

From: Stratfor <noreply@stratfor.com>
Sent: Wednesday, March 05, 2014 4:08 AM
To: Camillo M. Santomero
Subject: The Lure of Nationalism - Robert D. Kaplan's Global Affairs



The Lure of Nationalism

March 5, 2014 | 0904 GMT

Stratfor

By [Robert D. Kaplan](#)

Nationalism is in the air. The scholars may talk about universal values and the need to combat all forms of determinism and essentialism. The media may see the world through the prism of universal human rights. The global elite may meet at Davos and proclaim the ability to engineer a liberal order that can defeat what it sees as primordial divisions. And yet [nationalism](#) -- as well as other exclusivist tendencies such as tribalism and sectarianism -- manages to survive and prosper.

Nationalism is alive and well throughout East Asia, where modern states united by race and ethnicity, such as China, Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines, contest not lofty ideas but zero-sum geography -- that is, lines on the [blue water map of the Pacific Basin](#). The advance of military technology (fighter jets, ballistic missiles, surveillance satellites, warships) has created a new geography of strategic competition between two great world civilizations, those of China and India. The [Middle East has experienced less a democratic revolution](#) than a crisis of central authority, in which ethnic, tribal, religious

and sectarian identities have become more important than ever in modern times. In Europe, the steady decline of the European Union, originating in a half-decade-long economic crisis, has led gradually to the resurgence of national identities and right-wing, anti-immigrant movements. In the heart of Africa we see fighting and the fear of ethnic cleansing based on religious and tribal identities in the Central African Republic and South Sudan. Clearly, the scholarly, journalistic and business elites are speaking a different language than large elements of the masses worldwide.

The elite vision of a world in which a universal identity would vanquish narrower ones was a product of the end of the Cold War and the onset of the communications revolution. The Cold War's conclusion fostered the hope that a democratic universalism would make increasing headway, now that ideological battles were a thing of the past. The communications revolution that followed - - that is, the dynamic development of the Internet, smartphones, social media and more frequent and cheaper air transport links -- was believed to be an additional force for global unity.

But technology is value-neutral. It can be a force for division as well as for integration. The more that people of different origins and values come in contact with one another, the more they become aware of not just how similar they are, but of how different they are. Proximity, whether real or virtual, can ignite the deepest animosities.

And so can freedom.

"Freedom" is a sacred cow in the American political lexicon. But freedom can unleash not just the power of the individual, but also the power of the group. For as people become liberated from oppression they become aware not just of a prideful self-identity, but also of a prideful ethnic or sectarian identity. Americans assume that other people's experience of freedom will necessarily mirror their own, but that is a conceit more than an analysis.

In this vein, the immediate post-Cold War era constituted an interlude of naive assumptions. Perhaps the most obscure but telling of those naive assumptions was the easy conventional wisdom in the early 1990s that what the Middle

East required was commercial mass media -- a media relatively free of government constraints, which would dilute the region's anti-Western attitudes and its political, ethnic and religious divides, especially those between Arabs and Israelis. *If only the dictatorial regimes controlled less of what people thought, then the Middle East would be more peaceful.* More freedom, in other words. Well, such mass media did come into being. By the standards of the region's past, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya were independent networks modeled in style and sophistication after American ones. But their points of view -- in their Arabic language broadcasts, at least -- turned out to be extremely hostile to Western and Israeli interests, perhaps more so than the government channels they replaced. For the new networks reflected the narrow attitudes of their culture just as American networks do.

There is another element to the communications revolution to which elites are blind. Elites, by definition, are often brilliant and attractive-looking people who, because of their own sophistication and social confidence, welcome cosmopolitanism in all its aspects. For they are never insecure in the midst of exotic environments. But most people in this world are not brilliant, not terribly attractive and therefore not confident. Their lives are full of struggle. So they naturally take refuge in family, community, religion or some form of solidarity group. And in an era when mass communication technologies foster a vulgarized assault on traditional values -- whether directly or indirectly, knowingly or unknowingly -- the sense of alienation among the masses intensifies, leading them deeper into such exclusivist beliefs.

So it is not an accident that there is now a resurgence of Orthodox Judaism and evangelical Christianity in the United States, just as there is a resurgence of ideological Islam across the Greater Middle East. Whether it is trashy mass culture in America or relentless Westernization in the Muslim world, people require an ethical and a spiritual anchor against the forces of technological alienation. In Asia, perhaps the most technologically modernized region on the globe, nationalism helps to fill this void. For nationalism is modernism writ large. As people who do not retreat back into religion lose their literal faith in God and thus their belief in individual immortality, they take refuge in what the late Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz called a "collective immortality."

Europe is, after a fashion, a more severe example of this phenomenon because in Europe, we have a cosmopolitan global elite that actually runs an empire-of-sorts: the European Union. And so the [rise of anti-EU, right-wing tendencies](#) demonstrates not only a cultural, but also a direct political hostility to such elite rule. The EU leaders and bureaucracy long ago made the calculation that nationalism was dead and that the European masses, after two world wars, wanted nothing so much as a respite from divisive forces. But the masses may increasingly require an anchor in history, nationalism and religious identity that protects them against the bland universalism and increasing (albeit exaggerated) Islamization of the continent that the EU has thus far delivered.

Though, while globalization may have sparked a certain alienation that leads to a return of nationalism, that does not mean this new nationalism will be as intense and intoxicating as the kind that ravished Europe in previous centuries. Nationalism may return, but in a far more nuanced state -- a result of the very globalization that caused it in the first place. Indeed, there may currently be a rebalancing taking place in terms of personal and communal identities, for we are all not simply indistinguishable individuals bumping into each other in a global meeting hall. We have linguistic, cultural, ethnic and religious attributes that are very much a part of who we are, and which set us apart from others.

So the tension between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, and between universalism and exclusivism, must continue. Soon after the Berlin Wall collapsed, anticipating a degree of global unity, Milosz observed, "our bond of being born in the same time, thus being contemporaries, is already stronger than that of being born in the same country." Will, in fact, the bond of time overcome the bond of blood or narrow belief? It is this question that towers above us all.

Comments? Send them to responses@stratfor.com

[unsubscribe from this list](#) | [view email in browser](#)