

The Rise of Nationalism and Its Role in The Crisis of The Liberal World Order and
Global Conflicts



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Throughout the annals of history, it has been observed that nationalism has come both as a unifying agency, and a destructive one. The resurgence of nationalism is becoming an alarming driver in global conflicts and leading to worsening the crisis of the liberal world order. In short, the growth of nationalism in domestic politics has many times overbrought the spillover effects to the international field producing disastrous effects. Nationalism is historically a double-edged sword uniting as well as dividing forces. Constructive nationalism promotes collective identity, often based on (cultural, linguistic or historical) shared features and together with it, unity and cultural pride, destructive nationalism brings about exclusion, xenophobia and geopolitical aggression. More recent geopolitical tensions show us acutely the dynamic from the Napoleonic wars to the present when nationalist agendas lead to tensions and wars. The Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Israel-Palestine war and the Cold War 2.0 between China and the U.S. are some examples of how nationalism, when weaponised, increases global discord.

Nationalism as a Historical Catalyst for Conflict

The use of nationalism has a historical precedence of initiating conflict both within and among nations. During the 19th century, the Napoleonic Wars were probably the best example of how nationalism can be weaponised with expansionist aims, and how that can unleash chaos in a region. The language of revolutionary ideals was used by Napoleon Bonaparte to clothe his conquests under the vision of a 'greater France' which plunged Europe into prolonged warfare. Nationalism preceded both World Wars in the 20th century. Nationalist rivalries among ethnic groups were fundamental to the Balkan tensions that produced World War I. The grievances which led to the rise of Adolf Hitler to power in Germany originated from the Treaty of Versailles. His hyper-nationalist brand glorified Germany's supremacy and dehumanised minorities which led Europe and the world into a devastating war, World War II. After the end of World War II, ideological differences made nationalism unimaginable in the Cold War. The Cold War between the U.S. and USSR is what we might say was a global competition for influence in which it was often couched in nationalist rhetoric of protecting and expanding spheres of dominance. The start of the post-Cold War era brought with it a period of globalisation and multilateralism, only for them to soon be put on ice by the slumbering nationalism.

Nationalism's Global Resurgence

In the 21st century, nationalism resurfaces, but in more fragmented, more violent forms, led by populist leaders. Nationalism is at the fore in the post-COVID era, as the world is witnessing intense global and regional rivalries in the form of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Israel-Palestine conflict and U.S.-China rivalry.

1. Russia-Ukraine Conflict

The Russia-Ukraine war shows just how brutally nationalism can bleed. Russian President Vladimir Putin justifies his invasion of Ukraine to restore historical Russian lands and protect ethnic Russians. There's this nationalist rhetoric that legitimises aggressive foreign policy while sticking to deft domestic mobilisation during the economic slowdown and political turmoil. In turn, there has been a surge in defensive nationalism in Ukraine with people rallying around sovereignty, and resisting Russian invasion and domination with all possible means. However, the nationalist fervour on both sides has exacerbated divisions that prolonged the war and forwarded ripple effects on global food and energy supplies.

2. Israel-Palestine Conflict and Iran-Hamas Dynamics

The historical and religious narratives of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have a deep connection with Nationalism. The right-wing government of Benjamin Netanyahu has expanded this in a manner that recognises territorial claims before diplomatic solutions. Groups like Hamas represent Palestinian nationalism which came from many years of dispossession and resistance. The most recent surge in violence in Gaza was sparked by nationalist fervour on both sides, and the traditions that encourage neither or both sides to budge are what drive conflict forward. There is another expression of nationalism based on religious ideology, that is, Iran's support for Hamas. Iran is able to use nationalist rhetoric to boost its influence in the Middle East region and to present itself as the defender of Palestinian rights as well as a challenger to the domination of the West.

3. U.S.-China Rivalry

The rivalry between the United States and China in geopolitics has much to show how nationalism can fuel competition between major powers. The two nations see themselves as rivals of national pride and security. However, the United States gives importance to preserving its world leadership, while China's nationalism is concentrated on the return to its historical status of a powerful state. China's assertive policies in the South China Sea, Belt and Road Initiative and Taiwan's sovereignty are all based on President Xi Jinping's vision of "national rejuvenation". The America First narrative is what American nationalism is all about, especially under Donald Trump. On both sides, such nationalist rhetoric makes tensions even worse and takes us back to a period when it feels like the Cold War reignites.

The Role of Populist Leaders in Nationalist Escalation

The power of nationalist sentiment on the one hand has been proven powerful for populist leaders to deflect criticism and consolidate power and on the other hand, serves to exacerbate worsening global conflict. This external threat is then consolidated into an existential threat, the very threat they use to obtain public support and hide their domestic failure. For example, Putin's use of 'historical Russia' to invade Ukraine combined with spouting out about protecting the 'ethnic

Russians' acted as a distraction from economic stagnation and political dissent within Russia. Just like Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has succeeded in repeatedly applying nationalistic rhetoric to portray security threats and territorial expansion to avoid political instability and corruption charges. During Donald Trump's first term, his America First agenda – centred around economic protectionism, trade wars and anti-immigration rhetoric, was fuelling American nationalism among its citizens. These tactics have been effective at consolidating domestic power on the one hand, and on the other hand, only exacerbating regional and global conflict. Such narratives provide fertile ground for miscalculations, as demonstrated by the Russia-Ukraine war, in which further Western support for Ukraine has helped to entrench Putin's position, and in Israel and Palestine, where nationalist fervour on both sides only reinforces cycles of violence.

The Global Fallout of Nationalism and the Crisis of Liberal World Order

The crisis of liberal world order is becoming more acute as the global fallout of nationalism weakens international institutions, breaks multilateralism and intensifies geopolitical tensions that give rise to humanitarian crises. Donald Trump during his presidency has framed global cooperation as a threat to sovereignty and his decision to withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord, has encouraged a weakening of collective climate action. Just like in the case of Vladimir Putin's annexation of Crimea, for which he argued that it would 'protect the Russian identity,' Russia's war on Ukraine was kicked off by an aggressive nationalist policy. The U.S.-China trade war that defined the economic nationalism epitomised was an unwelcome disruption in the global supply chains as it widened inequalities while nationalist-led exclusionary policies further fanned out refugee crises, such as the Myanmar crackdown on Rohingya minorities. By exacerbating divisions, nationalism increases sources of conflict and humanitarian crises, putting an even greater burden on inclusive global governance and also weakening international institutions fighting these destabilising forces.

Conclusion

Global peace, stability and cooperation, under a liberal world order, are being threatened by today's rising Nationalism in today's geopolitics. The Russia-Ukraine war, tensions between Israel and Palestine, and competition between the US and China are all current examples that show nationalism is not only a cause of the escalation of the geopolitical rivalries but also a precondition to the appearance of the global conflict. Populist leaders cunningly use nationalist narratives to shore up their own station in power and to distract from the domestic issue. Such tactics, while effective domestically, weaken global alliances, strain diplomatic channels, and encourage zero-sum approaches that undermine cooperation. Global economic nationalism, and protectionist policies, break up global supply chains, deepen economic differences, and make humanitarian crises worse. All the above discussion

leads to the conclusion then that on the one hand nationalism can be a unifying force for a nation, but on the other hand, it can be a precipitating force for intense regional and global conflict as historical examples illustrate. The rise of nationalism is threatening the liberal world order, where international peace is hampered, weakening of international institutions, the decline in democratic values and rising humanitarian crisis. Solving these problems requires a change to a more inclusive form of governance, to help embed the international community's collective will into individual states' national interests, and to reinforce multilateral frameworks that can reconcile national interests with a broader global stability.