

# Will Civilizations Clash?

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IN HIS INFLUENTIAL 1996 BOOK *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel Huntington said that wars of the future will not be fought by nation against nation, but by cultures and religions from different civilizations, one against the other. Although Huntington was a terrific scholar, 23 years after his book, no Clash of Civilizations has appeared.

Isn't the West in a civilization clash with jihadism? No. The jihadists have only bombs. They rule no countries, large or small. They lack unified leadership. Their philosophy is a religious atavism, only alive, ironically, because of up-to-date weapons. Moreover, their victims are scattered across half a dozen civilizations, burdening them with endless targets, and giving Europe, Africa, America and others a shared, pathetic foe.

Like many large-scale theories, *The Clash of Civilizations*, when read today, overstates the coherence of its analytical units. Chinese civilization mixes Western free markets with its own top-down political traditions. Huntington wrote that East Asian culture produced the economic success of China and others, but a US-led security order helped. Muslim civilization

shows fractures not foreseen by Huntington: Two major Muslim countries, Saudi Arabia and Iran, oppose each other. Pakistan, Egypt and other Muslim governments battle jihadist protestors. Tens of millions of Muslim believers live in Europe and raise teenagers who seldom visit a mosque. Indonesia, with the largest Muslim population in the world, bears little resemblance to the Middle East.

Within the West, the E.U. and Trump's U.S. differ on tax policy, the death penalty, abortion, and other social issues. East European states, all once Communist and now EU members, have moved sharply to the right. Poland and Hungary are closer in philosophy, now, to Trump's U.S. than to France and Germany, and more democratic than Brussels permits some E.U. members to be. No wonder Huntington had trouble fitting Japan and Australia into his civilizational boxes.

Technology's leaps enable individuation, reducing the cohesion of civilizations. Niall Ferguson's new book *The Square and the Tower* attacks scattershot networking as a rising "disruption." The historian laments, "Hierarchy is at a discount, if not despised." He even offers the U.K.'s House of Lords as

an example of a lost but superior hierarchical order. But I think it's thrilling for individuals to "converse" on Facebook or WeChat (its Chinese counterpart) across racial and national borders, with equal partners never met in the flesh. It makes for a scrambling of civilizations, by linking different ways of life.

Parallel to technology's liberation, galloping international investment and military capability knit together regions once distant. China's checkbook diplomacy in the South Pacific and in Africa, the U.S.'s multiple thrusts into Latin America, France's role in West Africa, Russia's push to Europe's eastern edge—all of these cross civilizational divides. Even China's "Belt and Road Initiative," if successful, may further globalization.

The erosion of national sovereignty pleases some and scares others. But it softens the sharp corners of all civilizations. Internet gurus laugh at nations' borders and, step by step, chip away at monolithic cultures. National "boxes," in which civilizations have typically been contained, are breaking at the sides. China, especially, battles against the Internet's reach onto its home turf, but it cannot succeed for long.

Of course, clashes of ideology and territory can be damaging. But they are quicker to arise and more protean than clashes of civilizations. The U.S.S.R.-U.S. tension over four decades was about ideology and power. In fact, the U.S. has never experienced a civilizational face-off. China has endured multiple face-offs with non-Han peoples, including the Mongols, the Manchus, the British and others. From each of these, China learned intermingling, sharing, multiculturalism (without that label), and sometimes suffered dilution of its own culture.

Of the two main candidates for a fresh clash of civilizations in our time, China is a veteran while the U.S. is a virgin. This is one more reason that Beijing and Washington

will not clash civilizationally, as distinct from fighting over Taiwan or maritime transgressions.

Huntington wrote soon after the fall of the Soviet Union. Stable Moscow-Washington love-hate had bound the world together for decades since 1945. In 1991, without global Communism, and without the West's hostility to a Soviet bloc, cultures and religions stood naked around the globe, some of them newly activated by opportunity. Huntington's 20th century was violent, and perhaps "clash" was his natural expectation for the proud civilizations (Chinese, Islamic, West) that stood as Moscow fell. "We know who we are," the professor wrote, "only when we know who we are not and often only when we know who we are against."

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I find today's students more skeptical of Huntington's ideas than were their predecessors in the 1990s. Perhaps Harvard students learning Chinese and Japanese, and Shanghai youth seeking an MBA in Los Angeles or London are "crumblers" of civilizations, not standard-bearers for one civilization? "No paradigm is eternally valid," Huntington said of his own thesis.

Western ideas are so common within China's southern and eastern neighbors that Asians hardly recall they came from Europe and the U.S. This is true of Western law in Hong Kong, Spanish Catholicism in the Philippines, the U.K. parliamentary system in Australia, the Japanese love for

Shakespeare, and so on. Even within China itself, urban youth seek McDonald's, Michael Jordan, foreign games, and admission to Harvard or Stanford.

Today, it seems that a clash of civilizations is canceled by countervailing forces. Civilizational encounters during the first half of the 21st century are unlikely to be clear-cut. Fragmentation is persistent (for example, the breakup of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia; the issues of Catalonia in Spain and Scotland in the U.K.; the E.U.'s shaky unity; China's nervous grip on its vast Xinjiang province), and fragmentation induces sub-civilizational tension.

The balance of power, too, will be more influential than ideas in international tensions, just as it once adjudicated between China and the U.S., the Soviet Union and the U.S., and the U.K. and Germany.

Some expect a clash between China's Confucian authoritarianism and Western democratic individualism. It is possible. Yet over time, economic globalization and

technological universalism are freeing Chinese individuals to participate in the global village with increased independence from the state ideology of Beijing. If China falters, the cause will be economic crisis, political division, or territorial challenge. It will not be a clash of civilizations. If America falters, Huntington believed correctly, the reason will be loss of nerve in spearheading Western civilization.

As China and the U.S. engage yet also compete, we will enter an era of qualified globalism. Hundreds of millions of Chinese-Americans and American-Chinese (joined by others from various traditions) armed with ever-new technology, are forming local patterns inside the P.R.C. and U.S.A. Civilizations seem slow to change, but change they do. Taiwan, heavily a product of Chinese ways, seems headed for a nationhood of its own. Australia until 1901 was six entirely British colonies. They federated as Australia, which today is certainly not a British nation—and soon may look more Chinese than British. ♪