

The Resurgence of Nationalism in Southeast Asia: Causes and Significance

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Introduction

There was a time from the 1940s through the 1960s when the themes of nationalism and communism dominated the study of politics in Southeast Asia (Emerson, Mills and Thompson 1942; Trager 1959; Brimmell 1959; Emerson 1960). Throughout much of the above period, nationalist struggles (led in some cases by communist parties) were raging in Burma, Indochina, Indonesia and Malaya/Malaysia. These days communism is gone but nationalism is making a surprising comeback, as evidenced in the recent protests involving Cambodians and Thais over Preah Vihear Temple and those in Vietnam against Chinese claims over the Paracels and Spratly Islands. In Indonesia, the last decade has seen frequent mass protests against Singapore, Malaysia, Australia and the United States. Part of Indonesians’ national identity is their Muslim identity, which has spurred massive demonstrations against US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet the Philippines is perhaps the first Southeast Asian country to experience a surge of nationalism in the late 1980s when anti-Americanism led to the closure of US military bases there.

This essay surveys the development of nationalism in Southeast Asia since the end of the Cold War and evaluates the significance of the trend for regional peace and cooperation. As I argue, the growth of nationalism *as a mass movement* has different causes in each Southeast Asian context where it occurs, but at the regional level the phenomenon can be explained by three main factors: the end of the Cold War, the rise of China, and the wave of liberalization and democratization in Southeast Asia since the mid-1980s. Like the old nationalism of the early 20th century, the new nationalism has many positive missions, including defense of national territory, assertion of national identity in a more complex world, and reconciliation of people divided by Cold War ideologies. At the same time, the resurgence of nationalist claims is posing many risks to regional peace and cooperation.

The (old) nationalism and its liberation mission

When the Second World War erupted in Western Europe in 1939, all of Southeast Asia except Thailand was under colonial rule. Nationalist movement as a form of modern mass politics had arrived here in the 1910s and 1920s (even earlier in the Philippines) and had been brewing

¹ This is more a concept paper than one based on field work and primary sources. Due to time constraints, not all sources can be credited. Comments are welcome but please do not circulate without author’s permission.

among the new native elites in the colonies. The rise of modern nationalism in the region can be credited to capitalist development, the availability of Western education, the adoption of vernacular languages and the spread of the vernacular press (Gellner 1983; Anderson 1991). Emerging native elites were educated in colonial schools and strongly influenced by Western ideals of liberty, socialism and democracy. At the same time, they were frustrated by racism, capitalist exploitation and political oppression under colonial rule. As Southeast Asia became integrated into the global networks centered in European colonial metropolises, developments in Japan, China, Russia and Turkey also had profound impact on native elites' thinking and imagination. It was in this context that nationalism was born in Southeast Asia as elites found new national identities and demanded liberation from unjust colonial rule. Although the new identities contained many gaps and holes, they profoundly motivated colonized peoples during and after World War II in their struggle for national independence.

Fast forward to 20 years later, by the 1960s all of Southeast Asia had become independent nations. All major ethnic nations had acquired self-rule either through wars against colonial powers (Indonesia, Vietnam), or through peaceful transfers of rule to native elites (Cambodia, the Philippines, Burma, Brunei, Malaya and Singapore). To be sure, struggles for self-rule continue even today, in southern Philippines, southern Thailand, northern Burma, and Papua New Guinea. Yet these struggles are limited to marginal territories along the border. Unlike the nationalist struggles of the 1940s and 1950s that shaped the fate of millions of Southeast Asians, current demands for self-rule involved smaller ethnic groups who had not been integrated into the new nation-states. These claims to self-rule are unlikely to change current national boundaries significantly.

Thus the old nationalism accomplished its grand mission of liberating Southeast Asians from the colonial yoke. Thanks to a fierce nationalist struggle, millions of Indonesians today are bound together in a relatively stable political entity (Kahin 1952). Massive Western armies were defeated at the hand of Vietnamese communists cum nationalists who created a cohesive modern nation-state in the process (Woodside 1974). Modern Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines also have developed into viable nation-states thanks in no small part to nationalism (Roff 1994; Hill and Kwen 1995; Stanley 1974). Yet it is easy to overlook the costs and limitations of Southeast Asian nationalism. To begin with, nationalist struggles destroyed millions of lives in the Indochinese countries. Despite such costs in human lives, nationalism in these cases simply replaced European governors-general with indigenous dictators or oligarchs. In Vietnam, the broad-based nationalist movement was hijacked in 1948 and made to serve the political ambitions of its communist leaders. For decades, Southeast Asians chafed under dictators (Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, Ne Win in Burma, Sukarno and Suharto in Indonesia) and totalitarian communist regimes (Vietnam, Laos since 1975, Cambodia during 1975-1993). Cambodian Khmer Rouge leaders killed far more Cambodians than the French and Americans ever did. Burmese people were poorer and more oppressed under Ne Win than under British rule.

Vietnamese communist leaders exploited peasants through collectivization more than the French colonial state was ever able to. Understanding the limitations of the old nationalism is necessary to evaluate the new.

The surge of the (new) nationalism

Chronologically, it is the Philippines where nationalism first re-emerged in Southeast Asia. Through the 1970s to the early 1980s, Ferdinand Marcos ruled the Philippines as a dictator (Wurfel 1988). He placed the country under martial laws, suppressed opposition groups, and battled a communist insurgency in the south. Together with Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and South Vietnam, the Philippines under Marcos served as a key link in the US strategy to contain communism in Southeast Asia. Because Marcos was valuable as a close ally, American administrations from Carter to Reagan did their best to support him despite his regime's rampant corruption and gross violations of human rights. As the opposition coalesced around Corazon Aquino in the mid-1980s, US support for Marcos enraged democratic activists and brewed Filipinos' anti-American sentiments (Thompson 1995). After Marcos was overthrown, these sentiments would transform into popular demand for US troops to leave the Philippines (Brands 1992). By the early 1990s, for the first time in Philippine history, the country did not host any foreign military bases.

General Suharto differed from Marcos in many ways, not the least in the general's greater success in bringing economic growth to Indonesia (Elson 2001). Yet the Suharto regime was also a dictatorship that maintained strict control over Indonesian society. Under Suharto, the expression of popular sentiments was allowed only through government channels. Early in his rule Suharto suppressed Islamic demand for political participation and forced Islamic groups to profess loyalty to Pancasila, the state doctrine (Effendy 2003). By the early 1990s, he began to court Muslim support and opened up the political sphere for Islamic identity to be expressed (Hefner 2000). Externally, Suharto was not as close to the US as Marcos, but he was fiercely anti-communist, having risen to power under special circumstances in which hundreds of thousands of communists were killed (Crouch 1978). While Indonesia did not support the American war in Vietnam, it was much closer to the West than to the Soviet bloc (Leifer 1983).

After the financial crisis struck Indonesia in 1997, the Suharto regime quickly lost its legitimacy in the face of enormous street protests. Since Suharto stepped down in 1998, Indonesia has seen a sharp, sometimes violent, resurgence of Islam. Yet there was more to the movement than an effort to assert religious belief. Since the 1920s, Islamic identity has become a part of many Indonesians' national identity (Vu 2010). The Dutch were opposed both because they were foreigners and because they were infidels. While nationalist leaders such as Sukarno, Sutan Sjahrir and Mohammad Hatta succeeded in establishing a secular state, many Muslim leaders such as Mohammad Natsir and Mohammad Roem who had played prominent roles in the Indonesian struggle for independence maintained their strong conviction that the Indonesian state

must be Islamic in its character. This union of Islam and the nation in Indonesian imagination motivated the rise of protests in the last decade against the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Perwita 2007). On one hand, these protests expressed Indonesian Muslims' solidarity with their fellow Muslims viewed as being under attack by the US. On the other, the protests assert the identity of Indonesians as a Muslim nation in opposition to Western domination. Muslim groups not only protested against the US, they also demonstrated against Singapore, Australia and even fellow Muslim Malaysia for policies or statements that were perceived as insulting to Indonesia. These protests have sometimes strained Indonesia's relations with its neighbors and with the US against the wish of the Indonesian government.

Unlike in the Philippines and Indonesia, the recent surge of nationalism in Vietnam is primarily directed at China. Vietnam fought a border war with China during 1979-1988. While precolonial Vietnam and imperial China had fought numerous battles whenever China sought to dominate Vietnam, the war between the two communist powers in the 1980s was not primarily about China's domination but about the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia whose Khmer Rouge leaders were allied with China (Chen 1987; Evans and Rowley 1990). China was also angered by Vietnam's harsh treatment of ethnic Chinese and its military alliance with the Soviet Union. Although Vietnam succeeded in coping with Chinese aggression, by the late 1980s it had sunk into a deep economic crisis due to mistaken socialist policy, the Western embargo, the costly occupation of Cambodia, and the reduction of Soviet aid (Vo 1990). A new generation of Vietnamese leaders decided to embark on economic reform which essentially meant rural decollectivization, the acceptance of a domestic market economy, and the opening up of Vietnam to Western trade and investment (Fforde and de Vylder 1996). When the Soviet bloc collapsed, Vietnamese leaders responded by tightening political control and restoring relations with China in the spirit of socialist solidarity (Vuving 2006). Externally Vietnam joined the ASEAN in 1995 and normalized relations with the US in the same year. Thanks to economic reform and a favorable global environment, Vietnam has achieved rapid growth in national income. The country now trades widely with the West and has joined the World Trade Organization. Until recently Vietnamese leaders have seen China as a reliable comrade in an ideological struggle against American global imperialism. While US-Vietnam relations have warmed up considerably, significant mistrust of the US still exists within the top Vietnamese leadership, especially its security and military establishments.

Anti-China sentiments emerged in Vietnam around 2005 (Thayer 2009). After Vietnam and China signed a new border treaty, news about the loss of Vietnamese territories to China was circulated inside Vietnam and on the internet and drew sharp outcries. At the same time, China stepped up its claims on sovereignty over the Paracels and Spratlys by arresting and shooting at Vietnamese fishermen in the contested areas. The Vietnamese government's attempts to appease China while covering up these embarrassing events enraged Vietnamese intellectuals and youths who organized several spontaneous protests in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in 2008. Anti-China

sentiments have run feverishly high ever since, brewing in private conversations and on the internet. The movement reached a peak in 2009 when it was reported that Chinese companies had been given licenses to exploit mineral and forest resources in many strategic locations in Vietnam (Thayer 2010).

Like Vietnamese who resent their domineering neighbor to the north, Cambodians have long harbored deep resentment of Thailand and Vietnam both of which once colonized their country and annexed large chunks of the ancient Khmer kingdom. Anti-Vietnamese riots flared up in the early 1970s that led to tens of thousands of Vietnamese being murdered. Under the Khmer Rouge, the murder of ethnic Thais and Vietnamese was systematically practiced (Kiernan 1996). The Hun Sen government that came to power in 1979 thanks to Vietnamese support has not condoned anti-Vietnamese resentment, although since the 1990s Cambodia no longer depends on Vietnam for economic assistance or military support. Cambodian nationalism has recently turned against Thailand when Cambodian rioters burned down the Thai Embassy in Phnom Penh in 2003 following alleged remarks by a Thai movie star about Thai ownership of Angkor Wat (Pavin 2009, 456).

Historically nationalism in Thailand has never been as powerful as in its neighbor Vietnam and Cambodia. Nationalist sentiments fueled the military coup in 1932 that overthrew the absolute monarchy with only a single human death. Anti-Chinese riots have rarely occurred in Thailand compared to its neighbors (Wasana 2009). Thailand was a close American ally during the Cold War, and anti-American sentiments were part of the communist appeal in Thailand. The massive street protests in Bangkok that toppled military rule in 1973 and challenged a military coup in 1992 conveyed both anti-Americanism and anger against military dictatorship. During 2000-2006, popular Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawara pursued good relations with Thailand's neighbors, including authoritarian Cambodia, Vietnam and Burma, in part to expand his personal business empire (Pavin 2010, 450). Thaksin was overthrown by the military in 2006, but his party under the leadership of Samak Sundaravej regained power in 2007. In 2008, opponents of Samak launched a challenge against his government by organizing protests against Cambodia's claim for sovereignty over the Preah Vihear Temple located along Thai border with Cambodia. The temple had been ruled by the World Court in the 1960s to belong to Cambodia, and Samak government did not contest Cambodia's claim to it. The protests led to brief gun battles near the temple between Thai and Cambodian troops, causing three deaths. Samak was soon forced to resign and replaced by his opponents. In response, Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen invited deposed Thai Prime Minister Thaksin to be his advisor, severely straining relations with Thailand.

The review of major Southeast Asian countries has showed that nationalism has gained greater significance since the end of the Cold War. The phenomenon develops within the historical and political context of each country where it occurs, but it also reflects certain regional trends that are the focus of the next section.

Regional trends and the (new) nationalism

Three main regional trends (with specific local variations) explain the resurgence of nationalism in Southeast Asia. These trends include the end of the Cold War, the rise of China as a regional power, and the wave of liberalization and democratization since the late 1980s.

First, it is not a coincidence that the resurgence of nationalism occurred by the end of the Cold War (Jager 2007). The Cold War had origins in Europe but Southeast Asians were not pawns in the hands of the superpowers as commonly believed (Vu and Wasana 2009). Rather, many Southeast Asian elites truly believed in either Western democracy or Soviet socialism, and worked hard to enlist the support of one of the superpowers for their partisan cause. Ho Chi Minh went to Moscow in early 1950 asking Stalin for a Soviet-Vietnamese mutual defense treaty (Gaiduk 2003). Stalin turned down the request but agreed to recognize Ho's government and delegated to Maoist China the task of helping Vietnamese communists. At the same time, Ho's rival Ngo Dinh Diem and his supporters inside and outside Vietnam pulled all strings to get the US to commit to him as a man capable of defeating communism (Miller 2004). Thai government was among the first to offer troops for fighting alongside the Americans in Korea—in return for American support and alliance (Wasana 2009).

Because many Southeast Asian elites truly believed in Cold War ideologies, they sought to harness patriotic sentiments to serve ideological causes. In North Vietnam, to be patriotic was reinterpreted to equal to “to build socialism” (Vu 2009). People were made to believe that China was Vietnam's big and generous socialist brother despite so much traditional conflict between the two countries. In South Vietnam, people were made to accept that patriotism meant to fight against communism. Alliance with a foreign country against fellow Vietnamese was considered as “patriotic duties.” While anti-communism was suppressed under Sukarno's formula of Nasakom (nationalism-religion-communism), communism under Suharto was charged of being anti-Pancasila or against the nation. Nationalism was suppressed while socialist solidarity or anti-communist fraternity was promoted. Together with ideological affinities were military alliances, as those that linked communist Vietnam to China and the Soviet Union, those that linked the Philippines and Thailand to the US, and those that linked Singapore and Malaysia to Britain.

When the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the surviving communist regimes (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia) were forced to turn to Western capitalist countries for aid and investment. Cambodia's Communist Party abandoned communism to cling to power through a transition period from war to peace under United Nations' sponsorship. Laos and Vietnam also dropped communist orthodoxy to implement market reform. Although many Lao and Vietnamese leaders still believed in communism, it would be difficult for them to talk about communist paradise while having to beg for foreign investment from the West. Freed from the ideological shackles of their governments, the educated publics could turn their imagination to

new forms of community based on other ties, of which the most critical ones have been religion, ethnicity and money.

A similar phenomenon occurred at the same time in anticommunist countries where the Soviet demise alleviated the fear of the communist threat. Ruling regimes in these countries no longer had the motivation to propagate or enforce an anticommunist ideology. In fact, their capitalist elites quickly saw new opportunities for making money, as living standards in socialist countries were low and their workers were not allowed to organize independent unions. Thailand's Prime Minister Chatchai Choonhavan was the first to visit Vietnam, calling for "turning battlefields into markets." For sympathizers and supporters of communism in Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines, the collapse of the Soviet bloc sharply reduced the allure of communism and the viability of the struggles. As communist parties were dissolved in these countries, an important barrier to the formation of national or other communal bonds was removed. The end of the Cold War thus facilitated the opening up of ideological space for new imaginations of the nation.

Following the end of the Cold War, the rise of China is the second regional trend that has fueled the resurgence of nationalism in Southeast Asia. Despite Chinese leaders' professed belief in its "peaceful rise," China's rapid modernization of its military and its aggressive behavior toward its neighbors in the contested territories have raised significant concerns for the US and for China's neighbors. China still has many "friendly neighbors" such as Myanmar and Vietnam, which helped stem the rise of anti-Chinese sentiments. But as we have seen above in the case of Vietnam, the government has failed to completely suppress the anti-Chinese movement despite its tight control over society. In the future, anti-Chinese sentiments may erupt in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia as they have in the past if these governments see China as a security threat.

The wave of liberalization and democratization since the mid-1980s is the third trend that contributes to the rise of nationalism in Southeast Asia. In the Philippines and Indonesia, democracy has triumphed over dictatorship. Expanded popular participation in democratic politics forced political regimes to accept and carry out the popular will to some extent. In the Philippines, that popular will demanded greater independence from the US. In Indonesia, it has been the Muslim part of the national identity and the solidarity with Muslims elsewhere. The popular will as expressed through elections may not be stable, as evidenced in the failure of Islamic parties in Indonesia to dominate the government. Still, the fire of nationalism remains alive.

In "semi-democratic" Thailand, the liberalization of politics since 1973 and especially since 1992 has also opened up political space for popular movements. We have seen above how the opposition to the Samak government seriously derailed Thai-Cambodian relations. In communist Vietnam, political liberalization has accompanied market reform despite the government's intention to maintain absolute control. The growth of a market economy that lies outside

government control has led to the rise of a new middle class and intellectual strata which do not depend as much on the state as in the old socialist days. The nature of a market economy makes it difficult for the state to keep control, and the recent explosion of anti-Chinese sentiments in Vietnam is clear evidence of this fact.

While the resurgence of nationalism in Southeast Asian countries reflects conditions of local history and politics, as a regional phenomenon the new nationalism bears the stamps of three regional trends: the end of the Cold War, the rise of China, and the liberalization and democratization of politics. Nationalism has not surged in every country in Southeast Asia; nor has it been equally intense in the countries where it emerges. Yet the regional trend is unmistakable although not so well studied. To better understand the new nationalism it is useful to discuss its missions and compare these to the missions of the old nationalism.

Noble missions and looming risks of the new nationalism

The end of the Cold War led to significant disarmament in the NATO and the former Warsaw Pact. Both Russia and the US have sought to reduce their stock of nuclear arms. In Southeast Asia, the end of the Cold War allowed Vietnam to reduce the size of its military which was the world's fourth largest in the mid-1980s. Peace in Cambodia alleviated the needs for Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam to spend on expensive military buildup. Yet the new nationalism seems to be raising the security stake again for some countries in the region. Its first mission is to defend national territories. Under popular pressure, the Vietnamese government has adopted a more assertive position on territorial issues. Vietnam was the largest customer of Russian arms in 2009, with purchases of submarines and other military gadgets. Vietnam has lost the Paracels to China in 1974 and is now trying to keep part of the Spratlys from China. The military gap between Vietnam and China is huge and more purchases are expected. We do not have information about recent arms purchases of Cambodia, but these should also be expected.

A second mission of the new nationalism is to assert national identity, whether it is Cambodian, Thai, Filipino, or (Muslim) Indonesian. The Muslim dimension of this mission is important for Indonesia. Indonesian Muslims can be proud that Islamic spirits have penetrated the laws of the secular state to an unprecedented level in modern Indonesian history. Yet the Muslim dimension also challenges the existing construction of the Indonesian nation-state that unites religiously diverse Eastern and Muslim Western Indonesia. The Muslim dimension of the new nationalism may give new strength to the nationalist conflict in southern Thailand and southern Philippines. Finally, the Muslim dimension may drag Southeast Asian countries into the longstanding global conflict between Christianity and Islam in the West and the Middle East.

A third mission of the new nationalism is to reconcile Southeast Asians who were separated by Cold War camps and brainwashed with Cold War ideologies and their hateful messages. As the nation is resurrected in popular imagination and as the spectre of communism fades, it is now

possible for Indonesians to discuss the events of 1965-1966 during which hundreds of thousands of communists were massacred by the military and Muslim groups. Some modest attempts at restitution and reconciliation have been made with families of former communists and with ethnic Chinese. In communist Vietnam, the reaction to Chinese aggressive moves on the South China Sea has drawn many pro-government Vietnamese and anti-communist overseas Vietnamese together three decades after the bloody Vietnam War.

Unlike the old nationalism of the 20th century, the new nationalism is not aimed at liberating Southeast Asians, most of who have been liberated from foreign rule. Its missions are to assert national identity, to defend national territories, to unshackle the grips of Cold War ideologies and to reconcile those who once belonged to hostile camps. It gives Southeast Asians the national pride they deserve in an increasingly complex world. At the same time, it carries many risks of international and civil wars.

Nationalism by itself may not be sufficient to cause wars but it may be helped by the structural defects of the regional order in Southeast Asia. The first defect involves deep historical resentment among neighbors, in particular those between Thailand and Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam, and Cambodia and Thailand. Unlike the tensions between Singapore and Malaysia which may not last beyond the first or second generation of state leaders, the historical tensions among Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam went back centuries and are likely to persist. Nationalism has already rekindled these tensions in Thailand and Cambodia.

A second defect is the religious diversity of the region ranging from Buddhism to Islam to Christianity. Internal conflict in Myanmar or Thailand between the Muslim minority and the Buddhist majority can cause diplomatic dilemmas for Malaysia and Indonesia. In the past when authoritarian regimes still dominated these two Muslim-majority countries, national leaders could avoid being drawn into the internal conflicts of their neighboring countries (Dhillon 2009; Perwita 2007). It is more difficult today when politics is more open and they have to be amenable to popular pressure.

The third defect concerns the sharp inequality in national income among Southeast Asian countries. At the top are Singapore and Malaysia where many Indonesians and Filipinos work as housemaids and construction workers, and where many Vietnamese women go to find husbands or to prostitute themselves. Many Malaysians seek better paid work in Singapore but travel to southern Thailand for cheap (sexual) entertainment. Inequality provides the fertile grounds for nationalist envy, arrogance, and eventually hostilities.

Conclusion

The resurgence of nationalism is an important political trend in Southeast Asia that has been caused by the end of the Cold War, the rise of China, and the wave of liberalization and democratization since the 1980s. In the Philippines, the target of the new nationalism is the US,

but in Vietnam it is China. Thais and Cambodians target each other, while Indonesians invest significant Muslim contents in their sense of the nation and target the US as well as Indonesia's neighbors.

The new nationalism has noble missions of asserting national identity, defending national territory, and reconciling people once divided by Cold War ideologies. Yet nationalist movements also incur risks of wars, especially when they are assisted by existing structural defects in the regional order.

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