

Correlates of Nationalism and Implications for Security in East Asia

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Globalization was expected to eclipse nationalism after the Cold War's end. But in East Asia, a region dynamic with economic and military change, diverse in political systems and levels of development, and divided by historical and territorial disputes, nationalism seems to matter more than ever. Further complicating is how nationalism appears to vary widely: nationalism in China takes a different form than in Japan, and differs still in Southeast Asia. But what exactly is nationalism? More importantly, how can we discern the current and potential effects of different nationalisms on security policy in East Asia?

Nationalism is a sense of loyalty and devotion to a nation, prescribing the promotion of national wealth, power and prestige relative to and often at the expense of other groups. Nationalism is a manifestation of national identity: a consciousness of belonging to a particular national group with distinguishing characteristics. National identity, a product of human psychology, is contingent on historical interpretation and constructed through social interaction. As a result, national identity varies across cases and its expression in nationalist behavior is a necessarily political process. Understanding nationalism and how it matters for security policy is thus theoretically and methodologically complicated. One way to simplify matters is to use key correlates of nationalism to differentiate particular forms, and then consider where and how different forms of nationalism drive policy action and change.

Correlates of nationalism are phenomena that exhibit similar magnitude and directional trends as nationalism and likely drive a country's national identity debates. These include 1) government legitimacy, 2) international political role, 3) national unification, 4) mobilization against external threat, and 5) economic development. These five correlates do not represent a complete typology, that is, there can certainly be others. Nor are they mutually exclusive; most cases exhibit some weighted combination. But there is often a correlate that appears to fit a country's nationalism best, so that correlates can be useful for differentiating forms of nationalism, allowing focused discussion of what would otherwise be a slippery concept with unwieldy variation across cases. Below, a major case of each of the five correlates will be examined in order to spin out implications of different forms of nationalism for security policy in East Asia.

Government Legitimacy in China

A decent argument can be made that Chinese nationalism is related to any one of the five correlates above, but the one that stands out is government legitimacy. The rise of the current Chinese nationalism coincides with the Communist Party's need to maintain the "mandate of heaven" to rule while moving further away from the established ideologies of Marxism, Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. Economic growth is certainly an imperative for Chinese leaders today, but this is because of its importance for government legitimacy, not because of the obvious relationship between China's economic rise and standing in the world.

The process by which Chinese nationalism affects security policy might therefore operate as follows. The Chinese Communist Party pushes a brand of official (top-down) nationalism for the sake of government legitimacy. This involves remaking of the national myth, playing up symbols of national pride (skyscrapers, space program, hosting Olympics, etc.), and playing the "nationalism card" in defense of the government. Official nationalism could one day include revisionist claims such as territorial expansion or regional hegemony. But the current aims of Chinese official nationalism appear internally focused on maintaining social stability and domestic political control. As long as this remains the case, the effect of Chinese nationalism on security policy may be limited to theatrical responses to external provocations, such as the Belgrade embassy bombing or Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian's two states remarks.

However, the government does not hold a monopoly on Chinese nationalism, presenting the problem that domestic political actors or the mass public might use Chinese nationalism against the Communist Party. Official nationalism can lead to an unintentional hardening of public opinion, making compromise difficult, painting the government into a corner and effectively constraining its foreign policy options. Ultimately, bottom-up push back on official Chinese nationalism may force the regime to defend its nationalist credentials, resulting in hard-line, internationally destabilizing positions on security policy. This is dangerous because of possible spillover effects of Chinese nationalism in the region. Most of all, China's growing material capabilities make any increase in the probability that Beijing might exercise force a serious concern, prompting hedging strategies by the U.S., Japan and Southeast Asian nations.

Japan's International Role

In recent years, Japanese nationalism appears increasingly related to external threat perceptions of North Korea and China. But the major correlate of the current Japanese nationalism is squarely that of Japan's international role. In the 1990s, Japan lost the great source of pride associated with rapid economic growth. During the so-called "lost decade" of economic recession, Japanese engaged in much soul-searching about the global role and standing of Japan. During and after the first Gulf War, Japan contributed an enormous sum to the allied effort, approximately \$13 billion. Instead of receiving due

recognition for this contribution, Japan was criticized for an unwillingness to put Japanese soldiers in harm's way. Japan began to see its "checkbook diplomacy" as both unaffordable financially and ineffective politically. This view manifested itself in Japan's bid for a Security Council seat in the United Nations, an organization in which Japan has little influence despite funding more than 20% of the UN budget.

Japan's economic and international political stagnation motivated calls from the Japanese population for strong reform-minded leadership. The administration of Junichiro Koizumi largely delivered, pushing through restructuring plans to put Japan's economy back on track and placing Japan squarely on a path of greater international security contributions in conjunction with an expanded U.S.-Japan alliance. But the remaking of Japan's international role – a process still very much in progress – combined with unresolved historical antagonisms (Yasukuni Shrine, textbooks and competing claims to small islands) such that Japanese nationalism is straining relations with regional neighbors, especially China and South Korea.

The process by which the new Japanese nationalism matters for security policy begins with a domestically perceived Japanese identity crisis which creates political space for idea entrepreneurs. In Japan's case, the faction best positioned to fill this hole and build domestic support for new government policies were conservatives focused on advancing a more "normal" and assertive Japan. The resulting policy agenda, shaped in part by Japanese nationalism, prioritizes international contributions that are expected to deliver Japan the international respect and standing it deserves. Greater U.S.-Japan policy coordination appears positive for international security. But because of historical animosities that remain from the period of Japanese colonialism and military aggression, the problem with the new Japanese nationalism is that it may achieve normalization of the Japanese military before Japan adequately reassures its neighbors. This could build regional tension or even fuel an arms race, based not on accurate assessments of present intentions, but on an overemphasis of historical rivalries.

Korean Unification

Korean nationalism is related to South Korea's recent democratization and rapid economic growth. But the strongest correlate for Korean nationalism is the issue of unification, including other countries' role in the process. The Cold War basically froze North-South Korean relations at their 1953 stalemate. The end of the bipolar international order, collapse of the Soviet Union, China's opening to the world and South Korea's economic success compared to the nearly failed North, all allowed Seoul to engage Pyongyang from a position of new-found confidence. The concurrence of these events with South Korean democratization led to a resurgence of long suppressed desires for unification. The artificial division of the Korean Peninsula and the Cold War context produced a South Korean nationalism focused on competition with the North. Post-Cold War circumstances returned Korean nationalism to its prior purpose: a unified independent Korean state encompassing the entire Peninsula.

This renaissance of Korean nationalism was manifested in former President Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine" engagement of the North and President Roh Moo-hyun's concept of a more self-sufficient South Korean defense policy (meaning less reliance on the United States). The trouble with these policies driven by South Korean nationalism is that Pyongyang does not share Seoul's vision for the Peninsula. Both sides may express desires for unification, but are nowhere near agreement on terms. North Korea rejects economic reforms, human rights and outside contacts that could mount challenges to the Kim Jung-il regime. Much at the expense of its people's welfare, North Korea devotes most of its resources to its large military and the development of missiles and nuclear weapons.

Seoul's policies based on Korean nationalism have yet to elicit North Korean reciprocity or a reduction in military deployments. Meanwhile, Korean nationalism, heightened by grassroots movements, pop culture, media coverage and pandering by government leaders, has caused concern among South Korea's neighbors and security partners. China is hedging against a unified Korea, looking to increase its economic influence over the Peninsula and rewriting aspects of history (Koguryo Dynasty) out of concern for its northeastern border. The United States and Japan show some signs of disengaging their relations with South Korea because of anti-American and anti-Japanese sentiments. With the notable exception of the Dokdo dispute with Japan, Korean nationalism is unlikely to cause Seoul to take any provocative military actions. But because the Korean Peninsula is such a strategic point in East Asia, Korean nationalism's impact on other countries' policies could significantly affect the security landscape of the region.

United States vs. Terrorism

Nationalism in the United States is rather peculiar in that it may combine a sort of superpower pride with a missionary zeal to make the world a better place. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 appear to have elevated American nationalism, at least temporarily, via a "rally around the flag" effect. United States domestic politics concerning foreign policy became dominated by the need to defend America from the external threat of international terrorism. The domestic unity this nationalism provided waned significantly as disagreements intensified over how best to conduct the War on Terror.

Nonetheless, the immediate post-September 11 spike in American nationalism supported security policies with lasting consequences. The American popular response to the threat of terrorism backed not only measures to strengthen homeland security and wage a retaliatory war against al Qaeda and its harboring regime in Afghanistan. It also made possible a preventive war against Iraq, a criminal regime with suspected ties to terrorism, believed to be building an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. Poor intelligence and hidden agendas aside, such action probably would not have been taken absent the post-September 11 nationalism focused on the external threat of international terrorism.

The problem with nationalism focused on external threats is that it can lead to an aggressive security posture disproportionate to the threat or mandate unilateral military action for the sake of national defense. It is debatable whether the U.S. response to September 11 is disproportionate or unilateral. What is clear is that United States military superiority is such that, should the legitimacy of U.S. use of force come into serious question as it has in Iraq, international perceptions of American nationalism can detract from much needed international security cooperation. Moreover, nationalism can preclude adequate analysis of the unintended consequences of aggressively countering threats. It remains to be seen whether the American pledge to "take the battle to the terrorists" ends up creating more terrorist attacks than it prevents.

Southeast Asian Economic Development

Any characterization of nationalism in Southeast Asia will be superficial as the various nationalisms of ASEAN states are in themselves diverse. But there are enough similarities to make a comprehensive look at nationalism in Southeast Asia interesting. Most nationalisms in the region are related to anti-colonialism and place a premium on domestic sovereignty. But since Southeast Asian states exist largely according to colonial borders and patterns of trade, their societies are multi-ethnic and multi-religious, and are not yet fully integrated. On the fringes, this can result in secessionist movements and domestic terrorism. The problem for Southeast Asian governments, in addition to providing for domestic security, is unifying the populace behind a common purpose. That purpose across Southeast Asian states has usually been economic development.

The process by which this nationalism matters for policy begins with a government emphasis on the population's loyalty and sacrifice necessary for increased standards of living. Southeast Asian nationalisms were thus geared toward supporting export-led industrial growth. But this form of nationalism, not being exclusively based on any particular ideology or ethnic identity, tended to be flexible and pragmatic. As ASEAN countries found the need to pursue economies of scale in the context of global competition, Southeast Asian nationalisms came to support regionalism. Presently, Southeast Asian states compete for the driver's seat of ASEAN and try to one-up each other on regional initiatives. While working to build regional consensus on economic cooperation, Southeast Asian governments maintain a keen sensitivity to their own sovereignty, the so-called "ASEAN way."

At this stage, Southeast Asian nationalisms appear more related to domestic security than international security. What is perhaps most interesting is that Southeast Asian nationalisms do not appear to dissuade regionalism, but instead drive competing regional initiatives that respect national sovereignty. The result is a host of ASEAN-related institutions of growing importance for Southeast Asian economic and international relations. These institutions have begun to play an important role in regional security by establishing a framework for military codes of conduct and exchange within ASEAN,

and providing a forum for security-related engagement of Asia Pacific and European countries. The security related accomplishments of ASEAN remain modest however, and it is unclear how much Southeast Asian nationalism, institutions and norms will shape the future East Asian security order.

Scope Limitations of Nationalism and Security Implications

The greatest concern about nationalism is that it produces tense international relations in which grievances may be aggressively addressed or miscalculation and miscommunication can lead to escalation of conflict. Nationalism alone may not be sufficient for conflict, but becomes dangerous when paired with other destabilizing factors. As suggested by the above cases, these include a disaffected mass public or manipulative government elites, especially when either perceives nearing the end of their rope. Perhaps a better analogy is that nationalism primes the fuse for conflict. Should an external provocation or internal crisis come around and provide the spark, serious conflict could ensue.

The cases above, considered for their different correlates of nationalism, suggest myriad processes by which nationalism can affect security policy. It is important to note that nationalism need not result in bellicose foreign and security policies. For example, Southeast Asian regionalism increases despite nationalism, and U.S.-Japan security cooperation expands in part supported by Japanese nationalism. Like competing interpretations of national interest, nationalism can drive policy in different directions and does not bear on all issue spaces or all of a country's international relations in the same way. Moreover, there may be a host of mitigating factors concerning nationalism's effect on security policy. These include the extent of positive-sum relations with other states (usually involving trade), constraints on a nation's material power for addressing grievances, and the influence of stable political institutions.

This brief analysis represents only a sketch of the landscape of nationalism in East Asia and its implications for international security. A more extensive study would show how cases are many times more complicated than presented here. For example, identity debates in Taiwan significantly include all five correlates of nationalism posited in this article: government legitimacy, international political role, national unification, mobilization against external threat, and economic development. To understand more fully the relationship between nationalism and security, other issues need to be considered such as: the affect of international security developments on nationalism, the role of democracy in forming security policy, and the implications of socio-economic, generational and demographic change. These questions will be addressed in the articles that follow.