Nationalism and Political Violence

Seung-Whan Choi, University of Illinois Chicago

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Summary

The world has witnessed the reemergence of nationalism, especially a rising number of ethnic nationalist heads of state, each of whom promises to make his or her country great again. What are the consequences of the rebirth of ethnic nationalism? One of the most notable consequences is closely related to the ongoing debate about whether ethnic nationalism is inherently violent or peaceful. The existing literature mostly centers on ethnic conflict, disregarding other forms of violent outcomes. It also tends to focus on the masses in the context of independent movements, relying on historical anecdotes or a few case studies rather than statistical data. While informative, the literature has difficulty generalizing findings across different countries and time periods. More important, there is a lack of focus on the role that nationalist state leaders, such as Adolf Hitler, Slobodan Milošević, Narendra Modi, Victor Orbán, Vladimir Putin, and Donald Trump, play in inciting various types of violence through ethnic favoritism to maintain power. Such leaders are responsible for provoking significant political turmoil in the form of ethnic terrorism, ethnic conflict, irredentist conflict, and interstate war. When nationalist leaders employ ethnic favoritism to gain support from co-ethnics and thus stay longer in power, they provoke disenfranchised ethnic groups or countries into reacting violently. The latter groups fight back to protect and preserve their ethnic or national identity. Therefore, nationalist leaders can be viewed as the origins of multiple forms of political violence. Empirical analyses may be used to elucidate the connection between nationalist leaders and political violence across countries and years. If future empirical research confirms that ethnic nationalism poses a significant risk to domestic and international peace, it should prompt the security community to address it effectively and promptly.

Keywords: ethnic nationalism, political violence, ethnic terrorism, ethnic conflict, irredentist conflict, interstate war

Subjects: Conflict Studies, Foreign Policy, Security Studies

Nationalism is a political ideology and movement that believes in the congruence of the nation and the state. Its primary purpose is to promote the interests of a particular ethnic group in terms of national unity or ethnic autonomy. Nationalist states consider other ethnic groups within their territory and other states as a security threat. They believe that absolute national unity is the best defense against these perceived threats. However, the arrival of a nationalist state puts the very existence of disfavored ethnic groups and other states at risk. In response, other ethnic groups and states may either try to assimilate into the dominant culture and political system for peaceful coexistence (e.g., minority groups in the United States and Canada), or they may resort to violence to protect their ethnic identity (e.g., Sri Lanka's Tamil minority and Koreans under Imperial Japan).

Scholars have considered nationalism a positive or negative force, depending on how they view it from different historical points. On the one hand, nationalism is seen as a feature of movements for freedom and justice, promoting pride in national achievements and celebrating ethnic, religious, and cultural uniqueness compared to other ethnic groups (e.g., Kitts, 2022; Ko, 2022, 2023). On the

other hand, nationalism can undermine democratic governance and human rights and provoke ethnic violence (e.g., Asal, Ayres, et al., 2019; Asal et al., 2020, 2022; Asal, Gustafson, et al., 2019; Bartels, 2023; Choi, 2022b; Horowitz, 2001; Yazici, 2019). Given that these two opposing forms of nationalism are closely tied to the rise and fall of modern nation-states, many scholars have spent significant time studying their origins (i.e., how and when they arise)[1] rather than their consequences. This aligns with Vom Hau et al. (2023, p. 817) appraisal: "while we may have exhausted the interest in the origins of nationalism, we are just beginning to understand nationalism's variegated consequences" (see also vom Hau et al., 2023).

Some scholars have suggested that nationalism plays a role in determining the flow of migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, immigrants, human rights, foreign direct investment, or economic protectionism (e.g., Choi, 2023, Forthcoming; Hutchins & Halikiopoulou, 2019; Ko & Choi, 2022; Ko & Shin, 2021; Lang & Schneider, 2023). However, there has been limited exploration of the controversy surrounding whether nationalism serves as a trigger for political violence in both domestic and international politics. While leaving a more detailed and contextual theory development for future research, this article offers a broad perspective that state leaders who employ nationalist rhetoric to gain political legitimacy often create policies that favor their own ethnic group while discriminating against others. The leaders' ethnic favoritism, aimed at gaining support from co-ethnics, can become an existential threat to disenfranchised groups, leading them to resort to violence for survival. The ethnic persecution by leaders results in various forms of political violence. This article underscores state leaders rather than ethnic others due to their significant historical roles but insufficient attention in existing studies. As Horowitz and Fuhrmann (2018, p. 2072) lamented, "[the conflict literature] has downplayed or ignored leaders" and "we know remarkably little about [their conflict behavior]."[2]

This article proposes that future research should gather longitudinal data and test whether leaders' nationalist politics precipitates the four most concerning forms of political violence: ethnic terrorism, ethnic conflict, irredentist conflict, and interstate war. This approach differs from previous studies that (a) focus primarily on a single violent phenomenon, such as ethnic conflict instigated by the masses subjected to ethnic persecution, (b) examine activities of ethnic others rather than nationalist state leaders, and (c) prefer the use of historical examples over statistical data. It is worth noting that those four forms, reflected in Malešević's (2013) four types of organized violence and Hechter's (2000, pp. 15–17) nationalism-fueled violence, have garnered significant interest and concern among scholars and policymakers because of their direct connections to personal, national, and international security issues.

Conducting a cross-national, time-series quantitative analysis will allow future researchers to identify the general pattern regarding the question of whether ethnic nationalism is benign or malicious across time and across space. The results may reveal that when state leaders utilize nationalism to enhance political legitimacy, they are more likely to be responsible for spreading political violence rather than the other way around. If this is the case, future research can conclude that in a climate dominated by nationalist politicians, the security community must revise its roadmap to domestic and international peace to incorporate and mitigate the negative impact of nationalism.

What Scholars Say About Nationalism and Political Violence

Scholars have examined ethnic strife that arose in the newly formed post–World War II states. Nationalism is their analytical lens to explain why and how internal conflict broke out. Their main concern is with marginalized ethnic groups that want to establish an ethnically homogenous nation within a given territory.

Gellner (1983) provided insight into the periodic outbursts of national independence movements caused by ethnic victimization. The dominant ethnic group often tries to suppress other ethnic groups by emphasizing the unity between the nation and the state (Griffiths, 2017). Van Evera (1994) expanded on Gellner's work by examining scenarios of irredentism, or mismatches between the nation and the state where co-ethnics live in a neighboring state. These situations can lead to wars retaking co-ethnics' homes and lands (Saideman & Ayres, 2008; Siroky & Hale, 2017). Stating that "nationalist myths can help politically frail elites to bolster their grip on power," Van Evera (1994, p. 30) warned that the volatile nature of nationalism is likely to precipitate cross-border war. Mearsheimer (2018) explored how nationalists who aspire to state–nation congruence defend their country against marginalized ethnic nations that they view as inferior and hostile. When nationalist states interact, they often display hypernationalism, which means people who think their country is exceptional and superior view other nations as inferior or dangerous. This phenomenon creates animosity and hatred toward other nations and acts as a strong motivator to subdue dangers with violence and/or elevate other nations through dominance. Put another way, "hypernationalism can be a potent source of war" (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 401).

Using a qualitative and historical approach, some studies evaluate nationalism as a double-edged sword. Some believe that nationalism is associated with images of bloodshed, killing, bombings, and wars, while others view it as a unifying force that brings peace and stability to countries with diverse ethnicities.

The first group of studies, which perceive nationalism as a trigger for political violence, highlights its significant role in historical events, such as the conquests of Imperial Germany and Japan, the Balkan Wars, the Rwandan genocide, the Second Sudanese Civil War, the breakup of the Soviet Union, the U.S. invasion of Iraq following September 11, and Russia's takeover of Ukraine's Crimea (e.g., Bertoli, 2017; Hechter, 2000; Malešević, 2002; McCartney, 2004; Özkirimli, 2017; Smith, 1998; Wilkinson, 2004; Wimmer, 2013, 2018).

These studies use a small number of countries as historical illustrations. Brass (1991) studied India and the former Soviet Union and discussed how interactions between state leaders and elites from nondominant ethnic groups shape ethnic identity and nationalism. By analyzing Serbia, Gagnon (1995, 2004) maintained that political violence against Kosovars, Croatians, and Bosnian Muslims was one of the most significant atrocities in the aftermath of the former Soviet Union's collapse. Sekulić et al. (2006) analyzed a case in Croatia where former president Franjo Tudjman invoked nationalism to mobilize Croatians against Croatian Serbs. Harff and Gurr (2004, p. 222) drew attention to internal conflict among different ethnic groups, each of which "[shares] a distinctive and enduring collective identity based on shared experiences and cultural traits." Kaufman (2015, p.

33) stressed that "ethnic identity does become a useful tool for [political leaders] to use for seeking popular support." Snyder (2000) demonstrated that elites incite nationalist sentiments during periods of democratization for political gains. Mansfield and Snyder (2005) discussed how leaders can become trapped by the nationalism that they unleashed during democratization. Gruffydd-Jones (2017) explained how national leaders exploit national holidays and initiate conflicts. Nevertheless, a majority of studies limit their scope to a few case studies for a relatively short period. This limitation hinders the generalization of the conflict behavior of nationalist leaders.

The second group of studies focuses on people rather than state leaders and contends that nationalism creates a favorable environment for domestic politics and international relations. For instance, Depetris-Chauvin et al. (2020) showed that national football teams' victories increase trust in other ethnicities and reduce intrastate violence. Malešević (2013) contended that nationalism is contemporaneous with new engines of mass violence attributable to state-building processes but is rarely the underlying cause of terrorism, revolutions, genocide, and wars. In a survey experiment, Ko (2022) revealed that Chinese foreign policy attitudes do not become hawkish when celebrating national achievements and the greatness of the national Self. By combining U.S. experiments with European mass and elite survey data, Powers (2022) found evidence that nationalism built on equality mitigates militarism and facilitates support for security cooperation. Lind (2022), after presenting several historically positive examples, criticized academics and public intellectuals who view the nation-state as evil, anachronistic, or both.

Why Leaders Matters

Nationalism becomes a contentious issue either when state leaders manipulate it to gain political support from their own ethnic group or when disfavored ethnic groups rebel against the nationalist regime to settle scores. Along these lines, existing studies identify two types of nationalism. Tilly (1994) introduced two terms: state-led nationalism, when state leaders use it to maintain power, and state-seeking nationalism, when disfavored ethnic groups use it to challenge the status quo. In Feinberg's (1997) conceptualization, nationalism is categorized into two forms: nationalism of exclusion, where nationalist leaders seek to victimize other ethnic groups (e.g., Adolf Hitler and Min Aung Hlaing), and nationalism of resistance, where ethnic groups mobilize against nationalist regimes (e.g., Basques, Rohingya militants, and Québécois). Lake and Rothchild (1996, p. 54) explained nationalism through the lens of ethnic activists and political entrepreneurs. Ethnic activists mobilize their co-ethnics against the nationalist regime, while political entrepreneurs, regardless of mass sentiments, implement their own nationalist policies to discriminate against other ethnic groups (see also Green & Seher, 2003; Hardin, 1995; Saideman, 1998). This section discusses why state leaders legitimize their power through nationalism and why nationalist leaders prompt ethnically motivated violence later.

The ultimate goal of political leaders is to remain in office as long as possible (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003). To achieve this goal, political leaders must ensure that the people perceive their rule as legitimate. Legitimacy comes from the popular belief that a political leader has the right to govern the country, and it is not created out of thin air. Hence, political leaders strive to legitimize their power. Although not all leaders seek to enhance their legitimacy by appealing to nationalism (and

their reliance on nationalist rhetoric and policies varies significantly), many do given that nationalism is instrumental in rallying their own ethnic group, usually at the expense of ethnic others (Calhoun, 1993). For nationalist leaders, nationalism is an important source of political legitimacy. In contrast, challengers work to delegitimize leaders' rule and denounce leaders as illegitimate, particularly if they are separatists seeking some form of secession or self-determination (Sorens, 2017). For example, Bosnian leaders promote the unity of their ethnic people, while Bosnian Serbs have worked to delegitimize the nationalist regime in pursuit of self-determination. As is well-known, Canadian state leaders and French Canadians have conflicting views on who can legitimately govern Quebec (Dahl, 1971; Gerth & Mills, 1946; Hurd, 2020).

Legitimacy is neither automatically bestowed nor permanently given. Leaders must continually legitimize their authority to remain in power and advance their policy agenda (Barker, 2001). When leaders lack legitimacy, the public questions their vision for the nation, and their policymaking efforts become unfavorable. Leaders struggle to achieve policy goals, especially when confronted by opposition forces, leading to legislative deadlock(s) or regime collapse. Under this circumstance, leaders will likely leave an unfavorable legacy after their term ends (Dahl, 1971; Taylor, 1997). When Mikhail Gorbachev lost legitimacy in the eyes of his Communist allies, he could not prevent the fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the debacle of his government. Gorbachev's legitimacy crisis resulted in a victory for Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush—they were able to claim domestic and international political legitimacy over the "evil empire" (Bessinger, 2002; Lane, 2019).

Nationalist leaders seek to legitimize their political power by asserting the supremacy of the dominant ethnic group (Barker, 2001, p. 24; Johnson & Rundlett, 2020). The goal of nationalist leaders is to form a strong bond with their own ethnic group, as it efficiently creates a supportive base of co-nationals who are more likely to agree with their nationalist visions and goals than with other ethnic groups. It is not surprising that "ethnic identity does become a useful tool for [political leaders] to use for seeking popular support" (Kaufman, 2015, p. 33). Consequently, political leaders feel compelled to align the nation's boundaries with its governance unit, as it provides a more secure claim to legitimacy with the consent of the governed. Because the birth of modern nation-states was based on the congruent ethnic identity between leaders and the masses (Birdal, 2017), political leaders consider nationalism one of the most effective ways to enforce and reinforce political legitimacy (Goodman, 2017). As Haas (1986, p. 709) stated, "legitimate authority under conditions of mass politics is tied up with successful nationalism." This strongly suggests that "nationalism [becomes] the most potent principle of political legitimacy in most of the modern world" (O'Leary & Sambanis, 2018, p. 415) and that "nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy" (Gellner, 1983, p. 1).

It should be noted that throughout history, nationalist leaders have emerged across various countries, irrespective of regime type. These leaders are found in autocratic countries such as China, Syria, Turkey, and Russia, as well as in nascent democracies like Estonia, Mexico, and Slovakia, and in full-fledged democracies such as India, the United Kingdom, and the United States. However, leaders' efforts to legitimize their position through nationalist rhetoric and policies often backfire, provoking resentment from disfavored ethnic groups. This is because nationalist politics is

paradoxical as “a territorial political unit can only become ethnically homogeneous. . .it either kills, or expels, or assimilates all non-nationals” (Gellner, 1983, p. 2). Therefore, it is not surprising that disfavored ethnic groups perceive nationalist rhetoric and policies as threatening and intimidating.

Ethnic Nationalism as a Cause of Multidimensional Political Violence

Although ethnic nationalism has been involved in various violent events, most studies link it to a single type of political violence.[3] In 1960, historian Elie Kedourie (1960) argued that nationalism is liable for numerous forms of deadly political violence, including social disruption, persecution of ethnic others, and enabling mass mobilization for ethnic violence, terrorism, and wars. However, subsequent scholars of nationalism have mostly limited their inquiry to ethnic conflict. This focus is driven by their primary research interest in nationalist independence movements led by the masses rather than state leaders. This specialization creates what is known as “the ‘silo’ problem in the field, where ‘ethnic conflict’, ‘terror(ism)’, ‘state repression’, ‘non-violent protest’, and other ‘forms’ of political conflict are artificially separated from one another and studied in isolation” (Moore, 2017, p. 58). As a result, existing studies neglect to employ a holistic approach to explore the effect of nationalism on all possible forms of political violence.

The silo problem has narrowed scholarly views and made it challenging to see the overall picture. Scholars might become like blind men trying to describe what an elephant looks like—touching an elephant’s “tail” and claiming that an elephant is just like a snake. Similar to how a blind man must explore the entire body of an elephant to understand its overall size and composition, scholars of political violence should also examine the effect of nationalism on multifaceted forms of political violence. A holistic approach will allow the discovery of the overall trend of nationalism—bloody or benevolent.

Nonetheless, it would be an overstatement to say that the separation of studies on ethnic conflict, terrorism, state repression, and other forms of political conflict is a problem unique to nationalism research. In political science, it is common practice to focus on one dependent variable at a time, as the goal is often to identify causal relationships between specific variables. This specialization is a standard practice that allows for an in-depth examination of specific phenomena and helps in establishing precise causal mechanisms. It is not surprising that the silo problem has arisen from scholars’ depth of knowledge required in each research area, methodological differences, and the benefits of focused research in uncovering specific causal mechanisms. However, the standard approach of specialization might discourage scholars from enjoying the potential benefits of cross-disciplinary research. Scholars who are interested in expanding their research interests beyond their area of expertise have to pay high barriers to entry, as it requires acquiring new knowledge, methodological skills, data collection, and so on. As a result, scholars might wish to live on academic islands: “We do not interact in our journals (indeed, we seldom publish in the same places), we do not mix well at our conferences, and we are disparaging of what it is that we imagine others do” (Weiss & Wilkinson, 2014, p. 22). This tendency has led to losing valuable insights from other studies that could help solve the silo problem. “We tend to lose sight of the fact that all of us are studying politics of one form or another and so perspectives that span the [area] divisions are particularly valuable” (Jervis, 2000, p. 93).

Figure 1 depicts how nationalism can lead to a vicious cycle of multidimensional rather than unidimensional political violence. Nationalism emerges as a salient security issue when (1) state leaders and (2) the dominant ethnic group refuse to acknowledge the existence of other ethnic groups. At the height of ethnic tensions, (7) disfavored ethnic groups,[4] fearing for their future, are likely to (3) resort to terrorist violence to settle scores when they lack sufficient military capacity compared to the regime or (4) rebel against the incumbent leadership if they can compete with government forces. If (7) these ethnic groups make a successful armed revolt, they can (8) establish a nation-state where they claim dominance. To break this cycle, it is essential to create and foster ethnic harmony within their own territory. Otherwise, they have to face the challenges of disgruntled ethnic groups striving for independence (e.g., from British India to India, to Pakistan, and to Bangladesh). Figure 1 also shows that (1) when state leaders launch military campaigns to rescue co-ethnics in a neighboring country, they often engage in irredentist conflict (Hechter, 2000; Horowitz, 2001; Malešević, 2013). In another scenario, (1) state leaders may (6) initiate international conflict by claiming the superiority of their nation over others (Bertoli, 2017; Braumoeller, 1997; Gruffydd-Jones, 2017; Schrock-Jacobson, 2012).

While nationalism can lead to various forms of political violence, the limited data collection restricts the discussion mainly to (1) state leaders, (3) ethnic terrorism, (4) ethnic conflict, (5) irredentist conflict, and (6) international conflict. As noted, most previous studies have examined these phenomena separately.

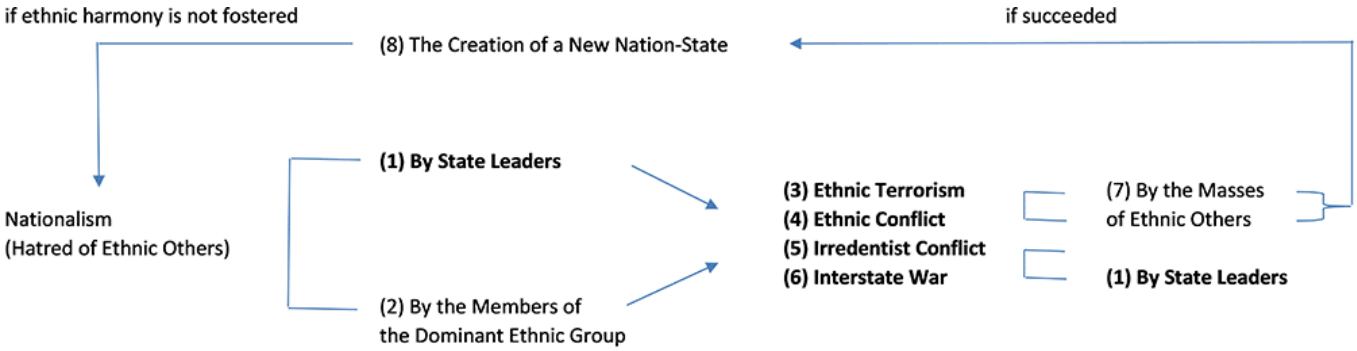

Figure 1. Nationalism and political violence.

Slobodan Milošević's role in the Yugoslav Wars illustrates how nationalist leaders can exacerbate the four destructive forms of political violence. Yet, most existing studies treat the Wars as armed struggles among different ethnic groups and pay little attention to the fact that Milošević escalated the severity of the conflicts by invoking Serbian nationalism. This article argues that the exclusion of Milošević from the analysis has led to an incomplete picture and a less clear understanding of the Wars. It is vital to recognize Milošević's role in the Wars. Milošević should be differentiated from other political leaders given his unique approach to nationalism, epitomized in the motto of a "Greater Serbia." This sets him apart from Josip Broz Tito, who strove to maintain Yugoslavia's unity despite its diverse nationalities, languages, and religions. Milošević employed Serbian nationalism to justify his authority and portrayed other ethnic groups—including Kosovars, Croatians, Bosnian Muslims, and even NATO members—as enemies of a superior Serbian nation.

Milošević's nationalist politics prompted him to engage in warfare even when he knew that his military was weaker than his adversary's (e.g., NATO during the Kosovo War). If Milošević, a nationalist, had not come to power, the country would have experienced substantially less violent conflict in the forms of ethnic terrorism, ethnic conflict, irredentism, and international conflict (Carmichael, 2017; Gagnon, 1995, 2004).

Despite Milošević cultivating a fertile ground for nationalism, most existing studies examine the Yugoslav Wars within the context of ethnic conflict, often neglecting to place them into a broader perspective and disregarding other violent dimensions. Furthermore, compounding the silo problem is the current literature's heavy reliance on historical case studies. While historical case studies allow researchers to uncover specific characteristics of individuals, groups, countries, or events, they are prone to selection bias—another likely reason for the inconsistent findings in the literature. When human history is sliced into small pieces by country or year, finding evidence for any particular argument becomes relatively easy. By using snapshots of the history of a nation-state, one can easily zoom in on events showing either positive or negative consequences of nationalism. Previous studies are vulnerable to this sample bias, preventing scholars from identifying a general pattern. The very advantages of historical case studies—providing more context and details than other analytical approaches—mean that their findings cannot be universally applied.

In responding to existing studies that are unidimensional, historical, and ethnies-focused, this article proposes that future researchers should utilize quantitative analyses to examine whether nationalism is associated with the four forms of political violence most linked with nationalist fervor: ethnic terrorism, ethnic conflict, irredentism, and interstate war.[5] Simply put, future research needs to investigate if nationalist leaders exacerbate multiple violent conflicts using quantitative approaches, an area long overlooked in studies of nationalism.

Nationalist State Leaders as a Cause of Multidimensional Political Violence

Existing studies on nationalism have usually focused on mass nationalism or state-seeking nationalism, which is seen as a response by ethnic others mobilized for national independence against the incumbent government (Conversi, 2007). This article pays attention to ethnic nationalism,[6] which is advocated as a strategy of political legitimization by state leaders. Nationalist state leaders are different from other political leaders who seek support from their colleagues and the public in policymaking. Donald Trump is an example of a nationalist state leader who frequently ignored advice from his policy advisers and the voices of concerned citizens. He unilaterally decided to attend the 2018 Singapore Summit with Kim Jong-un, the North Korean leader and America's sworn enemy.

While rare in nationalism studies, prominent figures have recognized the crucial role of state leaders in history. For example, Thomas Carlyle (1841, pp. 1–2) stated that the "Great Men" contributed significantly to the most crucial developments in human history. Max Weber (1947) discussed the role of charismatic leaders who precipitated major social changes and consequently

shaped modern society and nations. Henry Kissinger mentioned that "as a professor, I tended to think of history as run by impersonal forces. But when you see it in practice, you see the difference personalities make" (quoted in Isaacson, 1992, p. 13). Sandal (2017, 2022) underscored religious leaders' potential and actual role in creating a peaceful and just society. Hechter (2000, p. 15) maintained that state-building nationalism "is embodied in [central rulers'] attempt to assimilate or incorporate culturally distinctive territories in a given state." Straus (2015) concluded that nationalist leadership heavily determines whether interethnic conflict results in genocide.

Leaders imbued with nationalist sentiments often occupy higher positions in the state, allowing them to advocate for their nationalist agenda. They tend to manipulate the significance of national identity in politics rather than being influenced by the nationalist sentiments of the masses. These leaders often receive a high volume of media attention for their nationalist beliefs and policies, while mass nationalism—nationalist sentiments among the general population—is usually expressed in the media in support of the political leader.

This article focuses on state leaders who genuinely hold nationalistic beliefs. It argues that their actions reflect a profound, bone-deep (or at least policy-deep) belief that nationalism is the best way to legitimize their rule and lead the country. These leaders can be viewed as political entrepreneurs who prioritize their own policies and victimize minority groups in the process (Lake & Rothchild, 1996). While they may behave opportunistically, they strategically aim for top-echelon positions where they can easily dismiss voter or selectorate preferences (Green & Seher, 2003; Hardin, 1995; Saideman, 1998).

In a democratic system, nationalist leaders may rise to power when their agenda resonates with the masses. Viktor Orbán, for instance, came to power due to widespread discontent with EU austerity programs and refugee influx. Recep Erdogan won a majority of the popular vote by underscoring political stability, the nation's greatness, and its influence on the international stage. He appealed to the public, who cared about national pride (Sandal, 2021). However, these political maneuverings may not be needed in nondemocratic regimes, where the head of state is not elected through free and competitive elections but through nondemocratic means or force. For example, Chun Doo-Hwan came to power through a royal military coup and was the sole presidential candidate in South Korea, endorsed by an electoral college that overwhelmingly supported him—cast 2,524 (99.99%) yes votes out of 2,525. Indeed, Chun Doo-hwan did not need to chase mass sentiments to become president of South Korea in 1980 (Choi, 2022a). Leaders like Min Aung Hlaing in Myanmar and Xi Jinping in China assumed office through military coups and party selection, respectively, irrespective of mass sentiments. These examples suggest that the origins of nationalist leaders are diverse and may vary by regime type or depend on specific historical circumstances. Because the consequences of nationalism, not its origins, are the main focus of this article, the complexities of why nationalist leaders rise to power are not detailed. Instead, this article's conceptualization tackles whether their nationalist rhetoric and policies fuel political violence.

This article proposes a general theory on leader nationalism: When state leaders play the nationalist card—emphasizing the superiority of their ethnic group and treating other ethnic groups and nations as inferior and hostile entities—they play a crucial role in the onset of political violence. Feelings of superiority make nationalist leaders more inclined to engage in violent actions against

other ethnic groups and nations (Jenne, 2021; Tajfel, 1982; Woodwell, 2007). The absence of state leaders who act on nationalist political agendas would reduce violent incidents, both domestically and internationally.

Though understanding the activities of the masses is essential in conflict processes, this article suggests that researchers focus on leader nationalism more than mass nationalism due to data (un)availability. The former is more straightforward to observe than the latter.

> [The] view from below, i.e., the nation as seen not by governments and the spokesmen and activists of nationalist (or non-nationalist) movements, but by the ordinary persons who are the objects of their action and propaganda, is exceedingly difficult to discover.
>
> (Hobsbawm, 1992, p. 11)[7]

If more empirical data become available, future researchers can enhance the probable causal link among leader nationalism, mass nationalism, and political violence.

Having laid the theoretical steppingstone that links nationalism to political violence, this article briefly explains how leader nationalism gives rise to the four specific violent outcomes: ethnic terrorism, ethnic conflict, irredentism, and interstate war. Future researchers should develop more detailed theories of each violent phenomenon and explore an integrated theory that includes all potential conflicts arising from leader nationalism.

Leader Nationalism and Ethnic Terrorism

When state leaders amplify in-group versus out-group animosities to legitimize their political power, they set ethnic identity (the ethnicity of other people's family's country of origin) and national identity (other people's state of residence) on a collision course, creating a hostile environment where ethnic others may resort to violence. This tendency is particularly pronounced when nationalist state leaders place members of their own ethnic group in key governmental positions while excluding those of other ethnic groups from the state apparatus and the political system. Disfavored ethnic groups fear a potential loss of group identity and, in extreme cases, potential extinction. As a result, disfavored ethnic groups are more likely to resort to terrorist attacks such as bombings, kidnappings, and assassinations to settle their grievances. Historical examples include the Provisional Irish Republican Army, Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Leader Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict

Contrary to existing literature that attributes ethnic conflict to mass ethnic grievances, this article postulates that state leaders, through the promotion of nationalist sentiments and policies, should be held accountable for the outbreak of ethnic conflict. Nationalist leaders cast disfavored ethnic groups as "enemies within." This legitimation strategy is accompanied by ethnic favoritism for the dominant ethnic group and ethnic discrimination against disfavored ethnic groups. These disfavored ethnic groups—thus made to feel alienated, threatened, and marginalized—may turn to

armed rebellions. These ethnic groups seek forms of self-determination for survival because attempting to depose the incumbent government means confronting a strong military. In doing so, they could protect their ethnic identity from the attacks of nationalist leaders and establish ethnic autonomy or an independent state if successful. Because previous studies demonstrate that mass nationalism drives ethnic conflict, future research may compare mass nationalism and leader nationalism in conceptualization and empirical tests.

Leader Nationalism and Irredentist Conflict

Irredentist conflict, which involves attempting to annex foreign territories based on shared ethnic ties, occurs when state leaders have ample opportunity and/or grievances. This is why existing studies devote their attention to the opportunity (and/or grievances) aspect of irredentism. However, they neglect to explore the effect of the willingness of political leaders. Because willingness transforms opportunity into irredentist action, its absence in the theoretical and empirical discussion should be remedied. This article contends that leaders' willingness matters. When state leaders appeal to nationalism to garner public support, they commit to a nationalist foreign policy that involves protecting ethnic kin outside the nation's borders. As a result, they are more likely to pursue territorial expansion across borders to save people of the same ethnicity, more so than non-nationalist leaders. This is evident in irredentist military campaigns carried out by Adolf Hitler in the Sudetenland, Slobodan Milošević in Kosovo, and Vladimir Putin in Crimea, contrasting with the absence of such pursuits by Park Chung-Hee in Gando.

Leader Nationalism and Interstate War

Even though conflict studies suggest that democratic countries tend to maintain more peaceful relationships with each other (Choi, 2011, 2013, 2016; Choi & James, 2007, 2025; Choi & Noll, 2021), this article predicts that when democratic leaders employ ethnic nationalism to legitimize their regime domestically, their contentious rhetoric leads to foreign policy decisions, potentially resulting in military action and thus increasing the likelihood of interstate conflict. When in power, nationalist presidents and prime ministers promote the idea of their nation being superior while portraying other ethnic nations as inferior, evil, and dangerous. They assure their citizens that they are unwavering defenders of national pride and security. As a result, citizens expect their leaders to engage in aggressive nationalist rhetoric when provoked by other ethnic nations. Similarly, citizens in other ethnic nations also expect the same from their own nationalist leaders. This cycle of fervor between nationalist leaders and citizens in a dyad leads to increasing audience costs in democracies, making the occurrence of interstate conflict more likely. In essence, nationalism renders democratic dyads conflict-prone, counteracting the peacebuilding effects of democratic institutions. In other words, democratic leaders' deployment of nationalist rhetoric limits their foreign policy options, deviating from the expectation of peaceful relations with other democracies.[8]

Where to Locate Data for Empirical Analysis

To engage in empirical analysis, gathering or finding appropriate datasets is essential. Collecting new data is time-consuming and costly, so using existing datasets can be an alternative solution.

Leader Nationalism

To measure leader nationalism, researchers can use the leader nationalism variable from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project (2019).[9] This variable captures state leaders' promotion of nationalism as a political legitimation strategy. The V-Dem Project generates an index by asking multiple country experts: "to what extent does the current government promote [nationalism[10] as] an officially codified set of beliefs to justify the regime in place?" The V-Dem Project turns the survey responses into an index using point estimates from a Bayesian latent factor analysis model. The leader nationalism variable is a continuous index, ranging from "0" (lowest ethnic nationalism) to "1" (highest ethnic nationalism).

State leaders receive the same yearly nationalism score throughout their tenure. For example, Donald Trump scored 1 for his entire first term as president, and Margaret Thatcher scored 0.667 during her premiership. The V-Dem Project included no specific questions about conflicts in the wording, so the country experts did not rate leaders' nationalism immediately before known conflicts. As a result, Thatcher's nationalism score remained consistent before or after the 1982 Falklands War with Argentina, showcasing no significant change. Viktor Orbán, Hungary's prime minister since 2010, consistently receives a score of 0.667, reflecting his nationalist orientation as prime minister, his anti-immigration rhetoric, and his uncompromising defense of national sovereignty (Waller, 2020).

Alternatively, researchers can find an indicator of leader nationalism in the Database of Political Institutions.[11] Even though the Database covers the brief years 1975–2017, it introduces several factors related to leader nationalism. EXECNAT, for instance, depicts nationalism in the executive branch. This variable is binary; it is set to "1" if the political party of the chief executive supports the preservation of ethnic or national identity and "0" otherwise. This dichotomous variable has limits because party platforms constitute the basis of its formation. Party platforms may not align with the political views of presidents or prime ministers. While party platforms state one thing, political leaders may act differently. For example, the Republican Party of the United States' present platform does not include Donald Trump's "America First" philosophy (Choi, 2022c).

The Four Dependent Variables

Ethnic Terrorism

Future research may operationalize ethnic terrorism as the total number of terrorist attacks carried out by ethnic groups across time and across countries. Polo's (2020) GTD2EPR dataset can be a suitable source, as it provides valuable information on ethnic groups in each country during the period from 1970 to 2009. Polo linked terrorist groups identified in the Global Terrorism Database to politically relevant ethnic groups in the Ethnic Power Relations dataset.[12]

Ethnic Conflict

To operationalize ethnic conflict, future research may use the concept of violent self-determination, defined as "movements by one or more political organizations that are connected to an ethnic group and make claims for increased self-determination from the state" (Sambanis et al., 2017, p. 3). Sambanis et al. (2017) offered a dataset on self-determination movements for the years 1945–2007. The ethnic conflict variable is dichotomous, coded as "1" for the onset of separatist violence and "0" otherwise.

Irredentist Conflict

Siroky and Hale (2017) gathered actual and potential irredentist cases from 1946 to 2014. These cases include instances where the dominant ethnic group in a kin state has a co-ethnic enclave in a contiguous state. The exclusion of other countries is intentional to focus on cases where irredentist military campaigns are plausible, avoiding dilution of the statistical estimation. Irredentist conflict is dichotomous, coded as "1" when a state forcefully attempts to annex territory populated by co-ethnics in a contiguous state, and "0" otherwise.

Interstate War

Future research may operationalize interstate war as the onset of conflicts that resulted in at least 1,000 battle deaths (Ghosn & Bennett, 2007). The COW War Data, 1816–2007 (v4.0) or the Dyadic Inter-State War Dataset are two proper venues to gather information on interstate war.[13]

Conclusion

While acknowledging the possibility of interaction between leader nationalism and mass nationalism, this article suggests that future empirical research focus more on leader nationalism due to its data availability. It is essential to investigate whether leader nationalism acts as a trigger for political violence, as political leaders significantly impact human lives and health both within and across countries. This article proposes a simple conceptualization to initiate this investigation: When state leaders promote ethnic nationalism to increase their legitimacy, they are likely to

increase the risk of four types of political violence—ethnic terrorism, ethnic conflict, irredentist conflict, and interstate war. Furthermore, this article offers some guidance for empirical testing to help researchers establish a link between nationalism, when wielded by state leaders, and violent political phenomena. If future research finds a significant and aggravating effect of leader nationalism, it could be conveyed to the security community, which can then develop strategies to mitigate the adverse impact of nationalist state leaders and promote peace and stability in the 21st century.

As noted, many studies view nationalism as a widespread political ideology among the masses, usually associated with aspirations for national independence. Their research questions often overlook the violent nature of leader nationalism, and their historical cases are frequently challenging to generalize across time and countries. Even when nationalism is considered a cause of political violence, researchers typically focus on ethnic others employing violence to fight for national independence (e.g., Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, Tibetans in China, Kurds in Turkey and Iraq, and Chechens in the Soviet Union and Russia). This perspective falls short of capturing a crucial feature of the resurgent nationalism—the rise of nationalist leaders to power in the 21st century. This perspective also does not consider the implications of Massimo d'Azeglio's remarks on the unification of Italy: "we have made Italy. Now we have to make Italians" (quoted in Roeder, 2007, p. 29).

To gain a deeper understanding of ethnic nationalism and its consequences for domestic and international peace and stability, researchers need to examine state leaders more closely. The year 2022 demonstrates how prevalent the emergence of nationalist leaders has been. In April, Viktor Orbán overwhelmingly secured his fourth consecutive term as Hungary's prime minister. In the same month, Marine Le Pen achieved more than 40% of the vote in the presidential election in France, a record showing for her far-right party. In October, the incumbent nationalist leader Jair Bolsonaro fiercely contested the Brazilian election against Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Giorgia Meloni, head of the neo-fascist Brothers of Italy Party, was elected prime minister in November. Additionally, in the same month, Donald Trump's Republican Party gained control of the House of Representatives (Ezra Klein Show, 2022). Donald Trump is currently serving as the 47th president of the United States. Neglecting the possibility that nationalist leaders may increase the risk of political violence will make it difficult to address the grave danger of rising nationalism to both domestic and international peace in a timely manner.

Last but not least, this article emphasizes the importance of using a quantitative approach when studying leader nationalism. Quantitative research can provide additional, generalizable insights into the relationship between nationalism and political violence. In the past, nationalism studies have largely ignored statistical analysis, instead relying on a few qualitative examples for theory testing—the process of ascertaining whether the qualitative case either supports or does not support a given theory. Most existing studies remain qualitative and historical and have not kept pace with the quantitative trend in the once-qualitative domains of international relations and comparative politics. To feature nationalism studies more often outside of specialized journals and book publishers, it is important to provide more opportunities for researchers to publish empirical work. Although qualitative scholars view nationalism as more complex than numbers and figures, empirical research should also be welcomed as an essential component of social science, as it seeks

to discover the phenomenon's reality. Wimmer's (2013, 2018) studies of nation-building and war are great strides in this direction. Moreover, empirical research can help future researchers respond to the challenge of Mylonas and Tudor (2021), who called for more comparative, cross-disciplinary, and cross-regional research.

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Notes

1. On the origins of nationalism, see Özkirimli (2017) and Smith (1998).

2. Religious leaders often imbued with nationalist sentiments are also yet to be studied. Sandal (2017, p. 1) stated that "the role of religious actors in conflict transformation . . . is relatively new to the study of politics."

3. The discussion centers on violent political phenomena rather than nonviolent ones for analytical simplicity.

4. Disfavored ethnic groups may seek support from other countries, especially when the former share ethnic ties with the latter (Carment et al., 1997; Khosla, 1999). This third-party intervention scenario is not considered because the focus of this article is not the masses of ethnic others but nationalist state leaders. If an ethnic presence within the potential intervener leads nationalist leaders to intervene on behalf of co-ethnics abroad, the conflict becomes an irredentist one, as depicted in Figure 1.

5. Alternatively, future researchers should employ mixed methods research to bridge the gap between the need for quantitative rigor and the complexity of multidimensional political violence. In doing so, future researchers could benefit from case studies, which can capture nuanced interactions and complex causal pathways that quantitative approaches may struggle to encapsulate (e.g., Carmichael, 2017).

6. Other types of nationalism, such as civic nationalism, are not discussed because future research will have difficulty collecting related data for a substantial number of countries over an extended period.

7. Some scholars attempt to capture mass nationalism using survey datasets like the International Social Survey Program National Identity and the World Values Survey (e.g., Bieber, 2018). However, the variations in wording across surveys and the limited number of sample countries and years present challenges to their application here.

8. Mansfield and Snyder (2005) viewed nationalism as a trigger for conflict in the process of democratization (regime transition from autocracy to democracy), but not in mature democracy per se. They were also transparent about the use of an indirect measure of nationalism in the statistical analysis (p. 169).

9. See Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem).

10. Nationalism is one of the political ideologies in the following survey question: “how would you characterize the ideology/ideologies identified in the previous question?”

11. For detailed information, see the Database of Political Institutions (DPI): 2020.

12. Ethnic groups gain political relevance when their members are capable of mobilization, particularly in response to discrimination by state leaders based on their identity (see also Goodman, 2017; Johnson & Rundlett, 2020).

13. See the Correlates of War.

Related Articles

Devolution, Regional and Peripheral Nationalism

Ethnicity and Nationalism in Wars of Secession

Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Colonialism

Nationalism and Post-Communist International Relations

Nationalisms in International Conflict