



The Threat of Violent Nationalism to Global Stability

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Introduction

We normally do not think of nationalism as a problem. Rather, it is more an *element* of relations, like sovereignty, borders, populations, wealth, leaders and organizations. Around the world, nationalism is widely viewed as an essential part of a modern state, connecting residents, making them part of a community. And nationalism can be a force for good. Nationalist movements, for example, were a major force of the wave of decolonization in the Twentieth Century that led to the independence of more than 120 UN Member States.

But how many issues on the agenda of the UN Security Council are largely about problems of nationalism, about leaders or peoples pursuing enemies, foreign or domestic, because they threaten their national sense of identity? The world experienced the brutal dangers of nationalist extremism in the 1930s and '40s when Fascism, justified by nationalism, led to World War Two and the Holocaust.

Today nationalism is a major force leading to invasions of foreign territory and expulsion of minority people. With nationalist-fueled repression and violence on the rise around the again, the issue deserves highest-level attention, the attention of the UN Security Council.

In contemporary history, it was the nationalist excesses of the Yugoslav civil wars, 1991-1999, that showed how serious the dangers could be, revealing dangers that have vexed the international community ever since.¹ The

Yugoslav wars were primarily wars over nationalism, as the ethnics groups of Yugoslavia divided into exclusive nations. Serbia showed the way, persuaded of its superiority and need either to dominate the country completely, or establish an ethnically pure Serbia, free of other ethnicities.



Template for the future? Nationalist war in Yugoslavia, 1991-99.

The trouble started in 1987 as Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević built his democratic popularity in the Serbian region by cultivating exclusive Serb national support. The formula worked. In 1989 he became President of Yugoslav. In the next two years the country divided ethnically, and war broke out, soon emerging as the deadliest in European history since 1945. Ethnic nationalism was used to justify separatism, attacks to control, leading the over 100,000 deaths and leaving hundreds of thousands permanent refugees.² Territory, and forced evacuation of Croat, Bosnian Muslim and Albanian speaking minorities, what Serbian leaders called ethnic cleansing.³

¹ Jerry Z. Muller, 'Us and them: the enduring power of ethnic nationalism', *Foreign Affairs*, March-April 2008, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20032578>

² 'Yugoslav Wars', *Wikipedia*, n.d., https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yugoslav_Wars

³ Andrew Bell-Fialkoff, 'A brief history of ethnic cleansing', *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993,



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Violent nationalism no longer was an historical memory. It had emerged as a major problem of contemporary politics. Soon the same basic formula of national grievance and demands, justifying violent attacks on minorities, would happen in countries as diverse as Armenia and Azerbaijan, China, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Myanmar, Rwanda, Sudan. Nationalist grievances and ambitions justify the Russian ‘Special military operation’ in Ukraine. The rhetoric of ethnic nationalism, without large-scale violence, has become commonplace elsewhere, such as Hungary.

A different kind of issue

While Member States may hesitate to raise the dilemmas of nationalism, the UN Secretary-General is in a different position, with the freedom from national responsibilities, and perhaps better able to raise the issues of violent nationalism in the Security Council.

Normally we think of the Security Council deliberating specific questions of international peace and conflict, issues raised by its fifteen Member States, typically specific disputes. The Security Council has the ability, though, to consider any issue relevant to international peace and security. The United Nations Charter and Security Council rules give this power to the UN Secretary-General and any of the UN’s 193 Member States:

- **UN Charter Article 99**, ‘The Secretary-General may bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security.’⁴
- **Security Council Provisional Rules of Procedure Rule 6**: ‘Any Member of the United Nations may bring any dispute, or any situation... to the attention of the Security Council.’⁵

For the Security Council, nationalism is an issue few UN Member States are likely to raise, for virtually all have their own nationalism. But they feel threatened by the nationalism of neighboring countries, fearful their violent nationalism will be turned against them, used to justify military attack or subversion to undermine their stability.

Similarly, when nationalism is used to justify repression or expulsion of a minority group, Member States are more like to direct international attention at the act of repression or expulsion as a violation of international law or the principles of human rights. But the problems posed by violent nationalism are worsening, as leaders find it an appealing tool for attracting and motivating supporters.

As an organization committed to advancing *all* Member States, regardless of their size, culture, or prosperity, the United Nations has a critical interest in fostering an egalitarianism across all Member States.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20040203190219/http://www.foreignaffairs.org/19930601faessay5199/andre-w-bell-fialkoff/a-brief-history-of-ethnic-cleansing.html>

⁴ ‘United Nations Charter (full text)’, New York: United Nations, n.d., <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>

⁵ UN Security Council, ‘Provisional Rules of Procedure (S/96/Rev.7), Chapter II’, New York: United Nations, n.d., <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/rop/chapter-2>



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Nationalism is the exaltation of one nation above all others, placing an emphasis on the promotion of its interests and culture over all other nations.¹ Nationalism is the bedrock, foundational identity that gives legitimacy to most of the world's independent countries. Member States are quick to justify and shield their own nationalism, even when they criticize its excesses elsewhere. Does this mean all countries are protected by the shield of national sovereignty, which gives them unique power over their domestic law?

Or does it raise the important of international law, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, and international humanitarian law (IHL) to ensure the safety and security of all peoples, regardless of where they live? That's the problem before the Security council under this agenda item.

Nationalism versus patriotism

An essential distinction is between *nationalism* and *patriotism*. They are related concepts--both describe a relationship between people and their country--but they also are fundamentally different. And they have very different implications for international relations and domestic policy.

Patriotism is love of one's homeland, its territory. It is a connection between people and their home. It generally promotes stability, by encouraging people to work for *their homeland*. It is the reason people will defend their

homeland and work for its prosperity. It has no relationship to the patriotism of other people in other countries. It does not say anything about the superiority of one's people or the inferiority of others. All it focuses on is love of a homeland.

Nationalism is identity with a larger group of people, based on a belief in their greatness. It can be more forceful, encouraging people to make great sacrifices to conquer *new homelands*. While patriotism is ancient, nationalism is a modern invention, created by political leaders to solidify support. But it is much harder for leaders to control and often becomes a problem. Because it stresses the superiority of the nation, nationalism, may require or encourage some degree of domestic or international conflict.

Reduced to the basics, nationalism differs from patriotism in its aggressive sense of *supremacy* over another nation's culture, language, and people. Whereas patriotism is more passive respect for one's country and culture, nationalists assert that the inherent superiority of their culture immunizes their nation from committing fault. Nationalism is an incredibly powerful tool for politicians to yield, as it unites citizens against a common enemy, the enemy conveniently being whomever the rallying politician has competing interests. In its most extreme form, nationalism boils over into an extreme, violent movement that suppresses cultures, nations, and peoples which do not align with its narrowly defined values.



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NATIONALISM VERSUS PATRIOTISM

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NATIONALISM

Nationalism is identification with one's own nation and support for its interests, even to the exclusion or detriment of the interests of other nations

Based on the belief that one's nation is superior to others

More aggressive in nature

Gives importance to the heritage, culture, and language of a nation

Can unite people against a common enemy, typically a hostile foreign nation

PATRIOTISM

Patriotism is the feeling of love, devotion, vigorous support, and a sense of attachment to one's country or homeland, as well as the unity with others who share the same sentiment

Based on one's love and devotion to country

More passive in nature

Gives importance to the values and beliefs of a nation

Can unite people for the overall wellbeing and prosperity of the nation

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Examples of contemporary violent nationalism

China: Ethnic tensions in China have reached a concerning high in recent years, as reports have increasingly implicated China's role in the suppression and implementation of violence against the Uighur people. Protests against Chinese state violence have been met with increasing violence in turn. First-hand accounts describe mass arrests, torture, surveillance, and forced sterilization within internment camps for the Uighur Muslim minority. Within these camps are large classrooms meant to 're-educate' the detainees by stripping them of their language and culture.⁴ China adamantly denies activists' and UN accusations of genocide and states that the camps are simply mandatory training to prevent extremism. Chinese nationalism also is associated with military threats to conquer the near-by island of Taiwan.



Hungary: Nationalist ruling party, Fidesz (an acronym for Hungarian Civic Alliance) is a national conservative and right-wing populist political party. It has dominated Hungarian national politics since 2010 under the leadership of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. It speaks out for Hungarian-speaking minorities in neighboring countries and has forced opposition

media to close, as well as foreign-funded liberal organizations like the University of Central Europe.

India: Dedicated to Hindi dominance of the Asian subcontinent, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is an explicitly nationalist party responsible for restricting the rights of Muslims and Christians. Under the leadership of prime Minister Narendra Modi, nationalism is closely tied to religion, leading to the destruction of prominent Muslim shrines and the elevation of Hindutva values in Indian public affairs.

Poland: As in Hungary, nationalism pits rightist populism against the European Union and neighboring nations. In both cases, nationalists support restricting the rights of their political opponents, removing uncooperative judges from the bench, and closing opposition media. Poland's president, Andrzej Duda, a member of the nationalist Law and Justice party, and the League of Polish Families, have placed emphasis on homophobia and the facilitation of violent attacks on non-Christians, especially Jews, Muslims, and recent migrants. Unlike Hungary, in Poland nationalist activists have not yet cemented control over all major governing institutions.

Russia: Now of pressing concern to the United Nations is Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and its threat to stability on the European continent. In a clear statement of nationalist grievance and entitlement, on 21 February 2022 Russian President Vladimir Putin laid out a long list of grievances over Ukraine and rejected the legitimacy of Ukrainian national identity, sovereignty, and culture. Putin said that Ukraine and Russia are 'one people', and his invasion was an attempt to reunite the single nation. To critics of Russia, including a majority of UN



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Member States voting in the General Assembly, the attack is a prime example of the consequences of unchecked nationalism, as it empowers a nation to take what they believe is theirs, or should be theirs.⁹ Ukraine's military response, by comparison, first struggling to keep, and later to regain its territory, is more consistent with patriotism.

United States: Since the Presidency of Donald Trump, there has been widespread concern with the rise of groups advocating nationalist violence. The invasion of the U.S. Capital on 6 January 2021 by a mob seeking to deny the 2020 Presidential Election and keep President Trump in power illustrated the seriousness of the problem. To his critics, President Trump was part of the violent nationalist danger, his tenure revealing a history of nationalism, xenophobia, and white racial supremacy.

President Trump's 'America first' policies saw the United States withdrawing from numerous agreements, such as the Paris Climate agreement. This political approach to American politics weakened the country's political power and its reliability as a partner in the international community.¹¹ Early into his term, Trump banned the entry of immigrants and refugees from majority Muslim nations, which he dubbed the "Muslim ban." Following his election into office, hate crimes against minorities surged.¹³ American nationalism poses a significant issue for global stability given America's prominence in the international community, illustrated by the 8 January 2023 invasion of the Brazilian capitol in an effort to keep defeated President Jair Bolsonaro in power there.

Some Proposals for Action

The fifteen Member States of the UN Security Council have. Difficult task in trying to tame the

power of violent nationalism. Many of them were created in nationalism revolutions, including all the members who became independent after 1800. Some of the Permanent Members, are home to violent nationalist issues, and they can protect themselves from international action, using their Security Council veto.



Attacking the Brazilian capitol on 8 January 2023.

The Security Council must strike balance between the sovereign rights of its members and the need to prevent and halt violent conflict. Aggressive proposals will be killed by predictable vetoes. What can the Security Council do to curb the spread of this danger?

Some possible paths are described below. The list is meant to be helpful. It is not complete.

Create an investigatory commission: UN Secretaries-General may authorize commissions to further investigate the impact of nationalism on global actions, policies, and missions. Though a study lacks any sort of resolution, its findings may fuel action from skeptical states, not yet certain as to their stance on such actions. Major questions still have to be resolved first. Who will belong to the commission? Member States usually insist on appointing their own representatives, to protect their interests. Others



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may want and independent body, possibly chosen by the UN Secretary-General. And what is the body mandated to do? Does it report on problems? Or does it also make recommendations? Member States will have something to say about that.

Establish international standards for acceptable nationalism, limits on the behaviors to be accepted, and those to be rejected. The Council might list acceptable forms of nationalist expression, and those to be discouraged. Or it could create a commission to make recommendations, to be implemented by Member States as they choose.

Recommend the General Assembly act on the issue. Unlike the Security Council, the General Assembly is not limited by the veto. It can pass resolutions by majority vote, sometimes against the will of the major powers. It already has shown this by passing four resolutions critical of Russia's actions in Ukraine. But unlike the Security Council, it cannot demand that states do anything. It can only recommend and appeal for action.

Empower UN High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR): Leaving their homelands in search of safety, refugees escaping violent nationalism, ethnic cleansing or oppression often

find support from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). It is within the interest of these minorities that the UN should create a commitment to the preservation of their needs, interests, cultures and languages. Measures to ensure their *right of return*, enshrined in international law, would help ensure the eventual resolution of their mistreatment.

But for the UN, this overlaps with the long-standing agenda on treatment of Palestinian refugees, and their right of return to Israel, a coincidence which will raise suspicion in some quarters, and create support among others.

Keep the Peace: Learning from prior failures in peacekeeping, the Security Council could create a new kind of UN peacekeeping force, to protect oppressed minority groups. These initiatives are of course limited in their scope given the nature of peacekeeping, and its reliance on a nation's consent. However, it is the obligation of UN peacekeeping to suppress genocide and preserve peace. Finding soldiers and financing for such a force will be tricky. Few Member States will volunteer their militaries to fight in situations that are unknown, with unknown risks and obligations.



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