

Elites Are Getting Nationalism All Wrong

Russia, the United States, and the European Union are each suffering from resulting disasters.

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If a head of state or foreign minister asked for my advice—don't be alarmed; that's not likely to happen—I might start by saying: "Respect the power of nationalism." Why? Because as I look back over much of the past century and consider what's happening today, the failure to appreciate this phenomenon seems to have led numerous leaders (and their countries) into costly disasters. I've made this point before—in 2019, 2011, and 2021—but recent events suggest a refresher course is in order.

What is nationalism? The answer has two parts. First, it starts by recognizing that the world is made up of social groups that share important cultural traits (a common language, history, ancestry, geographic origins, etc.), and over time, some of these groups have come to see themselves as constituting a unique entity: a nation. A nation's claims about its essential character need not be strictly accurate in either biological or historical terms. (Indeed, national narratives are usually distorted versions of the past.) What matters is that members of a nation genuinely believe that they are one.

Second, the doctrine of nationalism further asserts that every nation is entitled to govern itself and should not be ruled by outsiders. Relatedly, this view tends to make existing nations wary of those who do not belong to their group, including immigrants or refugees from other cultures who may be trying to enter and reside in their territory. To be sure, migration has been going on for millennia, many states contain several national groups, and assimilation can and does occur over time. Nonetheless, the presence of people who are not seen as part of the nation is often a hot-button issue and can be a powerful driver of conflict.

Now, consider how nationalism has derailed leaders who failed to appreciate its power.

Exhibit A, of course, is Russian President Vladimir Putin's failure to understand how Ukrainian nationalism may thwart his attempt to restore Russian influence in Ukraine through a swift and successful military campaign. Russia's war effort has been error-prone from the start, but the Ukrainians' fierce and unexpected resistance has been the most important obstacle in Russia's path. Putin and his associates forgot that nations are often willing to absorb huge losses and fight like tigers to resist foreign invaders, and that is precisely what the Ukrainians have done.

But Putin is hardly the only world leader to blunder in this way. For much of the 20th century, European rulers of vast colonial empires waged long, costly, and ultimately unsuccessful campaigns to keep restive nations inside their imperial sway. These efforts failed nearly everywhere—in Ireland, India, Indochina, most of the Middle East, and much of Africa—and at a frightful human cost. Japan's efforts to conquer and establish a sphere of influence in China after 1931 was equally unsuccessful.

When it comes to grasping the meaning of nationalism, the United States hasn't done much better. Although U.S. diplomat George Kennan and other U.S. officials recognized that nationalism was more powerful than communism and fears of a "communist monolith" were overblown, most U.S. officials continued to worry that left-wing movements would sacrifice their own national interests and do Moscow's bidding for ideological reasons. During the Vietnam War, a similar blindness to the power of nationalism led U.S. leaders to underestimate the price North Vietnam was willing to pay to reunify the country. Not to be outdone, the Soviet Union came to grief when it invaded Afghanistan in 1979 because it failed to realize how fiercely the Afghans would fight to repel a foreign occupier.

Sadly, U.S. leaders didn't learn very much from these experiences. After Sept. 11, 2001, the George W. Bush administration convinced itself that it would be easy to topple the existing regime and replace it with a shiny new democracy because it assumed Iraqis and Afghans were yearning to be free and would greet U.S. soldiers as liberators. What the administration got instead was stubborn and ultimately successful resistance from a local population that did not want to take orders from an occupying army or embrace Western values and institutions.

The failure to appreciate the power of nationalism is not confined to wars and occupations. The European Union was created in part to transcend national attachments, foster a shared European identity, and mitigate the competitive pressures that have led to repeated and ruinous European wars. One can argue that the EU has had pacifying effects (though I would argue other factors are more important), but national identities remain an enduring part of Europe's political landscape and continue to confound elite expectations.