

You Can't Defeat Nationalism, So Stop Trying

There are deep reasons that imagined communities will always be a powerful reality in international politics.

By Stephen M. Walt

Way back in 2011, I wrote a column for *Foreign Policy* on “the most powerful force in the world.” The powerful force I had in mind wasn’t nuclear deterrence, the Internet, God, Lady Gaga, or even the bond market; it was *nationalism*. The idea that humans form distinct tribes based on a common language, culture, ethnicity, and self-awareness, and that such groups ought to be able to govern themselves, has shaped the history of the past 500 years in ways that many people still do not fully appreciate.

Nothing has happened since then to alter my views; if anything, the importance of understanding the power of nationalism is even greater today. It was nationalism—specifically, a desire to regain lost national autonomy—that drove the British decision to leave the European Union, even though the movement’s leaders (and I use that term advisedly) cannot figure out how to do it and departure is likely to make most Britons poorer and could lead to the eventual dissolution of the entire United Kingdom. U.S. President Donald Trump rode nationalist nostalgia for an imagined past (“Make America Great *Again*”) to the White House in 2016, and it forms the basis for the protectionist and anti-immigrant policies that keep his political base loyal now. Nationalism is central to Chinese President Xi Jinping’s ambitious efforts to make China a world leader, and it is the common thread uniting right-wing European politicians in France, Austria, Italy, Hungary, and Poland. Everywhere one looks, in fact, one sees nationalism at work in today’s world.

Why is nationalism so powerful, and why is its impact so important?

For starters, humans are social beings. From the moment we are born, we belong to some sort of community—a family, a tribe, a village, a province, and, today, a country. Because we depend on those around us from the very beginning, humans have evolved to be highly sensitive to in-group/out-group distinctions. Being able to identify friends and foes quickly was once critical for survival, and it is cognitively easier to rely on simple indicators (“she speaks my language”; “he looks different than my group”) than conducting an in-depth assessment of someone else’s character or propensities. Given these evolutionary imperatives, it is hardly surprising that humans are probably more sensitive to such distinctions than we ought to be. This is not to say we cannot see beyond our own tribes and forge powerful attachments to others, or that we cannot redefine who is “in” or “out” over time; it is merely to say that we have a strong propensity to identify more strongly with those we regard as being “like us.”

Thus far, the “nation” has been the largest cultural group with this sort of enduring attraction for its members. The defining traits that make up a nation can vary, but they usually include a common language, shared culture, a territorial origin, and a shared narrative about the collective past. Most importantly, a nation is a group of people that *conceives of itself* as constituting a unique community with a particular identity. In Benedict Anderson’s famous phrase, nations are

“imagined communities” where total strangers nonetheless recognize and acknowledge each other as belonging to the same group.

Moreover, as John Mearsheimer points out in his recent book *The Great Delusion*, the power of nationalism rests in part on its symbiotic relationship with the state. Given the competitive pressures inherent in a world with no central authority, states have powerful incentives to encourage national unity within their borders, so that citizens are loyal and more willing to sacrifice for the state when necessary. Promoting nationalism—and especially a common language—also helped create more unified national economies and more productive populations, thereby enhancing the state’s overall capacity.

Similarly, because national groups that lack their own state are more vulnerable to conquest, absorption, persecution, or assimilation, many nations decided that having a state of their own was the best way to ensure their survival as an independent cultural group. The unfortunate histories of the Kurds, Palestinians, Tamils, and many others shows what can happen when a national group’s aspirations to statehood are repeatedly thwarted.

In the modern world, in short, nations want their own states to ensure their survival and autonomy, while states promote nationalism to strengthen themselves and preserve their independence. Nationalist movements hope to add themselves to the ranks of U.N. members, while states do what they can to suppress independence movements within their borders and to create a homogeneous body of loyal citizens. In extreme cases, minorities are expelled, slaughtered, or “re-educated” (as China is now trying to do to the Uighur population in Xinjiang) in an effort to create a more unified (and presumably loyal) population.

Taken together, these twin imperatives help explain why nationalism remains such a powerful and persistent force. And make no mistake: Its impact is profound. Even overly educated and generally skeptical individuals (e.g., me) are hardly immune to its effects. Why do I bemoan the absence of American men among the ranks of the world’s top tennis players? Why do I root for the American team at the men’s and women’s World Cup? Not because I know any of these athletes personally and happen to like them or admire their individual virtues; for all I know, they might be undeserving jerks. No, I’m rooting for them solely because they’re *American*. Although I think of myself as fairly cosmopolitan in outlook and wise to the seductive appeal of national pride, I can’t escape it entirely.

Why should we care about this powerful and enduring phenomenon? First, because national sentiment is easily exploited by political leaders, including most of the demagogues whose activities are currently roiling politics around the world. By wrapping themselves in the mantle of patriotism, and constantly warning about the foreigners that are supposedly threatening our way of life, would-be authoritarians such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban or cynical opportunists such as Boris Johnson can convince supporters that they are the only defense against national decline or even extinction.

Second, nationalist narratives encourage double standards: They rationalize whatever one’s own side does while depicting similar behavior by others in the worst possible light. Americans condemn President Vladimir Putin’s Russia for its actions in Ukraine (and they are certainly worthy of condemnation), but we forget that we’ve done plenty of similar things in the past. It is more than a little ironic, for example, when the same people who loudly demanded that the United States invade Iraq in 2003 (on the basis of dubious arguments and manufactured “evidence”) were quick to attack Russia for its interference in Ukraine. Can you spell

“hypocrisy”? Similarly, U.S. officials like Secretary of State Mike Pompeo routinely portray Iran as a relentless aggressor, blithely ignoring all the moments when the United States has used its vastly greater military powers to interfere in states that had done nothing to attack us. Mind you, I’m not defending Russian or Iranian conduct; I’m just showing how nationalist blinders make it harder to see what is really going on.

Third, nationalism can get in the way of potential political compromises, especially when supposedly sacred national territory is involved. There was no rational reason for Serbia to try to retain Kosovo back in 1999 (the local population was overwhelmingly made up of hostile Kosovars and the region itself was of no great strategic or economic value), but Belgrade could not let it go because it was the cradle of Serbian national identity. Similarly, the inability of contemporary states to solve lingering territorial disputes (whether in Kashmir, the East China Sea, the Sakhalin Islands, or wherever) owes much to the power of national feeling. Not so very long ago, states ceded or sold territory when it made strategic or financial sense for them to do so, and they usually did it without much controversy. (The United States got the Louisiana Purchase from France and Alaska from Russia in just this way, for example). Today, such actions are almost unheard-of, because nationalized populations resist giving up anything that is seen as part of the country’s sacred territory.

Relatedly, nationalism makes cross-border empathy and understanding more elusive. Because all nations sanitize their own history, downplaying or denying their past transgressions and portraying their own actions as consistently noble and benevolent, they frequently won’t remember harms they have done to others. If they do remember it, it will be in a sugar-coated and self-serving form. As a result, subsequent generations won’t understand why others might have a very different view of the past, and thus a different view of the first state’s motivations and character. In some cases, of course, this phenomenon may be present in both countries and make the level of mutual misunderstanding even greater. The result: Each side won’t fully grasp why the other has good reason to be wary or suspicious, and each will be prone to interpret prudent defensive behavior as evidence of irrevocably malign intent. One need only consider the stubbornly toxic relationship between the United States and Iran to see how powerful and enduring such dynamics can be.

Fourth, nationalism has long been a potential source of overconfidence, because most (all?) national myths include subtle or not-so-subtle claims to superiority. Not only is our nation *different* from all others, we are taught, it is also *better*. Nationalism is hard to separate from national pride, and pride makes it harder to believe that outsiders could ever beat us in a fair fight. This tendency doesn’t mean that every tiny David thinks he can beat mighty Goliath (i.e., even proud nations sometimes recognize when the balance of power is stacked against them), but can still lead to arrogance and wishful thinking. It is no accident, I suspect, that die-hard Brexiteers believe leaving the EU will both restore British autonomy (yes) *and* usher in a new era of British prosperity and greatness (no). Brexit proponents may have known such claims were dubious and used them for purely cynical reasons, but the blatant appeal to national pride made audiences more likely to accept them.

Nationalism is not without its virtues, of course. Convincing individuals to make sacrifices for the common good is not a bad thing, and a healthy degree of political unity and pride in a country’s genuine accomplishments is surely preferable to the rancorous, open-ended struggles that divide many democracies today. **Binational or multinational states without a tradition of assimilation do not have an inviting history, and efforts to grant autonomy to every self-**

identifying nation inside a country would probably lead to ruinous levels of dysfunction and eventual dissolution.

In any case, nationalism ain't going away. The challenge, therefore, is to acknowledge its value and limit its vices. That is, of course, easier said than done. At the very least, its power and persistence needs to be recognized and respected. Among other things, a healthy respect for nationalism's power would discourage powerful states from thinking they can remake the world according to their own particular designs, and help us avoid the hubristic fantasies that have caused so much harm in recent years. We live in a world of bristling nationalisms, that's not going to change anytime soon, and acknowledging that is a good basis on which to construct a more realistic foreign policy.

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