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East Asian Supremacy: Race, Religion, and Hybrid Ideologies

By Paul Hedges

SYNOPSIS

Understanding the recent cases of East Asian supremacists detained by Singapore's Internal Security Department means looking at a wider set of extremist and conspiracy ideas often related to white supremacy and religious hatred.

COMMENTARY

In the last couple of months, Singapore's security agencies have picked up two young men, both of whom are self-proclaimed East Asian supremacists. In other words, they assert the racial superiority of the peoples of China, Korea, and Japan. Their ideology seems, in many ways, to mirror that of white supremacists and is part of a wider and adaptive nexus of hatreds and ideologies.

Racial Supremacy

These two East Asian supremacists should be placed in a wider context, including two other young men previously identified as right-wing extremists and picked up by Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD): one of these was a Chinese youth who [self-identified](#) as a white supremacist; the other was an Indian [Christian youth](#) inspired by figures such as the Christchurch attacker, who had killed many Muslims at a mosque in New Zealand.

All of these young men were seemingly inspired by online ideologies, groups, and individuals whose motives were often a hatred of Muslims and sometimes also of Jews. This raises for us the question of how racial supremacist thinking about race and religion is connected. From terrorists such as Anders Breivik – the Norwegian attacker – onwards, killing Muslims has often been framed as a defence of a white, European, Judeo-Christian civilisation. More recently this includes the Christchurch

attacker as a direct inspiration. Although both are atheists, Breivik and the Christchurch attacker tied their terrorism to religious conceptions.

Here, the shared hatred is often the glue. We have seen seemingly improbable alliances between militant advocates of Hindutva ideology and white supremacists who worship old Norse deities and assert a Viking identity. Historically, “white” has been a mutable category as race is not a scientific category but a culturally constructed identity generally in opposition to certain perceived enemies or outsiders. Whiteness, Blackness, or even “Chineseness” is never about skin colour (alone).

What is an East Asian Supremacist?

As yet, there is little information on the ideology of East Asian supremacy. It is difficult to piece together a coherent narrative or ideology from the two East Asian supremacist youths and the limited information revealed by the ISD in their statements. However, this is not necessarily surprising.

Since Breivik, many terrorists have left behind manifestos outlining their beliefs, aims, and commitments. But these are often a hodgepodge of ideas drawn from many sources. Later manifestos have often lifted chunks straight from Breivik, other manifestos, and increasingly online sources. Today, we live in a world of hybrid ideologies, where potential terrorists may pick and mix from varied options of extremist thought.

Partly speaking in response to the Southport terrorist attack, the UK Minister for Security, Dan Jarvis, has referred to a need to keep an eye on “[mixed ideologies](#)” given that the terrorist in this attack was not considered dangerous as his [ideology did not fit](#) the profiles expected.

This does not mean that we know nothing about East Asian supremacists. The hatred of Muslims links them to a wider group of what is often, if inadequately, termed right-wing terrorists. That all four associated with right-wing extremism in Singapore are male is also worth noting. There are connections between white supremacy, conspiracy theorists, and what is often termed the manosphere, including incel groups. One of Singapore’s East Asian supremacists also seemed to have a wider aversion to Jews and maybe all religions.

Islamophobia and Antisemitism

A connection between extremist religio-racial ideologies is often Islamophobia, but also, almost as commonly, antisemitism. While Muslims are frequently posited as the direct threat, Jews are typically portrayed as the enemy behind the scenes.

The great displacement conspiracy, which seemed to be a concern in these cases, argues that white people are being replaced by others, especially Muslims, in the West. Jews are often seen as the masterminds behind this. Various versions of displacement theory also have their place in both forms of Buddhist and Hindu Islamophobia. But behind this, many other conspiracies are often linked in online communities, from climate change denial to anti-vaxx campaigns, with [antisemitism readily uncovered](#) in the ideological framing.

When we think about racial hatred, therefore, we must always keep in mind that religion is often a major part of the ideological frame. Even in those who are proclaimed atheists, normally there is still such a racial-religious frame of belonging, as with Breivik in his horrific attacks in Norway. In particular, a hatred of certain religions is often key.

While both East Asian supremacists do not cite any religious motivation behind their ideas, they have a shared hatred of Malays, which equates, it seems, to a shared [hatred of Muslims](#) in general. The first case extended this to a deep [antisemitic stance](#) as well as a seeming wider hatred of religion.

Hybrid Ideologies

In today's digitised world, the connections and available ideologies are often only a click away. Some potential and actual terrorists now increasingly pick and choose amongst many extremist or conspiracy theories. We may also often see incoherence or contradiction occurring within these groups. [Julia Ebner](#) noted this of QAnon (a wide set of conspiracy theories associated with right-wing extremism popular in Trump's first term as US president), which moved from opposition to both Putin and Xi to embrace them as part of their wider alliance.

We should expect that various self-proclaimed East Asian supremacists will not have identical profiles. Some may hate Indians, while others may see a white-Hindutva-East Asian alliance. Some may be deeply misogynistic, others may not. Some may frame their ideas in religious terms, while others may be anti-religion. What is most likely, though, is that the hatreds and those they wish to kill will remain a more stable touchpoint.

Lessons

Singapore has, so far, done a remarkable job in detecting would-be terror attacks, but it is clear that it may be increasingly hard to spot trends and patterns. A report by the UK government has suggested that rather than ideologies, the focus should be on behaviours, as, amongst other things, the Southport attacker's own hybrid ideology did not raise enough red flags. However, it is unclear what may constitute these behaviours.

What is clear is that there will almost certainly be new and emerging ideological hybrids behind extremist behaviour and potential acts of terror. Security services, educators, scholars, policymakers, and all those involved in this arena need to focus not just on what has been, but on what may be. Sometimes, thinking the improbable may be a good strategy.

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