
Reviewed by Kristen Williams (Clark University)

Published on H-Diplo (June, 2024)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

The end of the Cold War and the outbreak of conflicts in the 1990s, such as those in Rwanda and Bosnia, led to an increase in research on ethnic conflict, nationalism, and war. How and why nationalism and nationalist identity can lead to intrastate and interstate war became the focus of this scholarship in the field of international relations.[1] The works in other disciplines, namely sociology, history, and psychology, informed much of this research. For political scientists, particularly international relations scholars, this research examined factors such as political elites’ motivations and public opinion that impacted a state’s foreign policy. *Popular Nationalism and War* contributes to this area of research in examining the connection between popular nationalism and the initiation of interstate conflict.

Jiyoung Ko begins by asserting the following: “Despite the widespread belief that nationalism is one of the major causes of war, our understanding of whether and how nationalism leads to interstate war remains incomplete” (p. 2). Ko argues that the existing literature on nationalism and war, which claims that nationalism is a significant factor contributing to the outbreak of war, has not sufficiently focused on the mass public, and thus proposes “a new theory of nationalism and interstate war” (p. 3). This theory centers popular nationalism: to understand leaders’ decision to go to war, one needs to take into account the “nationalistic sentiments that the mass public holds” (p. 3).

The introduction proffers various elements that define popular nationalism, primarily a mass phenomenon in which nationalist sentiments and national identity are highly salient. The chapter continues with a discussion on the “three main pathways” by which popular nationalism can develop, namely from above by the political elites who initiate war (p. 8) or “for domestic purposes” (i.e., consolidation of power), or from below, such as grassroots movements (p. 9). Ko argues that as “a state-level theory,” popular nationalism impacts
political leaders’ calculations about whether to initiate a war (p. 11). Such calculations revolve around “two moderating factors: political leaders’ perceived chance of complete victory in conflict and their domestic political vulnerability” (p. 11).

Following the short introduction, the book is divided into three parts. In part 1, “Theoretical Foundations,” the relevant literature on nationalism, national identity, and foreign policy, and the proposed new theory on popular nationalism and the initiation of conflict are presented. Chapter 1 delves into various theories in social psychology, namely social identity theory, to understand national identity and nationalistic sentiments about the Self and Others. These nationalistic sentiments, as Ko demonstrates, can engender “two distinct kinds of foreign policy preferences among the general public”: “aggressive, hawkish means” and “expect and demand complete victory as an outcome of an international dispute” (p. 31). Chapter 2 builds on chapter 1 by exploring the impact of popular nationalism on political elites’ calculations regarding war initiation by introducing a new theory: “the conditional theory of popular nationalism and war” (p. 50). Ko’s theory asserts that, in contrast to existing scholarship, popular nationalism does not always contribute to the initiation of conflict. Rather, popular nationalism sometimes has “a restraining effect” on the initiation of conflict (p. 50). To ascertain whether popular nationalism has a “conflict-inducing effect” or “restraining effect,” however, two factors matter, as noted previously: political elites’ “perceived chance of achieving complete victory in conflict and their political standing, particularly whether they are competing with powerful nationalist political opposition” (p. 50). In a nutshell, if political leaders perceive that they can prevail in a conflict, then “popular nationalism will dramatically increase the likelihood of military aggression by incentivizing political elites to use force” (p. 65). If, however, political elites do not think they will be victorious if they initiate war, “the presence of a nationalistic public with adverse foreign policy preferences in this case incentivizes political elites to firmly resist the idea of going to war and instead stick to the status quo” (p. 65). The conditional theory, of course, also includes the second moderating variable: domestic political vulnerability. Political elites want to stay in power, and when faced with opposition from other political actors, such elites are vulnerable, and may initiate a conflict if the nationalistic public has such a preference. Political leaders without domestic political opposition and with a perception that complete victory is unlikely will choose not to use force, in spite of the presence of popular nationalism.

The chapters in parts 2 and 3 investigate different case studies to test the author’s theory. The two case study chapters in part 2 focus on China. Chapter 3 discusses the author’s original survey experiment of 1,500 Chinese citizens that used visual stimuli (videos and images) for nationalistic sentiments. The positive images of the Self contrasted with negative images of the Other, including those focused on Japan, given the negative historical memories of Japan’s occupation of China in the 1930s. After watching the videos, survey respondents were asked about their foreign policy preferences concerning “the territorial dispute between China and Japan over the Daoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea” (p. 92). The findings from the survey experiment showed that depending on the context, there was a preference for hawkish means (military aggression) and outcome (complete victory).

While chapter 3 presents the findings from the survey experiment, chapter 4 traces China’s foreign policy decision-making with regard to its territorial dispute with Japan and other countries in Southeast Asia in the East China Sea and South China Sea, respectively, in the context of popular nationalism. In the case of the East China Sea, Ko notes that this dispute “has been driven by the mass public’s historical experiences or political elites’ domestic legitimation strategy” (p. 116). Yet, even with significant nationalist sentiment of the
population, China’s leaders have not initiated conflict with Japan over the islands. Ko argues that China’s restraint can be explained in two ways. First, as a one-party, authoritarian regime, China’s leaders do not face domestic national political opposition. Second, there is “the low likelihood of complete victory” if China were to engage in military aggression against Japan (p. 126).

In the case of the South China Sea, “Chinese nationalistic sentiments ... have not been as strong as sentiments over the East China Sea dispute” (p. 127). And yet, China has used force in the South China Sea, for example the clash between the Chinese and Vietnamese navies in 1988 or the decision to build artificial islands in the Spratly Islands in 2012. After building these islands, China “built three airstrips and a structure to host long-range surface-to-air missiles” (p. 127).

The chapter also compares China’s and Taiwan’s reactions to Japan’s decision to nationalize three of the disputed islands in the East China Sea in 2012. The Chinese government elected not to use military means but rather engaged in diplomatic activity in terms of statements critical of Japan’s decision. China also “routinized maritime patrols in the disputed territorial waters” (p. 133). Overall, China’s leaders chose to “maintain the status quo” rather than invoke a military response (p. 134). Interestingly, Taiwan had a more hawkish response than China to Japan’s actions even though the Taiwanese public perceived Japan “as a benign Other” (p. 129). For example, coast guard patrol ships sailed “near the disputed waters” and “the Air Force sent F-16 reconnaissance aircraft to the disputed waters to monitor Japanese and Chinese patrols” (p. 140).

Part 3 presents two historical cases: Argentina’s ruling junta’s decision to invade the Falkland/Malvinas Islands in 1982, a British territory (chapter 5), and the War of 1812 between the United States and Great Britain (chapter 6). In challenging the diversionary theory that Argentina’s political leaders decided to invade to quell rising discontent among the population given the worsening recession and repression, Ko argues that it was the changed perceptions of Argentina’s leaders that it would prevail in its military action against Britain that contributed to the decision to invade. Popular nationalistic sentiment had called for the return of the islands, and once the leaders’ perceptions of victory changed and the invasion commenced, the public supported the government’s decision. Chapter 6 examines the foreign policies of two US presidents, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, both of whom “perceived Great Britain as a hostile Other that was attempting to undermine the American republic” (p. 173). Popular nationalism in the US was strong. That said, Jefferson did not initiate a conflict with Britain given the asymmetry of power between the two countries, and thus the likelihood of the US prevailing in such a conflict was low and “the potential costs of defeat would be unbearably high” (p. 178). After Jefferson’s term ended and Madison was elected president, popular nationalism remained a presence. America’s “relations with Great Britain became a major campaign issue” in the upcoming congressional elections, “exploited by Republican candidates and the media for electoral gains” (p. 184). Madison preferred to “maintain the status quo despite the pressure from the nationalistic public,” but “he was unable to stick to his preferred position” given the “domestic political vulnerability” from within his own political party (the War Hawks) (p. 186).

By way of the concluding chapter, as Ko asserts, the book “reveals that there is a new type of domestic audience that conflict studies can consider—a nationalistic public. Contrary to conventional wisdom that the public generally prefers peace, a nationalistic public calls for the use of force while expecting to see their country’s complete victory. This provides new insights for the study of public opinion and conflict” (p. 198). The conclusion also discusses the implications of popular nationalism in the context of US-China relations in the contemporary period, in light of the
concerns that Chinese popular nationalism could lead to war with the United States: “The theory and findings of the book suggest that consistently sending a signal that a militarized conflict will not result in China’s complete victory is of utmost importance” (p. 210). The importance of signaling buttresses realist theory in international relations regarding the role of costly signals for states seeking to deter or defend against their adversaries.

Ko argues throughout that the conventional wisdom asserts that nationalism leads to war: “the association between nationalism and violence is almost taken for granted” (p. 32). Yet, while many works do demonstrate that nationalism can lead to war, the existing research has concluded that the relationship between nationalism and the outbreak of war is much more nuanced. Thus, the book complements, rather than challenges, the literature on nationalism, foreign policy analysis, and war in that it specifies mechanisms for when and how popular nationalism acts as a conflict-inducing or restraining effect.

Further, while not explicitly presented in the book, international relations scholars will find that the work utilizes a levels-of-analysis framework, as the argument (popular nationalism, the two moderating variables, and war initiation) and evidence involve political leaders’ perceptions, domestic factors (i.e., public opinion, mass nationalistic sentiments, political parties), and systemic factors (the balance of power between the aggressor state and target state). As Ko’s case studies demonstrate, it is the interaction of systemic-level factors and domestic factors, such as popular nationalism, economic conditions, military readiness, political parties, media, and so forth, that influences political leaders’ decision-making. Additionally, the case studies reveal that foreign policy actions, rather than simply a decision to initiate war or not, were often along a continuum of militarized responses, such as the US embargo on Britain in the lead-up to the 1812 War, China’s use of “routinized maritime patrols” (p. 133), or Taiwan’s decision to send F-16 reconnaissance aircraft to monitor Japanese and Chinese military patrols.

Scholars in disciplines such as political science, history, psychology (particularly those in the interdisciplinary field of political psychology), and sociology who study nationalism and national identity, and the interplay between elites and mass publics will appreciate the extensive discussion of the relevant research from these disciplines. More specifically, readers interested in the role that elites and the public play in the context of foreign policy decision-making will find the historical and contemporary case studies, as well as the original survey experiment of Chinese citizens to test the proposed new theory, informative. Overall, Ko’s work provides a welcome contribution to the continued study of public opinion, nationalism, and war.

Note


Kristen P. Williams is professor of political science at Clark University. She has authored and coauthored works related to nationalism, war, and gender, including Despite Nationalist Conflicts: Theory and Practice of Maintaining World Peace (2001); Identity and Institutions: Conflict Reduction in Divided Societies (2005), Ethnic Conflict: A Systematic Approach to Conflict (2011), and Women, the State and War: A Comparative Perspective on Citizenship and Nationalism (2007). Her coedited books are Beyond Great Powers and

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo

Citation: Kristen Williams. Review of Ko, Jiyoung, Popular Nationalism and War. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. June, 2024.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=60340

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.