., 2025, p. 3), coupled with its focus on performance as a set of social practices (Jasanoff, 2015, pp. 9–10).

In subsequent research, Jasanoff widened the definition of sociotechnical imaginary to encompass the "collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology" (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 6). This revised definition had three significant analytical implications. First, by dropping the explicit reference to "nation-specific scientific and/or technological projects," it widened the concept's analytical focus to include a consideration of the imaginaries held by a range of actors that operate beyond, above, inside or outside of the formal institutions of the state. Second, it clarified that visions of the future are prescriptive and productive in relation to the kind of society that technologies can (and should) be used to pursue in the present. And third, through incorporating a focus on the "institutionally stabilized" and "publicly performed" characteristics of sociotechnical imaginaries, it suggested that not *every* vision or idea about technology-enabled development and societal progress constituted a sociotechnical imaginary (Mager & Katzenbach, 2021, p. 226). On the contrary, according to Jasanoff's (2015) account, sociotechnical imaginaries are productive of stability only insofar as they become collective, institutionalized, and publicly enacted modes of thinking and doing.

In IR, interest in sociotechnical imaginaries began during the late 2010s. This trend formed part of a wider push by Critical Security Studies scholars to draw insights from the field of STS to strengthen the study of technology (Bellanova et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2021), innovation (Haddad et al., 2024) and disruption (Csernatoni & Martins, 2024). According to Baur (2024), the sociotechnical imaginaries framework highlights the "coproductive relationship between future technologies and (un)desirable futures, as well as the relationship between materiality and normativity" (p. 801). Martins and Mawdsley (2021) traced the roots of the EU's European Defence Fund to a particular set of narratives about security, innovation, and research that began in the 1970s, when concerns arose over Europe's technological dependence on the United States. The research on sociotechnical imaginaries expanded to include innovation in US national security (McCarthy, 2021), global governance (Ferl, 2024: Watts & Bode, 2024), and energy security (Berling et al., 2022; Berling et al., 2024). As should be clear at this juncture, STS-inspired research elucidates not only the social but also the *material* dimension of imaginaries, for example in relation to how particular devices, infrastructures, and platforms circulate, constrain, or structure these visions.

As the sociotechnical imaginaries framework has traveled from STS into IR and Security Studies, it has become generally accepted that imaginaries are "produced through discourses and practices alike." They are therefore understood to become observable to study through language and "material performance" (Ferl, 2024, p. 144). This is consistent with Jasanoff and Kim's (2009) conceptualization of sociotechnical imaginaries as being "associated with active exercises of state power, such as the selection of development priorities, the allocation of funds, the investment in material infrastructures, and the acceptance or suppression of political dissent" (p. 123). When coupled with Jasanoff's (2015) subsequent reworking of the framework, these understandings helped widen the empirical focus of this literature to include actors other than nation-states. Recent work has focused on the sociotechnical imaginaries of supranational institutions such as the EU (Baur, 2024; Csernatoni, 2022; Klimburg-Witjes, 2024; Martins & Mawdsley, 2021), as well as corporations based in Western Europe and the United States (Csernatoni, 2022; Csernatoni & Martins, 2024, pp. 857–858). These contributions helped situate the study of sociotechnical imaginaries within wider debates on how corporations promote their preferred visions of war and global affairs (Ølgaard, 2025).

There is growing interest in sociotechnical imaginaries as multiple, competing, and contested visions of the future. For Jasanoff and Kim (2009), sociotechnical imaginaries are inherently normative, linking dominant forms of imagination to various forms of power. The exercise of various power relations and contestations of meaning are theorized to impact how

imaginaries emerge and come to circulate. For example, according to Mager and Katzenbach (2021):

> Actors at individual and institutional levels—framed by their own sociocultural contexts, guided by their respective interests, and equipped with differing resources—construct future expectations and strive to translate these into encompassing and sustaining imaginaries, intentionally or not. Some of the visions and imaginaries might run peacefully in parallel, while others may contest each other and seek for dominance or resistance (pp. 226-227).

The study of sociotechnical imaginaries is increasingly understood to involve an interest in "more or less explicit contestations and struggles over dominance" (Mager & Katzenbach, 2021, p. 227), some of which can take decades to become institutionally stable (Martins & Mawdsley, 2021). This points to the complex power dynamics involved, as imaginaries travel across different social contexts to reshape practices (Ølgaard & Hedling, 2026; Van der Maarel et al., 2024) and expectations of the future (Depledge et al., 2025). This redirects analytical attention away from the "what" of sociotechnical imaginaries towards questions of "how," "when," and "why" they become productive of various forms of political change and order (Ølgaard, 2025).

Security imaginaries

The growing attention on sociotechnical imaginaries has been coupled with a resurgence of interest in security imaginaries. These literatures are connected by a curiosity about the importance of technology and technological innovation in world politics. This convergence has blurred the boundaries between these traditions and is problematic for two reasons. First, as discussed in more detail elsewhere in this special issue (Watts, 2026), the study of security imaginaries has a distinct intellectual genealogy within IR and Security Studies that *predates* the more recent interest in sociotechnical imaginaries. Second, the analytical focus of security imaginaries scholarship extends beyond a concern with the relationship between technology and society to examine how groups envision the security of their identity, interests, and preferred forms of (geo)political order. Rather than approaching security imaginaries as an offshoot of social or sociotechnical imaginaries, we borrow from the understandings of the security imaginary as a heuristic for studying "way[s] of naming, ordering and representing security reality" (Mälksoo, 2010, p. 32).

The first wave of relevant Security Studies scholarship can be traced to the work of Kaldor (1990), Weldes (1999), and Muppidi (1999). In Kaldor's understanding, the Cold War in Europe was an "imaginary war" comprised of routinized practices—military exercises, war games, espionage—and

discourses. On this basis, Kaldor (1990, p. 6) argued it was a "joint venture" that provided both superpowers a vehicle for addressing internal social tensions. Kaldor's account examined the military and technological aspects of this "imaginary war" but did not explicitly define a security imaginary. Picking up on this thread, in a later study of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, Weldes (1999) defined the security imaginary as the "structure of well-established meanings and social relations out of which representations of the world of international relations are created" (p. 10). Weldes' focus on the intersubjective and socially constructed character of security imaginaries drew from Castoriadis (1975/2005) study of social imaginaries as well as contributions made by critical constructivist and post-structuralist IR scholars (Campbell, 1998; Doty, 1993). Security imaginaries provided the "cultural raw materials out of which representations of states, of relations among states, and of the international system are constructed" (Weldes, 1999, p. 10). Muppidi (1999) adopted a similar understanding of the security imaginary to explore how India's postcolonial identity structured its relationship with the US.

The first wave of security imaginaries scholarship brought the study of imaginaries into greater dialogue with constructivist IR perspectives to examine how political communities represent their own identity. Challenging rationalist explanations of military isomorphism, Pretorius (2008) approached the security imaginary as a heuristic that emerged "through the interaction among knowledge, power and practice" (p. 106). The concept was used to draw out the various cultural meaning-making processes associated with how states come to adopt similar weapons and military strategies. Around this time, Mälksoo (2010) also employed the heuristic to explore how Poland and the Baltic states sought recognition for their European identity after the Cold War. For Mälksoo (2010, p. 30), this move was intended to move beyond the positivist understandings of culture that influenced previous debates on strategic culture. Drawing on Weldes (1999) and Muppidi (1999), Mälksoo (2010, pp. 30–34) highlighted the relational dimensions of security imaginaries in processes of identify formation.

The literature on security imaginaries is diverse, and can be divided into four main strands. First, security imaginaries are occasionally studied as a (sub)category of sociotechnical imaginaries. For example, in his work on sensor technologies in the Arctic, Benjamin Johnson defines a security imaginary as the "specific type of sociotechnical imaginary that underscores the logic and modes of reasoning deployed towards the production and use of technology in the name of security" (Johnson, 2024, p. 189). Csernatoni (2022, p. 398) has similarly drawn from the literature on sociotechnical imaginaries to examine how the visions associated with strategic autonomy and sovereignty became hegemonic in reshaping the European Union's

"collective security imaginary-building process" and informed the EU's political identity and practices of technological development.

Second, some scholars have focused on the affective dimensions of security imaginaries. Jacobsen and Nørgaard (2024), for example, synthesized the study of security imaginaries with a Lacanian view of fantasy to provide an alternative understanding of the processes through which certain security imaginaries have endured and come to be viewed as more appealing than others (Jacobsen & Nørgaard, 2024, p. 411). Such accounts broaden the study of security imaginaries beyond a descriptive focus on elite discourses by drawing out the absences that inform background representations of security, and the desires and modes of enjoyment that help sustain them.

Third, several scholars have narrowed the study of security imaginaries to include a greater focus on their military dimensions. Such studies build on Lawson's (2011) investigation into Western military imaginaries and the role of military theory in linking "dominant conceptions of science, technology, society, economy, war, and military organization, thought, and practice to provide a unified image of the world that shapes the military organization's preparation for war, the conduct of its forces, and attempts to justify the use of force" (p. 51). This has fostered detailed empirical engagement with practices including organizational training, staffing, and operational procedures, as well as doctrinal strategies and operational planning. In Öberg's analyses, this enabled a more nuanced study of military design (2018) and ethics (2019).

Fourth, some accounts have extended the security dimensions of imaginaries to include a focus on the durability of desired international political orders. The interplay between imagination and geopolitics has been subject to long-running debate amongst critical geographers (Agnew, 2004). Drawing inspiration from this literature as well as recent innovations in the study of sociotechnical imaginaries, contributors to the debates on geopolitical imaginaries argue that "how we imagine the geopolitical world shapes how we relate to it and act within it, and we enact our imaginations through our practices and discourses" (Monsees & Lambach, 2022, p. 381). Such understandings have been applied to develop a range of insights, including that geopolitical imaginations inform expectations of technological possibilities (Ruppert, 2024); are co-constitutive of practitioner understandings of strategic autonomy (Klimburg-Witjes, 2024); and can inform the processes of identity building (Monsees & Lambach, 2022).

The imaginary as an analytical framework: Critiques and core questions

Despite the breadth of the research traditions laid out above, questions remain about how (best) to "operationalize" the study of imaginaries.

There is no clear consensus on how to evaluate different methodological approaches to its study. These concerns underpin a wider scepticism of this research agenda: What, precisely, is the contribution of the imaginary to a field undergoing a dizzying array of turns?

The ambiguities we point to below are not unique to the study of imaginaries. Positivist researchers have long expressed discomfort with concepts that are not easily amenable to standardized measurement (Neufeld, 1993, p. 42). In acknowledging this point, any move to dismiss this area of study must be viewed in the context of longer-standing epistemological debates within the discipline. That said, there are legitimate uncertainties surrounding the value-added of imaginaries within IR and Security Studies. Before the discipline can grapple with this problem in a rigorous and productive manner, we argue, two key questions need to be addressed: *What are the core analytical properties of the imaginary?* and; *What methods can be used to empirically study the imaginary?* Our efforts to offer a "first take" on these questions, below, help contextualize the contributions made by the articles in this special issue while identifying areas ripe for further development.

On the core analytical properties of the imaginary

Not infrequently, the imaginary has been treated as an ambiguous concept or category of analysis. Some accounts employ the notion lightly. This can lead to the discussion of multiple types of imaginaries within the same article— i.e., "closed-world imaginary," "technopolitical imaginary," "military imaginaries," "imaginaries of omniscience"—without a clear specification of how these understandings hang together (Suchman, 2023, pp. 736–765). There is a similar tendency for some scholars to use "imaginary" as an appendage to other concepts or as an additive to older, more established literatures. These moves imply that the analytical contribution made by the study of imaginaries is contingent on bringing the framework into greater synthesis with existing frameworks, rather than as a standalone concept.

This type of conceptual ambiguity is a common feature of IR and Security Studies scholarship. Even within the mainstream, "IR scholars do not have straightforward ways to measure many key concepts or even general agreement on how these concepts should be defined" (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2013, p. 441). In the case of imaginaries, this ambiguity reinforces the utility of developing a vocabulary that captures the "fuzziness" that comes with integrating these kinds of visions into the discipline's analytical purview. To address this scepticism and foster conceptual development, scholars would do well to reflect on the core analytical properties that connect the literatures on the imaginary. Based on our earlier review, we can identify six key properties of imaginaries. They are intersubjective; normative; relational;

embedded in power relations; based on visions of the past, present, and future; and performative.

First, imaginaries are collectively shared and acted upon representations of the social world that predates action. For this reason, they are "by definition … group achievements" (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 36) that rely on social recognition. This speaks to the intersubjective character of imaginaries, "reflect[ing] the presence, weight, and necessity of others in the construction of shared and contested realities" (Sparks et al., 2022, p. 6). Unlike ideas or visions that may only be held by small groups or individuals, imaginaries gain their power by being collectively held (Hendriks et al., 2025, p. 8). As Taylor (2004, pp. 23–24) argues, imaginaries articulate a set of background understandings that, as expressed through practice, structure how audiences make sense of their social reality, their relationship to each other, and "the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations."[5] This means that they perform important political work by, amongst other things, articulating the "expectations, dispositions, skills, techniques, and rituals that are the basis for the constitution of practices and their boundaries" (Adler & Pouliot, 2011, p. 16).

Second, imaginaries are inherently normative. They are always imaginaries "of something," whether technologies or concrete political projects that tie collective visions to a particular set of (socio)political goals. In this sense, imaginaries are not only sense-making devices but are also closely tied to a particular set of understandings of how things "ought" to be. As Pretorius (2008) notes, the notions of social and security imaginaries share an understanding that "there is a continual, reciprocal, and constitutive relationship between what people do and what they think they should do" (p. 104). In the context of Jasanoff and Kim's (2009) conceptualization of sociotechnical imaginaries, this understanding contains a commitment to an "ideal or desirable future and societal progress that is to be achieved and co-produced through technology and to be shared by wider collectives" (Csernatoni & Martins, 2024, p. 865). Viewed this way, imaginaries reflect collectively held understandings of "good and evil" (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 4) that facilitate the co-production of normativity and materiality. Imaginaries can consequently be productive of change and stability at the global, international, national, organizational, and local levels, functioning to legitimize privileged forms of knowledge production that are materialized through practice.

Third, imaginaries have a meaning-making component that informs processes of "boundary making" (Baur, 2024, pp. 797–798). Building on the insights developed in Anderson's (1991 [1983]) research on imagined communities, a common thread that runs across the literatures on social, sociotechnical, and security imaginaries is the understanding that imaginaries provide a heuristic for affirming a collective sense of "self" and "other." In

keeping with the wider literature on security imaginaries (Mälksoo, 2010; Muppidi, 1999), Weldes (1999) argues that imaginaries provide "representations that clarify both for state officials themselves and for others who and what 'we' are, who and what 'our enemies' are, in what ways we are threatened by them, and how we might best deal with those threats" (pp. 14-15). Imaginaries can thus be bound up with the processes of identity making at the group, national and supranational levels, underscoring their contingent and relational character. In short: imaginaries provide an organized set of representations that help audiences make sense of their relationships to each other, technology, and international politics.

Fourth, imaginaries are both embedded within and generative of power structures. The meanings and identities that flow from imaginaries are, as Muppidi (1999, pp. 123–124) argues, a field of social power through which some perspectives come to be viewed as more legitimate than others. Imaginaries are thus always multiple and contested (Mager & Katzenbach, 2021; Taylor, 2004). Their "productive power" (Barnett & Duvall, 2005) lies in their capacity to help make certain social, technological, and security practices—as well as the understandings of self, other, and interest that flow from these—appear natural and necessary. The processes through which such "hegemonic" imaginaries emerge and come to be publicly (re)articulated, performed, and contested are also a site of power relations in which different groups may intervene to fix their preferred social understandings (Csernatoni, 2022). These interventions, often led by small groups of "vanguards" (Hilgartner, 2015; see also Depledge et al., 2025), can spread to influence wider societal understandings and identities, eventually reproducing the perspectives of their originators.

Fifth, imaginaries weave together visions of the future with those of the past and present. The adoption of the sociotechnical imaginaries framework has been animated by an interest in "better understand[ing] the role of science and technology in producing collective visions of attainable *futures*" (Klimburg-Witjes, 2024, p. 824, emphasis added). Yet, whilst foregrounded in Jasanoff and Kim's (2009) conceptualization of sociotechnical imaginaries, this focus on the future as the prime object of analysis should not distract from the understanding that audiences conceive of the future based on their interpretations of the past and their experiences in the present (Johnson, 2024, p. 187; Martins & Mawdsley, 2021, p. 1462; Ølgaard & Hedling, 2026; Winkler, 2025, p. 5). The future-orientated properties of any imaginary do not have a natural or predetermined character separate from the historical processes enabling their emergence. In this respect, there is a strong "intertextuality" (Hansen, 2006) to the temporality of imaginaries, because visions of the future are constitutive of the constant (re)negotiation of the relationship between the past and the present.

And sixth, imaginaries have a *performative* dimension in the sense that they provide a set of representations about the world and can be productive of changes within it. According to Butler's (1988) influential account, performativity refers to the iterative set of discursive and embodied practices through which meanings are ascribed to identities with no predetermined character such as gender. IR and Security Studies scholars have drawn from such understandings to inform the study of preemption (de Goede et al., 2014) and agency (Braun et al., 2019), amongst other topics. A concern with performativity runs across the literature on social, sociotechnical, and security imaginaries, but is most pronounced within the work on sociotechnical imaginaries. Some scholars argue that "[b]y guiding the making of things and services to come, imaginations of the future are co-producing the very future they envision" (Mager & Katzenbach, 2021, p. 1). Understood in these terms, imaginaries are performative because they do more than describe shared political understandings of the world. They also help bring those visions into being by presenting them as possible and legitimate. For instance, the act of describing a weapon system as being "disruptive" is understood to be performative in the sense that it can produce changes to real-world practices that exceed the technical capabilities of these systems (Csernatoni & Martins, 2024, pp. 864–865).

On the research methods used to study imaginaries

As with all approaches, the study of imaginaries requires the researcher to adopt a method(ology). Consistent with the understanding that imaginaries are intersubjective constructions (Pretorius, 2008, p. 100), IR and Security Studies scholarship on imaginaries is firmly rooted within the interpretivist research tradition. The starting point is the "insight that to understand actions, practices and institutions, we need to grasp the relevant meanings, beliefs and preferences of the people involved" (Bevir & Rhodes, 2004: 131–132 quoted in Pretorius, 2008, p. 101). In this way, most work on imaginaries is tied to a particular set of epistemological claims that are broadly aligned with Critical Security Studies (Browning & McDonald, 2013). The contextual nature of imaginaries mitigates against hypothesis-testing methods aimed at developing law-like regularities regarding the causal impact of imaginaries on world politics. Instead, the tendency is to work from "how-possible" questions of the kind favored by constructivists and poststructuralists (Doty, 1993).

There is no single method to study imaginaries. Based on our qualitative review of the relevant literature, researchers have used a range of methods to guide empirical analysis, including ethnography (Van der Maarel et al., 2024) and (elite) interviews (Depledge et al., 2025; Klimburg-Witjes, 2024). Most common is the use of qualitative discourse analysis, typically as part of a

single-case or comparative case study design. This includes the use of *critical discourse analysis* (Ferl, 2024; McCarthy, 2021); *frame analysis* (Winkler, 2025); and the method of *articulation* (Lawson, 2011; Pretorius, 2008; Ruppert, 2024). Contributors to these debates have applied these methods to a range of speech acts to identify the key themes and representations that constitute imaginaries. For the most part, these texts have been official governmental speeches, strategies, memos, and policy reports. This methodological orientation aligns with an understanding of narratives as the "building blocks" of sociotechnical imaginaries (Sartori & Bocca, 2023). It provides a restrictive understanding of the imaginary as an analytical construct that sits between the separate literatures on social, sociotechnical, and security imaginaries. As Mälksoo (2010) argues citing Hansen's (2006, p. 62) work on the relationship between discourse and foreign policy, the study of elite sites of imaginary production should "ideally be supplemented with the critical study of the security practices of the 'ordinary people'" (pp. 33-34). Whilst this requires close attention to the language, culture, and history of the political community under investigation, it enables a more holistic account of imaginaries, including their sites of resistance and contestation.

Given this understanding, what is the relationship between imaginaries and narratives? According to Jasanoff, the concept of the "master narrative" is "possibly closest in spirit" to the idea of sociotechnical imaginaries (2015:, p. 20). The difference, for Jasanoff, is that master narratives tend to be more "monolithic and unchangeable." Keeping with the more normative aspects of imaginaries, narratives too can serve to rationalize and legitimate. According to Krebs (2015), "[d]ominant narratives of national security establish common-sense givens of a debate, set the boundaries of the legitimate, limit what political actors inside and outside the halls of power can publicly justify, and resist efforts to remake the landscape of legitimation" (p. 3). In a recent study of narratives in IR, Freistein et al. (2024) define narratives as "communicative-discursive representations of events with temporal sequence and/or causal relations in the form of a *plot*, carried by *characterization* of roles, and drawing on socially relevant *topoi* and motifs" (p. 6). These essential components of narrative are supplemented by four optional elements: performativity, affect, fantasy, and relationality (Freistein et al., 2024, p. 8). It is through these components that we see how narratives differ from imaginaries, but also how they might complement each other. Imaginaries do not necessarily have a plot, characterization, or topoi (common themes), but they can feed into these things as they are performed. Imaginaries may also provide the background knowledge or resources used to generate plot, characterization, and motifs.

IR and Security Studies scholars have also studied imaginaries as being reproduced through, and constitutive of, practice. Practices can be broadly

defined as "socially meaningful patterns of action, which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world" (Adler & Pouliot, 2011: 6). Amongst other sites, imaginaries are understood to materialize through the day-to-day practices of soldiers (Van der Maarel et al., 2024) and diplomats (Ølgaard & Hedling, 2026), technological design (Baur, 2024, p. 803; see also Prem, 2026), and the decisions to pursue certain policies and pathways of action. As with practices, imaginaries have a performance element in the sense that they contain "a process of doing something" (Adler & Pouliot, 2011: 7).

Understood in these terms, practices and imaginaries are mutually constitutive. Imaginaries enable "certain identities and practices [which are] reproduced through the continued performance of those practices" (Mälksoo, 2010, p. 32). As such, imaginaries do not have an unmediated effect on world politics. They are expressed through the practices—including discourse (Hansen, 2006)—that make them observable. Imaginaries become windows onto the "often-implicit background understanding[s] that frame the introduction of technology into novel contexts" (McCarthy, 2026, p. 4), as well as the processes through which these technologies are made to appear legitimate and often commonsensical.

Special issue contributions

As we have highlighted, imaginaries can be studied from a range of different intellectual vantagepoints. These traditions can inform and strengthen one another. However, IR and Security Studies scholarship has yet to fully benefit from such a synthesis. In calling attention to the analytical potential of an imaginary turn, we aim to put these strands of research into closer—and more deliberate—conversation with one another. A deeper awareness of these adjacent traditions of imaginary scholarship, we argue, would enrich the discipline.

The articles that comprise this special issue demonstrate the flexibility of "the imaginary" as an analytical framework. In her contribution on control-by-design imaginaries of AWS, for instance, Prem (2026) provides a granular analysis of practices of design in relation to the testing and validation practices associated with, and the encoding of target profiles within, autonomous weapon systems. Other contributions focus on the imaginaries that circumscribe AI associated technologies, albeit at different levels of analysis. For example, Watts' (2026) contribution examines how military applications of AI have been socially constructed by American defense planners as a key technological domain of great power competition. This account focuses on how the "offset imaginary" promoted as part of the Third Offset Strategy during the latter years of Obama's presidency has shaped commonsense

understandings of these technologies' desired geopolitical purpose. McCarthy's (2026) contribution shares an empirical focus on the US Department of Defence/War but is primarily concerned with how the adoption of AI technologies has reshaped aspects of US civil–military relations and understandings of military expertise.

Moving beyond the US, Lingevicius (2026) and Mawdsley and Martins (2026) provide novel accounts of sociotechnical imaginaries associated with the EU's recent approach to emerging and disruptive technologies. Mawdsley and Martins (2026, p. 3) examine how the "moment of crisis" produced by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Donald Trump's re-election has influenced decisions about how, when, and why to pursue some visions of the future over others. Extending existing understandings of how imaginaries come to be multiple and contested, their study traces how the EU has negotiated competing political visions of technological innovation and weapons production. Lingevicius (2026) article, in contrast, centers the concept of "agentic security" in the EU's AI policies to study how they impact the protection of human agency.

The diversity of the issue's contributions is further exhibited by their conceptual and theoretical plurality. Several contributions draw from the growing IR literature on sociotechnical imaginaries (Mawdsley & Martins, 2026; McCarthy, 2026). Other authors approach the imaginary from alternative conceptual vantagepoints. Rather than situating their analyses within the study of sociotechnical imaginaries, these works foreground e.g., security imaginaries (Watts, 2026) and design imaginaries (Prem, 2026).

Several contributions also develop more novel conceptual framings. In their investigation into "apocalyptic imaginaries," Baldus and Ferl (2026) analyze and compare the regulatory discourses of military AI and nuclear weapons in high-level official documents in two key international regimes: the UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Renic's (2026) contribution, in contrast, examines the relationship between technology and collectively-held understandings of "civilization" and "barbarism." This account is driven by a concern with "civilisational imaginaries" which the author introduces to extend the insights developed within sociotechnical imaginaries scholarship. Renic's contribution offers an authoritative genealogy of the West's relationship with military technology, engaging with themes of race/racism and dehumanization to critique the moral underpinnings of Western states' recent approach(es) to technological competition.

While building on distinct methodological foundations, the contributions tend to lean heavily on discursive approaches. Most contributions analyze some combination of public statements, policy documents, military doctrines, technical standards, and expert reports, largely from states in Europe and North America. But there are noteworthy variations. For

example, Mawdsley and Martins (2026, pp. 7–8) perform a "congruence analysis" of the (dis)similarities between central "elements of the sociotechnical imaginaries literature" and their empirical data. Baldus and Ferl (2026) also provide a comparative analysis, albeit not between theory and empirics, but between imaginaries of existential (or apocalyptic) destruction in relation to regulatory discourses about two distinct weapons technologies: AWS and nuclear weapons.

The individual contributions hence illustrate that research on imaginaries in IR and Security Studies is predominantly focused on acts of representation. In this vein, narratives are approached as the building blocks of imaginaries. Prem's (2026) contribution, however, shows how IR and Security Studies might examine practices at a more granular level of analysis, beyond high-level policies and elite statements. Alongside Lingevicius' (2026) use of elite interviews, this demonstrates the value of expanded methodological approaches, even as these approaches reinforce concerns about researchers' lack of access to key sites of power and decision-making in international security.

Together, the articles in the special issue expand the study of imaginaries in a variety of new directions. Empirically, the contributions shed light on how recent technological and geopolitical developments are impacting the emergence and evolution of imaginaries across several contexts: the US, the EU, NATO, and the "West" more broadly. Conceptually, contributors extend the study of apocalyptic (Baldus & Ferl, 2026) and civilizational (Renic, 2026) imaginaries. For a wider IR and Security Studies audience, they bring the study of imaginaries into greater dialogue with the literatures on "agentic risk" (Lingevicius, 2026), civil–military relations (McCarthy, 2026), and ontological politics (Mawdsley & Martins, 2026). Collectively, the special issue thus refines the conceptual development of imaginaries scholarship, opening several areas for future research.

Conclusion

References to the "imaginary" have become increasingly prevalent in critical IR and Security Studies scholarship. This introductory article has taken stock of this observable and ongoing "turn" within research on war, technology, and the shifts in contemporary world politics at a time of renewed great power competition. We acknowledge that certain aspects of this turn have gone un(der)explored in this article, including in relation to the interdisciplinarity of the imaginary. Similarly, we have been conscious not to prejudice our audience as the reader moves into the special issue contributions that follow. Precisely because we are sympathetic to the open possibilities of an imaginary turn, we wanted to ensure that our approach in this introductory article was pluralist in spirit, particularly as it relates to the discussion of the

imaginary as observable object, concept, and/or framework. In this conclusion, we consider some directions for future research.

First, contributors to these debates would do well to take seriously the professional politics associated with the development of research agendas and the multiple forms of gatekeeping that shape what is considered "acceptable" forms of knowledge production. As Dunn Cavelty and Wenger (2020) note, "there are economic and structural factors that shape research in all fields of science" (p. 13), a point that echoes much of the "turns" discourse in IR. Research should thus pay greater attention to how imaginaries circulate among both practitioners and scholars engaged in power struggles. For instance, how have the visions associated with AI and nuclear weapons, to name just two examples examined within this special issue, come to be viewed as more influential than others? What actors have helped bring these imaginaries to prominence? Which perspectives have been silenced or marginalized? Tracing these processes over shorter and longer *durées* of history adds much-needed depth of knowledge by connecting meaning-making practices with global hierarchies of power.

Second, it is imperative that scholars continue to refine the core analytical properties of the imaginary. Ideally, this should lead to the development of methodologies that are rigorous, sophisticated, and applicable to multiple cases, while consistent with the pluralist spirit of the framework, which has the advantages of flexibility and adaptability to various modes of interpretivist or post-positivist theorizing. In this spirit, scholars working in this area should be encouraged to refine their definitional understandings of the "imaginary," especially when this term is used in conjunction with other, similar concepts. Coupled with an explication of the methods used to access or evidence the imaginary, this should allow scholars to articulate the "value-added" of this concept, both as an additive to other literatures and as a standalone area of study. Additionally, while the use of ethnographic approaches to "everyday" articulations and enactments of imaginaries provides an alternative to the more common discourse analysis, these methods present their own challenges. The collective dimension of imaginaries accessed through ethnography can be unclear, because such studies are often limited to "thick descriptions" of everyday interactions amongst small groups of individuals.

The relationship between imaginaries and the imagination is also ripe for further clarification. This would entail the more detailed study of individuals and their imaginative capacities alongside the collective. Moreover, the commitment to research grounded in the linguistic turn has created an emphasis on the public performance of imaginaries. Such approaches, however, say little about the character and importance of the imagination in its own right. How might collectively held imaginaries, for example, be reimagined? A greater emphasis on imagination would make possible a more detailed

account of the dynamics of change and agency in these debates. This suggests a greater focus on ethnographic, creative, and participatory methods as ways to access embodied and emotional experiences related to imaginaries.

Two additional challenges are raised—if sometimes tangentially—in the contributions to this special issue. The first concerns the "political relevance" (Jahn, 2017) of research in this area. This requires reflecting on the implications for establishing concrete political spaces for deliberation and policy formation. Consistent with the small "c" criticality of many current adopters, much of the existing literature has sought to critique the use of specific technologies. When appropriate, scholars should work to extend these insights to clearly communicate the implications of their findings in a manner that is relevant to wider audiences. This is crucial because scholars produce novel and detailed knowledge about the productive and performative aspects of imaginaries as deeply embedded in existing power relations. Such insights may in turn inspire critical self-reflections on how and why scholars and practitioners come to enact or take for granted certain visions of technology, war, and international politics that materialize through practice.

Second, and relatedly, research on imaginaries would benefit from moving beyond an empirical focus on North America and Europe to open up "space[s] for alternative imaginaries and knowledge production processes" (Csernatoni & Martins, 2024, p. 867). In this way, (re)imagining technology, war, and world politics could also become, for some but not necessarily all contributors to this debate, a normative project aimed at challenging (and not merely interpreting or explaining) particular imaginaries. Calls for IR to move beyond Western centrism are hardly new. Under the guise of the return of great power competition, the debates on international security appear to have snapped back towards more "traditional," state-centric concerns, with a particular focus on "Western" security concerns and considerations. There is nothing "intrinsic" about the imaginary as a concept or framework that limits its application to these settings. Imaginaries have no "natural" geographical or geopolitical "home."

Ultimately, for those involved in this fast-growing area of IR and Security Studies scholarship, there are risks and promises in how researchers engage not only with their critics but with one another. An imaginary turn, pursued beyond our initial stock-taking exercise, should not lead us into an intellectual cul-de-sac. As editors of this special issue, we may have skin in the game, but we are sincere in our view that the discipline would not be served by the cultivation of an insular camp of imaginaries scholars, speaking mainly if not exclusively to one another. It is our hope that this special issue not only sharpens the debate within this nascent research community but also broadens the discussion in new and productive directions.

Notes

1. Scholars in IR and Security Studies have long debated the influence of imagination on global politics (Adler, 1997; Kier, 1997). Perhaps more than other, related fields, IR would seem well-positioned to draw out the insights of imaginative thinking. E. H. Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939* (1981 [2001]), for example, makes multiple references to the imagination and imagining, and there is a Utopian tradition in IR theory that can be traced to the First Great Debate, and which is at least partly about imagining new horizons of political possibility and the prospects for progressive change (Brincat, 2009, p. 581).
2. We use "notion" here deliberately based on our observation that "imaginary" appears in the literature as an observable object, discrete concept, and framework for analysis.
3. The turning metaphor is not unique to IR. For a critical discussion of its use in STS, see Vasileva (2015).
4. We thank Raluca Csernatoni and one of the anonymous reviewers for helping us clarify these points.
5. The authors are grateful to Daniel McCarthy for this observation. For a more detailed discussion of McCarthy's (2026) understanding of the role of background understandings in imaginaries scholarship, see his contribution to this special issue.

Disclosure statement

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