



Addressing the Spread of Violent Nationalism

ODU Model United Nations Society

Introduction

The rising global appeal of nationalism is a challenge to the ability of the United Nations to solve problems. When Member States choose policies based on national superiority instead of global cooperation, the UN loses the consensus it requires to act effectively. Yet a growing number of leaders find the political rewards of enhancing nationalism hard to resist. With stronger nationalism comes a not just less ability to solve international problems, but greater risk of conflict and war. For the UN Security Council, coping with the rise of nationalism may be essential to remaining relevant and effective. But it is possible?

The nationalism problem raises s fundamental difficulties for the UN. The United Nations is based on conflicting principles. Above all, it is an organization of 193 Member States, their membership justified by their legal, sovereign equality. This makes China with a population of 1.4 billion, the legal equal in UN for a of Nauru and Tuvalu, each with populations of about 10,000 each. The delegation of each Member State formally represents their state’s sovereign interests. On the other hand, the UN can only be effective when the Member States work together based on shared norms and principles, cooperating to advance global agendas.

The problem is fundamental, making cooperation essential, but also hard to achieve. For Member States, the problem is how to balance pursuit of distinct national interests with the desire to shape global outcomes through shared normative principles.

Since the end of the Cold War in 1989, the problem has become much worse with the rise of nationalist foreign policies, policies based not

on international cooperation but differentiation, deliberately choosing conflict over consensus. The difficulty comes because of the great public appeal of nationalism. Emphasizing the uniqueness and superiority of each nation, nationalism often is the easiest way to unite the largest number of people in a country’s borders. It has enormous appeal to rising leaders in democracies especially, but also can be useful for leaders of authoritarian governments, seeking a way to enhance the legitimacy of their power. In every case, nationalism often is the easiest way to strengthen a government, to win elections and unify an electoral majority of the people.

Nationalism has the advantage of unifying most or many of the people in a territory, making them willing to sacrifice together on behalf of the state. They can be taxed more effectively to support the power of the state, and will even offer their lives for the expansion of state interests elsewhere in the region or the world. This kind of nationalism, first developed during the French Revolution of 1789-1815, created a global super power, and became a model for emulation everywhere else.

Figure 1. Patriotism versus Nationalism

Characteristic	Patriotism	Nationalism
Origin:	ancient	modern
Basis:	territorial	ethnic
How created:	poetic	political
Attitude toward others:	passive	superior
Attitude toward force:	defensive	offensive

If only it ended there. Unifying people under nationalism requires excluding someone. Unlike



patriotism, based on love to one's homeland, nationalism usually involves claims of superiority. At a minimum, nationalism requires 'othering' the people of other countries, distinguishing the people of one country from those of bordering countries. Often nationalism is easiest to promote when it stresses a specific ethnic identity within a country. Above all, nationalism usually requires an enemy. This may be foreign (the people of a neighboring country) or internal (an unworthy or untrusted domestic community).



Nationalist rally in Hungary

It was the civil wars of the former Yugoslavia that made the scale of the dangers apparent. Propelled by nationalist leaders first in Serbia, then in Croatia, Slovenia, and soon throughout the territory of the country, Yugoslavia was gone by 1991, ultimately replaced by seven independent, often warring countries. During the worst fighting, the ethnically divided Bosnia 1992-95, over 100,000 people died as warring sides battled for domination. The worst violence came as Serbian nationalists acted with genocide against their Bosnian Muslim enemies, most famously in the slaughter of all 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys in the town of Srebrenica. This was only one year after an estimated 800,000 Tutsi people were killed in attacks by

their Hutu enemies in Rwanda. In neither case was the international community able to respond effectively.

For the United Nations, the problem is how to cope with a basic force in world affairs that is not going away, but which must be restrained to avoid the worst trouble it can create.

While several UN Member States have leaders cultivating nationalism as a route to power, others are suspicious or critical, calling for international action to halt the trend. France has been especially outspoken in this regard.¹ Similarly, UN Secretary-General António Guterres, argues that the rise of nationalism makes it hard or impossible for the UN to do its job.²



Nationalist rally in India

Prominent examples

Few states are immune to the nationalist political temptation, but some are more affected than others. Usually the key is political leaders who deliberately chose to build support based on nationalist appeals. Nationalist appeals allow leaders to assume a position of moral superiority and unique legitimacy. In this formulation,

¹ 'Rise of nationalism one of world's real dangers', M. Jean-Marc Ayrault, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Brussels, 14 November 2016, <https://uk.ambafrance.org/Rise-of-nationalism-one-of-real-dangers-for-world-today-Minister>

² Rising Nationalism Threatens Multilateralism's 70-Year 'Proven Track Record' of Saving Lives, Preventing Wars, Secretary-General Tells Security Council', *UN News*, 9 November 2018, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13570.doc.htm>



support for such leaders equals morally support for the nation, while support for their enemies weakens the nation, and sometimes can even be considered treasonous.

Virtually every country has a nationalist movement and leaders, but some are more explicit and powerful than others. Examples are easy to find. The following are illustrative:

China: Nationalism has been at the forefront of Chinese politics since the 1920s, when the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang), became a prominent force fighting for national unifications. In 1949 the nationalists lost the Chinese Civil War to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) led by Mao, but the CCP quickly claimed the cloak of nationalist leadership. Today, under the leadership of Premier Xi Jinping, the CCP advocates national unification, including reclaiming full control of the territory of Hong Kong, the autonomous (and effectively independent) island of Taiwan, as well the large area of the South China Sea.

Hungary: the 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. Fidesz is best known for its demonization of the American-Hungarian business leader George Soros, who often is attacked with thinly veiled anti-Jewish symbols. Aggressive Hungarian nationalism has made Orbán the most prominent nationalist in Europe today. Even more extreme is Jobbik, Hungary's most xenophobic party.

India: As in several other Asian countries like Indonesia, Myanmar and Philippines, the rise of Indian nationalism is associated with democratic

politics. In India's case, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is an explicitly nationalist party, in favor of Hindi dominance of the Asian subcontinent, restricting the rights of Muslims and Christians. Under the leadership of prime Minister Narendra Modi, nationalism has a strong religious element, associated with the destruction of prominent Muslim shrines and elevation of Hindutva values in Indian public affairs.

Poland: As in Hungary, nationalism pits rightist populism against the values-based community associated with support of the European Union. In both cases, nationalists support restricting the rights of their political opponents, removing uncooperative judges from the courts and closing opposition media. Poland's president, Andrzej Duda, is the most active nationalist, as a member of the nationalist Law and Justice party. Another nationalist party is the conservative League of Polish Families, which is more focused on elevating a sense of threat about homosexuality and tolerant of physical 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: Under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, nationalism has emerged as an explicit justification for ever more Russian policy actions at home and abroad. This trend leads observers to ask if nationalism is what really drives Russian politics? Many politicians and political scientists argue that the 2014 annexation of Crimea showed President Vladimir Putin's desire to enhance national identity as a basis for aggressive action, repressing minorities domestically, conquering disputed territory and intervening abroad. Nationalism has been used to explain everything from Russia's intervention in Syria, Russia's unusually large number of hate crimes and the regime's rush to host sporting mega-events such as the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics and the 2018 World Cup. Polling leaves no doubt that nationalist sentiment is more popular than ever,



especially what the Russian's call 'imperial nationalism', or 'civilizational nationalism', which is used to justify not just repressing religious and gender minorities in Russia, but to justify intervening in the domestic affairs of countries like the Netherlands, United Kingdom and United States.



'I am a nationalist': Trump's embrace of controversial label sparks uproar', *USA Today*, 24 October 2018.

Nationalism and separatism

A major problem nationalism raises for many countries is division and secession (breaking away). In countries where minorities are organized on national lines, the possibility of breaking up is very real. These often rely on public votes—a referendum—to establish populist legitimacy. None has succeeded since the Czech-Slovak Velvet Divorce of 1994, but several are trying:

A prominent example is Canada, where French speaking minority of Quebec had two failed national referendums on independence. The most recent in 1995, failed with 51 percent opposed and 49 per cent in favor. Nationalist leaders have been quiet in recent years, but the feelings that brought them to the verge success in the 1990s are just below the surface of Canadian politics.

In Spain, the province of Catalonia had an independence referendum in 2017, in which advocates of independence received 92 per cent

of the vote, due largely to an opposition boycott. Catalan nationalist leaders are calling for another.

In the United Kingdom, an independence referendum in Scotland failed in 2014 by a vote of 55 percent against and 45 in favor of independence. Another Scottish referendum is possible, especially as England favors leaving the European Union, while most Scots want to stay. With many countries facing similar problems, the UN Security council may have to get engaged.

For advocates of nationalism efforts at nationalist secession raise difficult issues. Secessionism uses nationalism to undermine the unity that nationalists treasure most. Advocates of strong, unified nations often are horrified at the prospect of secessionism. The best known case involves the island of Taiwan, where support for formal national independence is strong, a threat that brought Taiwan and China to the brink of war in 1996 and well could again.

Proposals for Action

As always, the UN Security Council must balance the need to address threats to international peace and stability against the interests of its fifteen members, especially the Five Permanent Members (P5). The Security Council always balances principles and interests.

Create a Commission under the UN Secretary-General to investigate the impact of nationalism in contemporary global affairs and recommend alternative paths for the Security Council and the Secretary-Address to deal with it. A study is not the same as immediate action, but it may be a compromise that satisfies the Member States.

Establish a new normative principle of global patriotism, asking states and leaders to restrain the most extreme nationalist political rhetoric and emphasize the more easily managed forms



of patriotism instead. Such an approach might extend to regular conferences to rearward and encourage support for global consensus.

Clarify a new normative principle on the forms of nationalism that are internationally acceptable and those that are now. Any system of criteria would have to be clear and auditable to the most common kinds of nationalist disputes. It also would have to satisfy the conflicting needs of highly nationalist and less nationalist leaders. And it might require a way for the Security council to respond to violators.

Identify countries where nationalist rhetoric is especially provocative and threatening. Because the UN is hesitant to act in domestic affairs, it might be easiest to target countries here nationalist language is especially threatening to neighboring states. Russia's nationalist claims to parts of Ukraine, including the Crimea peninsula which it conquered and annexed in 2014, is a prominent example. Others include China's preoccupation with establishing control over Taiwan or the waters of the South China Sea. But this approach runs into a =n immediate problem; the veto power of the Five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council: China, France, Russia the UK and United States. All five can stop any resolution they oppose.

Focus instead on countries where nationalism is used to target minority groups. This means switching to action in the domestic politics of Member States, always difficult for the UN. Many Member States insist that legal sovereignty makes it unacceptable for the UN to act in any state's domestic affairs. China is especially clear on this, as Russia often is to a degree. European and Latin American states are more supportive of the moral imperative to act in such cases. Others like the countries of Africa, are more divided.

Likely targets for international attention are countries where persecution of minorities is especially clear. A prominent example is Myanmar, where the Buddhist majority defined the Muslim Rohingya minority out of the nation and undertook a policy of explicit removal (ethnic cleansing for the last two years. A lesser version can be seen in the United states, were people from seven Muslim countries are forbidden from entering, even for family reunification visits. In both countries, Muslims are targeted as a group, not because they are individually judged, but because the entire community is suspected of presenting a threat to national security and legitimacy. Nationalism is especially powerful as a way to target entire communities, turning them into 'the other', regardless of their actions or beliefs as individuals.



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