

Is There Really A Clash of Civilizations? The Nature of the Present World Order after Huntington and the Explanations of Clashes within Civilizational Orbits

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores and presents examples how and why Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilization theory' is weak. Huntington attempts to define the political and cultural realities of the post-Cold War World. He rightfully identified that the World was changing, and that nations were no longer rigidly divided among ideological lines. The new order would be defined by differences among civilizations, particularly the West (North America and Western and Northern Europe, Orthodox Eurasia, the Muslim World and the Sinic civilizations of the Far East. He outlines the differences between the cultures, particularly the liberal and individualistic west, in contrast to the more conservative and collectivist cultures of the Muslim and Sinic world. He hypothesizes that the contrasts between cultures will fuel future conflicts and wars, as opposed to ideologies and resources. However there are many negations to Huntington's thesis. Many of his constructed civilization blocs are not united, and some of the cultural alliances Huntington has predicted have not come into fruition. Much of the conflicts that have occurred since the 1990s have been fueled by a need to control resources and territory, rather than to assert one set of values over the other. Many nations within Huntington's constructed cultural blocs are not always in agreement among each other (e.g. China vs. Vietnam in control over the Spratly Islands), which raises doubt of cohesion of the civilization blocs constructed in the thesis. The Muslim world is more of a spectator and a battleground between the West and an evident Sinic-Orthodox (Russian) Alliance. While it is true that the World is no longer divided into rigid ideological lines, it is implausible that the world will be divided into cultural blocs.

Keywords: Clash of Civilizations, Muslim World, Sinic Orbit, Orthodox Orbit, West

INTRODUCTION

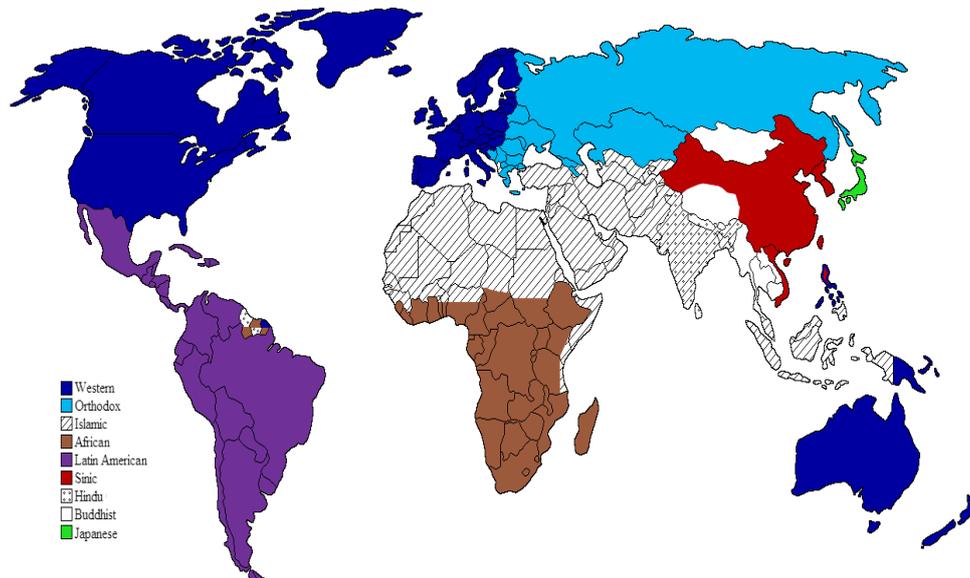
Since the end of the Cold War, a Harvard academician, Samuel P. Huntington postulated a thesis on the "Clash of Civilizations." Since then, it has been a popular point of reference for many scholars and politicians. However, the "Clash of Civilizations" thesis contains many holes, and it should be taken into account that Huntington's thesis was published in 1996, closely after the closure of the Cold War between the United States and Communist Bloc nations, during the beginning of Japan's economic stagnation and before various relevant global events, such as the start of the 'War on Terror', the ascendancy of Vladimir Putin's leadership in Russia and the labyrinth the Arab Spring created in the Muslim countries.

To Samuel Huntington, cultures, particularly religious cultures will be the key facilitators of conflict, and that political ideology, economic interests, economic disparity, will become largely irrelevant to culture and religion as the causes of conflict, that religion and culture will play a larger role in shaping the world order. However, Huntington's argument is weak,

and is continually challenged, especially with regards to recent world events and trends. Huntington is correct in that clashes between nations will continue to exist well into the future, but these clashes are not fueled by cultural differences, but by economic mechanisms, such as resource scarcity.

On Samuel Huntington's map, there are color-coded divisions of the countries by civilization among different categories and cultural lines:

1. Western
2. Latin
3. Orthodox
4. Islamic
5. African
6. Hindu
7. Buddhist
8. Chinese/Sinic
9. Japanese



This map is presented in Samuel P. Huntington's 1996 Book; "Clash of Civilizations."

In explaining the nature of future geopolitical conflicts, Huntington uses this map to illustrate the different civilizations. Nation-States are organized into larger, collective civilization types, be they Western, Orthodox, Latin-American, Islamic, African, etc. This map does not accurately categorize civilizations. For example, Greece is categorized within the "Orthodox" orbit, but the Greeks are more politically and economically aligned with the Western nations instead of the Orthodox (Former Eastern-bloc) nations. Bosnia and Herzegovina is considered part of the Orthodox orbit, but most Bosnians are religiously Muslim, with the Bosnian government sympathetic to the Western orbit (The "Orthodox" Bosnians are Serbs living in the Serbian Republic in the southern regions of Bosnia). Vietnam and South Korea are viewed as "Sinic" nations, but the Vietnamese are often at odds with their Chinese brethren, and South Korea maintains stronger political, military and economic ties with the West than with China. Taiwan is also a point of contention in which many Taiwanese consider themselves Chinese, but many view themselves as independent from China, preferring closer

alignment with the Western and Japanese orbits. The African and Latin Americans are hardly united, and may not see eye-to-eye completely with each other, even culturally. The Muslim World is not united, and there certainly no unity among the Muslim countries. The disunity of the Muslim nations is highlighted almost countless times in new reports. It could be argued that these classifications are overly simplified, and even inaccurate. It will be important to offer explanations, using history and current events to debunk Huntington's simplification of the present day world order.

The Muslim World

Samuel P. Huntington placed a strong emphasis on the Muslim orbit. He viewed the Muslim world as the main contender (along with Chinese allies) against the West for cultural dominance of the World. However, considering the meteoric rise of China, and the revival of Russian power, this argument becomes weak. Many would argue that the oriental rivals of the West are a Sinic/Confucian-Muslim alliance, but rather, an Orthodox-Sinic alliance, while Muslims are spectators, who may align with one or another cultural bloc. The Arab Spring Conflicts upsets Huntington's suggestion that the West should align with the Orthodox East against his hypothesized Sinic-Islamic Alliance (Huntington, 49: 1993).

His theory on the Muslim world does not take into account that the Muslim nation-states are independent, autonomous, and have self-interest. Between Saudi Arabia and Iran, there are challenges against each other for control over the Persian Gulf. Between Turkey and Iraq, there are long-standing disagreements over water and damming. There was anger from Iraqi government officials over plans to build the Ilisu Dam (which would provide electricity to the lesser developed Southeastern region of Turkey) over fears that the dam would affect the flow of the Tigris River. Kurdish groups (who represent another significant group within Huntington's hypothesized Muslim orbit) are also upset with the damming project, in that it would flood the Kurdish home of Hasankeyf, a culturally significant city of the Kurdish people. The Turkish government, led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan (who is known as a conservative Muslim politician in Turkey) assured the Kurdish people that the dam would provide electricity to the large Kurdish population in Southeastern Turkey (Der Spiegel, 2006). Construction of the Ilisu Dam began in the Summer of 2006, and is expected to be completed by 2015. However, the Ilisu Dam was constructive in a vital area, between the Turkish, Iraqi and Syrian border, in the Middle of Kurdish lands. The Dam has sparked disagreement among Muslim people over electricity for Turkish citizens, water supplies and water flow for Iraqis living along the Tigris River, and historically and culturally significant land and sites for the Kurdish nation.

Are Cultural Differences Really More Meaningful Than Economic/Developmental Differences?

In *Clash of Civilizations*, Huntington asserted that differences between economic strength and levels of national development are no longer meaningful (Huntington, 23: 1996). That conflicts will arise purely along cultural lines between broad groups of civilizations, however there are many instances in which economic development are emphasized, however, many conflicts have been internal, and involve fights over limited resources, even by different nations within the defined civilization. Huntington's assertion that economic development levels between nations has been debunked by various events, such as the rise of "Twenty First Century Socialism" in Latin America (i.e. Chavismo in Venezuela), the ascendancy of Pope Francis to the Roman Catholic papacy last year and Pope Francis's emphasis on addressing the ailments of global economic disparity and injustice, and increased concerns about economic disparity between wealthy, middle income and poor nations. Economic and developmental disparity is still heavily discussed in the role of politics, and conflicts over

resources continually persist, despite Huntington's denial of that reality. In response to the increasingly perceived economic inequalities, "old world" communist/socialist/radical left movements has reappeared. The Indian Maoist Naxalites pose larger headaches for India than any Islamic group, Socialism for the Twenty First Century (aka: Bolivarianism, or Chavismo) gained popularity in Latin America, and continues to hold out after the death of Hugo Chavez. As mentioned earlier, religious institutions, particularly the Roman Catholic Church under the direction of Pope Francis will take the church in the direction of towards emphasis ailments stemming from economic injustice and disparity of development and class between different nations.

American, European, Chinese, Korean, Saudi Arabian, Turkish

When Samuel P. Huntington emphasizes that the world will be divided along cultural lines, he made it very clear that culture would trump economic and political considerations. While he made it clear that his article does not mean the dissolution of the nation-state or the absence of short-term intra-cultural clashes. But many "short-term" intra-cultural clashes have been intermediate or long-term disagreements and conflicts. There are many examples that challenge Huntington's idea: the worsening intra-Islamic Sunni-Shi'a sectarianism, the current intra-Orthodox Russo-Ukrainian altercation, or even the age-old intra-Confucian North/South Korea conflict, that occasionally comes to boil, in spite of its sixty-plus year-old ceasefire.

The article fails to take into account that some cultures within the packaged cultural blocs can be radically different from one another. In his map, he placed the Korean, Vietnamese and the Chinese nation-states into an over-arching Sinic orbit. However, can Vietnam or Korea (even China's North Korean ally) really be called "Sinic" or classified as "Confucian" to the same degree as the Chinese? It would be very important to understand the history and the current events of the East Asian nations to evaluate whether or not Huntington's classification are even solid. The current situation between Vietnam and China is volatile. Currently, there are disputes over the Spratly Islands and the Paracel Islands. Even during the end of the Vietnam War, the Communist North Vietnamese made sure Vietnamese claims of Spratly was reinforced by sending soldiers to beat the remnant South Vietnamese army garrisoned on the island, so that their Chinese allies (at the time) would not claim the Island as their own (Greenway: 2014). Despite U.S.-Vietnamese enmity during the Vietnam War, the communist government of Vietnam has warmed up to their old nemesis of the United States in light of China's rapidly growing economic and military leverage. As ironic as this may sound, it makes sense in the larger picture. The U.S. occupation of Vietnam is viewed as an unpleasant footnote of Vietnamese history, whereas China is a reoccurring long-time nemesis and is continually viewed as an existential threat to Vietnamese (Greenway: 2014). In the fight for islands and the economic benefits they carry, the Communist/Sinic Vietnamese is very much willing to take the Western nations, including the United States as their allies against the Chinese flagship of the Sinic/Confucian orbit which Huntington classified Vietnam as being part of.

The Confucian-Islamic Nuances

In *Clash of Civilizations*, Huntington mentions that there has been a "Confucian-Islamic Connection" that has been established to challenge western influence and power. While China enjoys good relationships and engages in commerce with various Muslim countries, such as Iran, Pakistan, Sudan and Syria, there is no wholesale unification between Confucian China and the Islamic orbit. Many Muslim people are upset by China's treatment of the Muslim Uighur population and the suppression of Islamic practices by China.

In Malaysia and Indonesia, where there are large Chinese diaspora populations, there is appears to be resentment between the native Malays and the Chinese. The Sino-Islamic clash may reinforce Huntington's belief that future conflict revolve between civilizations, however, there are other, underlying causes that stem from political and economic explanations that cause this. In Malaysia and Indonesia, the Chinese population is described as economically affluent, but politically disadvantaged, while the Malays and Indonesians are not as rich as their Chinese counterparts, but they make up the majority population of their respective nation-states, and hold more political leverage than the Chinese.

Samuel P. Huntington's Clash thesis might explain the fact that in Malaysia, Islam has become more of a national identity than a religious one, in that Chinese, even pious ethnically Muslim Chinese people, cannot be seen as "true" Muslims to the Malaysian religious elites who control the institutions. (Palmer: 2006) However, this is more of an argument against Huntington's postulation that entire groups of people, such as Muslims, are united on the basis of a larger cultural identity, such as religion. Malaysian nationalists use Islam for a narrower national identity, usually to mobilize support among Malay people to invoke sentiments against the affluent Chinese population, similar to how the National Socialist German Workers Party invoke national identity of the downtrodden German people against a perceived unfairly affluent Jewish minority. It also helps to understand that, in the larger picture, anti-Chinese sentiments are bred by economic resentment by a less affluent majority against an affluent minority population. However, the Malaysian government understands that antagonism against the Chinese by the Malay population will become harmful for the country in the long-run. Some figures, like Dr. Mahathir Mohamed, have gone as far as to revolutionize the way Malay people live and act (to become 'more' like the Chinese minority), in order to better compete with the affluent Chinese minority. In recent times, the Malaysian government enacted various policies that sought to improve economic parity of the Malay majority with the Chinese minority, such as *Bumiputera*, where special rights are given to those covered by the policy, until more economic equality between the groups have been achieved. However, there are concerns that the Bumiputera policy will become grandfathered, and special rights will continue, even after economic parity has been achieved (Palmer: 2006).

In the current reality, there is no substantial "Confucian-Islamic" cooperation. If there is, it is between China and a select few nation-states, such as Pakistan (which China views as a check on India), and Iran. Many Muslims in fact resent China, notably issues regarding Xinjiang and the Muslim minorities in their eastern provinces. It is suggested that relationships between the Chinese government and the Han Chinese people, and the Muslim Uighurs are worsening. Worsening relations come after a series of restrictions were placed upon Muslim groups in China, such as the Uighurs and the Hui, such as fasting during Ramadan, restrictions on material that contains extremist, jihadist and separatist material, and government surveillance on religious activities, such as congregational prayers (Wan: 2014). Restrictions on Islamic religious practices could incite some anger among Muslims elsewhere. Muslims in Turkey often condemns China's authoritarian measures over the Uighur population. Even the Iranians, who are close allies to the Chinese, will often express criticism against China over heavy-handed policies conducted in Uighur-populated areas (Associated Press: 2009). The Uighur question will remain a black mark on China, with regards to its relations with the Muslim-majority nations.

The Arab Spring Reaffirms Political and Economic Divides over Huntington's Culture-Clash

The Arab Spring, which erupted in 2011, will throw a wrench in Huntington's theory that many non-western national states and people are autonomously choosing to de-westernize. In some cases (i.e. the Syrian Uprising) the Western powers have aided the opposition against the government of Bashar al-Assad (Londono and Miller: 2013). However, despite fears that U.S. weapons and support could trickle down to the hands of hardline Islamic factions within the opposition against the secular-natured regime of Bashar al-Assad, the fear of such conclusions are not intense. One could argue that the Syrian Ba'athist regime is aligned with Islamic Iran, Orthodox Russia, and Confucian/Sinic China, and that the Western Nations, including the United States, may have an interest in supporting hardline Islamic opposition against the Assad regime, it creates a problem for Huntington's theory that all Muslims, be they Shi'a, Sunni, Wahhabi, Alawi, etc. view themselves as part of a collective, greater Islamic civilization. If that is the case, why are there powerful sectarian divisions within Islam? Why is identity towards a particular sect stronger than the collective Islamic identity? Why is takfirism (accusations of other Muslim groups, sects and schools of thought other than your own of disbelief and apostasy) highly prevalent in many areas of Muslim politics? How come the largely Wahhabi opposition aligns itself with the Western powers, while the Alawi-led Assad government (with a large following from Shi'as and non-Wahhabist Sunnis) seeks support from the Orthodox and Sinic powers? It is understood that Samuel P. Huntington published this in the 90s', well before the eruption of the Arab Spring, but Huntington wrote the article as a hypothesis on realities in the future, however, the hypothesis is becoming increasingly weak as new realities emerge in the twenty first century.

The Clash of Like-Civilization and the "Short-term" Alliances that have trumped them

The Arab Spring has also created contradictions against Huntington's article. Western civilizations build alliances with "civilizations similar to Western Civilization", on page 49 of *Clash of Civilization*, Huntington hoped that the western civilizations would build alliances and incorporate Eastern European and Latin American societies into a 'greater west', however, to date, this has backfired heavily. In light of the Ukrainian crisis, the Western orbit is in a bitter conflict with the Orthodox orbit, before the current Ukrainian conflagration, there was the conflict between Georgia and Russia in 2008 over Southern Ossetia and Abkhazia, where Russia, and Georgia (with the assistance of NATO) fought over territory. As a result of this development, an alliance between the Western and Orthodox Orbit (with Russia as the primary actor) will not occur, despite Huntington's predictions.

The End of History and the Clash

Francis Fukuyama spoke of a world in which western consumerist culture will reign supreme and will eventually not only overtake the communist societies of the Eastern Bloc nations, but will also eventually undermine the traditional societies of non-western nations and cultures. Fukuyama admits that his thesis is not an original one, but was influenced by the ideas of German philosophers, such as Karl Marx and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (Fukuyama, 2: 1989). While Fukuyama agreed with the dialectical view of history postulated by Hegel and Marx, Fukuyama predicted an "end of history" that would be characterized as a liberal democratic political system, with a consumerist capitalist economic system, whereas Marx envisioned a communist utopia. In his theory, Fukuyama mentions that leftist Marxist and right-wing anti-Communist thinkers alike have. Fukuyama argues that cultural rigidity of non-western nations will eventually give way to the importation of consumerism from the industrialized world. In his article, he mentioned Iran following the 1979 Islamic Revolution

and the ascendancy of Khomeini soon gave into the wave of commercialism fostered by Japan in the 1970s and 80s. (Fukuyama, 12: 1989). When an Asian country, such as Japan, became a bastion of commercialism and economic liberalization, the rest of Asia followed. What Fukuyama argues contradicts the cultural rigidity of large, collective blocs of nations that Huntington argues in his *Clash of Civilizations* article. However, Fukuyama's essay does confirm one of Huntington's predictions that many non-western nations will seek to modernize, but modernization will not come from western inspirations or designs. In this instance, the Iranian move to allow a commercialist and consumerist following Khomeini's ascendancy follows the commercialization patterns of non-western nations during the late 1970s and the 1980s, such as Japan and possibly China (following Deng Xiaoping's economic reformations.) Fukuyama argues that the rise of far-eastern capitalism and commercialism not only allowed for the spread of commercialism through the orient, but even created the desire for access and conformity to consumer-based economics and society throughout beyond the west, even in societies that had recently developed open animosity towards western values, such as consumerism and economic liberalism.

Another affirmation of Huntington's theory by Fukuyama's *End of History* article is that contradictory ideas will be in conflict against each other for primacy. Some political ideologies have to be countered with force. Fukuyama uses the Second World War to illustrate that fascism and ultra-nationalism in Europe and Japan had to be defeated with militant force. Both Liberal-Democratism, promoted by the Western Allied powers (U.S. and Britain) and Communism, promoted by the Soviet Union, won the Second World War against a regressive, reactionary and uncompromising fascist order. However, Communism's fall was different to that of fascism. Communism fell through the soft-power provided by western democratic and consumer capitalist culture and through the self-contradictions that lie within the Soviet Marxist order (Fukuyama: 1989).

Fukuyama spoke mainly about (western) liberal democracy and consumerist capitalism's triumph over fascism through hard power, and its triumph over communism through soft power (and self-inflicted wounds by communist systems). Political and socio-economic ideologies are completely different from cultures. Even when Fukuyama mentioned Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Fukuyama was primarily concerned with Weber's emphasis on the economic designs of the Protestant ethic vis-à-vis the Catholic ethic, but not go into much depth outlining cultural differences. To Fukuyama, religions and culture are engines of ideology, instead of the end-product. Huntington views religion and culture as the end-product, while ideology is, for the most part, separate from culture and religion. However, in examining present day world events, Fukuyama's idea of a unified world under a monolithic consumerist society has not come to fruition. Clashes between nations and orbits continue to exist, but the clashes have a different nature from Huntington's explanation.

CONCLUSION: IS HUNTINGTON CORRECT?

Huntington is correct in that world will still remain divided. His *Clash* argument triumphs over Fukuyama's *Last Man* hypothesis in that the world remains divided, and that there is a divide between the "West" (United States and the Eurozone) and the "East" (Russia and China). However, his prediction on the Clash has been debunked. While the "West" certainly consists of North America and Western and Northern Europe, the west does not enjoy support from an Orthodox ally, instead the Orthodox orbit has seemingly joined sides with the Sinic orbit against the west. The "East" does not consist of the Sinic civilizations, allied with Islamic nations, but rather the Sinic flagship (China) allied with the Orthodox flagship (Russia). Rather than being fully antagonistic towards the West, the Islamic civilization

appears to be divided among itself and in limbo between supporting the West and the East. It is also important to note that the Orthodox orbit and the Sinic orbit are not united, especially when present day antagonism of Ukraine and Georgia against Russia and Vietnam against China are considered. Often times, those antagonisms have political, economic and territorial underpinnings, such as control over land, islands and resources.

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