The Clash of Civilizations

The thesis of the challenging and potentially important “Clash of Civilizations” is that the growing threat of violence arising from renewed conflicts between cultures and countries that base their traditions on religious faith and dogma. Samuel P Huntington, a political scientist at Harvard University and foreign policy adviser to President Clinton, argues that policymakers should be mindful of current developments, especially when they interfere in other nations' affairs.

The clash of civilizations is a controversial theory in international relations. It was originally formulated in an article by Samuel P. Huntington entitled “The Clash of Civilizations?” published in the academic journal Foreign Affairs in 1993. Huntington later expanded his thesis in a 1996 book “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order”. Huntington's central thesis is that main conflicts have always been marked by clashes between fundamentally different civilisations rather than between similar nations. He states that major conflicts occur on the boundaries between these civilizations. His theories may be applied not only to international conflicts (for example World War II as a conflict between Eastern and Western European civilisation and between West and Japan) but also to domestic ones where countries lie on the “fault lines” between civilisations (example is Yugoslavia as conflicts between Eastern European and Islamic civilisations). Huntington also identifies the extent and grounds of conflict. He studies the politics of post-colonialism and national identity and reviews many other possible sources of conflict awaiting the civilisations currently competing for resources and status within the world structure.

This work brings to fore issues that have been pushed to the side for long. Huntington’s view is somehow sad, for we see from his work that the clash is certainly unavoidable. Nonetheless, its effect and speed can be reduced or deferred. The question Huntington puts is whether mankind actually reached the end of civilisation?

Analysing “The Clash of Civilizations” we cannot omit essential question: “Will conflicts between civilizations dominate world politics?” Huntington’s answer is affirmative; clashes between civilizations are the greatest threat to world peace nowadays. An international order based on civilizations is the best safeguard against war. National states remain the principal actors on the international arena, but the most important category is the major civilizations - Western, Latin America, African, Islamic, Hindu, Orthodox, Buddhist and Japanese. Huntington asserts that civilizations have no clear-cut boundaries, no definite beginnings and ending. According to his view, they are mortal, nevertheless, long-lived. They develop and adapt. Also all civilizations have particular weak points. The hotspots are on the fault lines between civilizations - the Middle East, Chechnya, the Transcaucasus, Central Asia, Kashmir, Tibet, Sri Lanka, and Sudan. The West, - Huntington says, - is the most powerful civilization but its relative power is declining at the same time as Confucian and Islamic societies are rising to balance the west. Huntington warns us that dangerous clashes are likely to proceed from Western arrogance and Islamic intolerance. According “The Clash of Civilizations” the essential problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. Islam is a different civilization with obvious conviction of superiority of their culture. Huntington presents in his book the evidence, the argument and offers a strategy for the West to protect its culture while learning to coexist in a multipolar and multi-civilization world.

Huntington explains that the expansion of the Western civilization has ended and the riot against the west has already begun. The West confronts nowadays numerous problems: of slow economic growth, stagnating populations, unemployment, huge government deficits, low savings rates, social degeneration, drugs and crime. Thus, economic power is shifting to Asia. Moreover, military power and political weight are supposed to go after. Asia and Islam have been the active civilizations of the last quarter century. China is probable to have the world's largest economy early in the 21st century. In addition, Asia is expected to have seven of the ten largest economies by 2020.

Huntington began his meditations by surveying diverse thinking about the nature of global politics in the post-Cold War period. According to Huntington, future conflicts will base on culture. He claims that the concept of different civilizations, as the highest ranking of cultural identity, would increasingly become useful in considering the potential for conflict. “It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future”.

It is important to say that using various studies of history and making certain decision, Huntington divided the civilizations in following way: Western Christendom, centred on Europe and North America, including Australia and New Zealand; the Muslim world of the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Malaysia, and Indonesia; the Hindu civilization, located mainly in India, Nepal; the Sinic civilization of China, Vietnam, Singapore, Taiwan; Sub-Saharan Africa; the Buddhist areas of Northern India, Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolia, Buryatia, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Tibet; and Japan is considered as an independent civilization (Huntington 1993, 26).

Huntington states that the Western creed that the West's values and political systems were universal was very naive and that insistence towards democratization of the rest of the world and acceptance of universal norms would only further antagonize other civilizations. Huntington also identified the Sinic civilization to be the most powerful continuous threat to the West World. He represents Islamic civilization as a probable ally to China, for these both civilizations have revisionist goals and also are involved in conflicts with other civilizations. Huntingon also marked the Orthodox, Hindu, and Japanese civilizations as “swing” civilizations that are probable to go in different ways in their development.

Samuel P. Huntington's article “The Clash of Civilizations” (1993) published in the Foreign Affairs journal suggested the idea that the world is returning to a civilization-dominated world where future conflicts would come from clashes between “civilizations”. Nevertheless, this theory has been largely criticised for overgeneralization, disregarding local conflicts and for improperly predicting what has happened in the decade after its publication. Events of September the 11th also became the ground for the claim Huntington is simply not supported by the evidence. Although, it was published when a post Cold War world was searching for a new perspective to view international relations and it has however proved influential.

Huntington's theory draws a future where the “great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural” (Huntington 1993, 22). Huntington also argues the idea that the end of ideological conflict between liberal democracy and communism will lead to the conflict that is supposed to take place along the borders between civilizations. On the other hand, he predicts confrontation between countries from different civilizations for control over international institutions and economic and military power (Huntington 1993, 29). The author also explains how the West World represents its policies as constructive and beneficial for the rest of the world and that the idea of a universal culture is a creation of Western minds. In evidence thereof, he says about such Western values as human rights, claiming that they very often are the least important values to other civilizations (James Graham, 2004).

The clash of civilizations thesis as every theory has its flaws. James Graham considers that Huntington’s thesis somehow distorted the reality, although they are original and persuasive. He also points the advantage that this theory made people look at non-Western cultures more seriously and with greater interest. Huntington also is criticized for being too vague and indistinct addressing many specific issues (James Graham, 2004). Many specialists say that Huntington’s anecdotal style is simply not suitable enough to account for the rationalizations and arguments he represents in such a serious work (Fox 2002, 423). A comprehensive analysis accomplished by Jonathon Fox for the period 1989-2002 concluded that the precise contrary of what Huntington predicted occurred in fact (Fox 2002, 425). In addition, James Graham says that civilization conflicts were less widespread than noncivilization conflicts and the end of the Cold War had no noteworthy impact on the relation between them (James Graham, 2004). Most confusing of all was the observation that where civilization conflict did occur it was more likely to take place between groups that were culturally similar, that is in the frame of the same civilization and not between them. These conclusions openly contradict Huntington's thoughts.

Many say that Huntington's thesis ignores culture's tendency to be fast changing and multi-dimensional (Herzfeld 1997, 116). Most of the Western countries are becoming multi or bi-cultural now. From this statement, we may conclude that they are somehow a part of multiple civilizations, a situation he outlines is characterized by religion as the crucial factor. “A secular Arab immigrant living in an Arab community in England is just one example where this designation is inappropriate. Really, situated in a highly religious country with a considerable number of Christian fundamentalists he states confidently that the world is becoming un-secularised. His data to support this claim is circumstantial” (James Graham, 2004).

The theory of “Clash of Civilizations” has been used to boost the fear in the West World of an Islamic movement alleged as increasingly influential and anti-Western. It is mostly due to this vision that has provided the foundation for attempting to limit and manage the growth of the Islam and Confucian civilizations and its expansion, of which the war on terror is alleged to be the most extreme example. As we see, such policies were supported and promoted by Huntingdon. A rational argument we may conclude that “The Clash of Civilizations” generated a self-fulfilling forecast. Moreover, we should perceive that to make real someone is draws as a theory is rather dangerous if not disastrous.

In the light of latest global developments, it is impossible to dismiss Huntington's theory as nothing more than an effort to upstage another theory that emerged after the collapse of the communist state. A question that is worth asking here is whether Huntington's theory would have ever emerged if Fukuyama had not put up his hand with his theory first. In other words, whether Huntington's thesis is self-consistent separately from the existence of Fukuyama's ideas. Both the "end of history" and the "clash of civilisations" theories were welcomed as contributions to the domain of political philosophy. We may say that the major argument used to authenticate Huntington's theory is that he was the first to foresee that civilisations will ultimately come to clash. Huntington replaced conflict between classes (as we see in Marxist theory) by conflict between civilisations, eventually even between religions. He also argued the fact for the inevitable clash of civilisations from the stance of Western civilisation.

Speaking about the Arab-Muslim aspect within the “clash of civilisations” theory has the ground mostly because of the sharp rise of terrorism and because the perpetrators of terrorist actions often appeal to Islam to justify actions blameworthy in the eyes of the international community. Unsettled conflict in the Middle East gives despair over the powerlessness of the international community to settle the conflict. We have no choice but to recognise that there is a burning necessity for a determined disapproval and condemnation of terrorism.

Consequently, we are bound to say one more time that Huntington's article in Foreign Affairs created more responses than any other work ever published within that journal. It is important to say that there have been many criticisms of his theory from wildly diverse paradigms. Some specialists have argued that his identified civilizations are very split with little unity. For example, Vietnam still keeps a massive army, mostly to guard against China. The Islamic world is rigorously fractured in terms of ethnic lines with Kurds, Arabs, Persians, Turks, Pakistanis, and Indonesians, every of them having very unlike world views.

It has been emphasized that values, in fact, are more freely and easely transmitted and altered than Huntington presents. For example, nations such as India and Japan have become successful democracies, and the West World itself was predominant with despotism and fundamentalism for most of its history. Supporters, though, have pointed out that worries and tensions have often arised between democratic states and that new emerging democracies in civilizations could successfuly remain hostile to states belonging to civilizations which are supposed to be hostile. Furthermore, they outline that the states belonging to different civilizations attach different amount of importance to the nature of the national governments of states with which they trade and support in international issues (e.g. as with India, Russia, and Japan). Few politologists see Huntington's theory as creating a self-fulfilling prediction and reasserting differences between civilizations. However, Huntington's argument may often be caricaturized, creating false assumptions about its content (Wikipedia, n.d.).

It is relevant to say that after the September 11, 2001 attacks, Huntington appeared prescient and well-known attacks by Western states upon Afghanistan and Iraq accelerated the perception that Huntington's “Clash” was well underway.

Some still state that the 1995 and 2004 enlargements of the European Union brought the EU's eastern border up to the boundary between Huntington's Western and Orthodox civilizations. Many of Europe's historically and traditionally Protestant and Roman Catholic countries were now EU members, while a number of Europe's historically Orthodox countries were outside the EU. However, the strong EU candidacies of Bulgaria and Romania, as well as the dominating ascendancy of pro-Western powers in Ukraine's 2004 presidential elections, and the NATO membership of Romania and Bulgaria (since 2004) represent a challenge to some of Huntington's analysis (Wikipedia, n.d).

While Samuel P. Huntington's the “Clash of Civilizations” thesis has directed substantial attention to the questions such as what causes international conflict and war, do either a clash of “national interests” or divergent values, ideas, cultures, identities, and civilizations primarily lead to conflict at both regional and global levels, what is the likely future of Islam-the West relations conflict-like or cooperative and many others, the critics of Huntington have also extended the discussion further. The debate, on the other hand, has returned to the world agenda due to the consequences of September 11 attacks.

The September 11, which is a unique and most remarkable event after the Cold War, has created many expectations about the shifting nature of post-Cold War international system and global politics. Ironically, it has demonstrated how the world's only superpower is not protected from the threats and vulnerability of current international system. On the other hand, the September 11 has seriously endangered patterns of US foreign policy and particularly its policy towards the Middle East region. It is not surprisingly that Samuel P. Huntington's clash of civilizations theory has regularly taken place in post-September 11 debates.

It is relevant to say that Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis primarily attempts to offer a new concept of world politics. We know now that Huntington principally focuses on cultural-religious-civilizational factors. He calls to understand the post-Cold War global politics. He also argues that his “civilizational conflict hypothesis” is superior to any of alternative models, which have been developed after the Cold War.

Huntington has been criticized for his presentation of “new paradigm”. He argues that the prevailing Cold War model of state-centric realist model can no longer be useful to analyse the post-Cold War era. He claims that civilizational dissimilarities will be key source of regional and global conflicts (Huntington 1993, 22). On the other hand critics suggests that Huntington's “civilizational conflict theory” is deterministic since there are manifold causes of conflict, in which civilizational factors do not play considerable role. Others say that in particular “clash of interests” rather than “clash of civilizations” will continue to be real cause of conflict. For example, Shireen T. Hunter opposes Huntington and say that relations between the West and the Islamic World are hardly arise from civilizational discrepancy but from structural-political and also from economic inequalities between the two worlds.(Shireen, 19). In addition, there are critics that Huntington overestimates cultural differences between civilizations and at the same time underestimates the power of the West in the hostile relations with the Muslim World. Many criticise Huntington for paying too much attention to the West's technological and military superiority. Overall, Huntington has received several criticisms because of his “new paradigm”.

Another kind of criticisms is about Huntington's “monolithic” conception of civilizations and disregarding of intra-civilizational differences and home conflict. Some say that the idea of West has undergone a considerable transformation in turn of the 21st century, and the actual clash will happen not between the West and the rest, as Huntington predicted, but it will arise between pro-Western conservatives and post-Western liberal multiculturalists in the US-West World. On the other hand, the critics assert that Huntington take no notice of internal developments and complexities of Muslim World. Critics say that there is no single Islamic culture as Huntington meant, moreover, there are different types of political Islam (Edward W. Said 2001, 20). Furthermore, there are numerous conflicts within civilizations. Overall, second sort of criticisms focuses on diversity and dynamics of each civilization and intra-civilizational differences.

Huntington has met so many criticisms because of the alleged inconsistencies, methodological flaws, and overgeneralizations in his thesis. For example, Robert Marks points that Huntington chiefly uses secondary sources in his book and his research of Islam, China and Japan is rather weak (Reviewed by Marks). He proposes that Huntington's speculation is methodologically flawed because of his frequent overgeneralizations in the examination of civilizations. Many have also criticized the data, which Huntington uses to support his thesis. For example for many of Huntington’s critics, the Gulf War was a case for “clash of state interests’ and not a case for “clash of civilizations”. Therefore, we may say that in this respect, the critics have focused on vast generalizations and inconsistencies.

Huntington is also very often is blamed for orientalist backdrop. According to Huntington, Islam turns to be a problem and even a threat to the West. He always privileges the West World and ignores the other - Islam. It is possible to say that such clash thesis distorts and de-humanizes the Muslims.

One more category of criticisms is about Huntington's policy recommendations on the basis of his understanding of post-Cold War global politics. Huntington looks for new enemies, which replace the rival of the Cold War, the Soviet Union. There are arguments that Huntington's theory is an ideological and strategic theory that aims at influencing the US foreign and defence policy (Edward W. Said 2001, 20). Huntington's scenario of World War III that stems from clash of civilizations interestingly fits best into military and representatives of arms industry. In this respect, it is possible to claim that the “clash of civilizations” is considered as determined thesis aiming at guiding the US foreign and security policy. What is more, some scholars criticize even Huntington's advice to pursue Atlantics policy, by means of strengthening relations with Europe to counteract Islamic-Confucian civilization.

There are some studies challenging the “clash of civilization thesis. It is interesting to review few of them - Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart's studies. In their study they have compared political and social values of the Muslim and Western societies. What is interesting, they have found that Muslims have no less democratic ideals than the West and the West is not so distinctive from Islam in terms of faith in democracy (Pippa Norris 2002, 12). In this regard, this study has significantly undermined Huntington's theory that Islam and the West have poles apart political values based upon leading religious cultures. These authors demonstrate the availability of similar political attitudes in the Muslim World as well as in the West World. What is more, many have criticized Huntington for his pessimistic vision of future and unawareness of the fact that collaboration and dialogue among civilizations are possible and even useful.

As a little conclusion, I would like to present some criticism that need no explanation and clearly outline Huntington’s flaws. The basic problem with Huntington's theory, however, is the conviction that all cultures aspire to imperial power. Huntington is not only inaccurate but his thesis has the potential to be extremely dangerous if taken as a prescription for making policy. Huntington's thesis maximizes the significance of cultural factors and minimizes the importance of nationalism. The problem is that most Islamic countries do not see themselves to be in conflict with the United States. Huntington paints an aggressive picture of the non-Western civilizations, Islam in particular, while ignoring the misdeeds of the Western civilization whose dominance is being challenged.

Further, within the paper it would be of use to mention some civilization clashes according to Huntington. As an example we may take the Cold War and 9/11 attack on USA. These two patterns are very similar and different at the same time. Both wars can be easily named as clash of civilizations, for involved two different civilizations and in its course endangered the whole planet.

The Cold War was a “Clash” of two different systems, for it is early to make a stress on cultural differences. On the first stage, there were political misunderstandings that have led to confrontation in all spheres of life including cultural diversity. The Cold War was putting on edge the whole world, for it saw the largest conventional and the first nuclear arms race in history.

Another significant event in our recent history is a 9/11 attack on the United States of America. It would be relevant to say that Huntington predictions have been truthful. For, we could not escape that great clash he forsaw between West and Muslim (or Islamic) world. Al-Qaeda (that is blamed to be responsible for 9/11 attack) considers its terrorist campaign against the United States to be part of a war between the ummah—Arabic for the “Muslim community”—and the Christian and Jewish West. Many experts therefore say the September 11 attacks cannot be reduced to a “clash of civilizations”.

As a little conclusion, it is significant to state that it is impossible to say for sure whether Huntington was right in his observations. Definitely, he could have mistaken in some aspects, but we should not forget that some of his thoughts have real basis to be believed in.

It is evident that world politics is entering a new phase, in which the great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of international conflicts will be cultural. Civilizations that are the highest cultural groupings of people are distinguished from each other by religion, history, language and tradition. These divisions are deep and increasing in importance. From Yugoslavia to the Middle East to Central Asia, the fault lines of civilizations are supposed to be the clash lines of the future. In this emerging era of cultural conflict, the United States must build alliances with similar cultures and spread its values wherever possible. With alien civilizations the West must be accommodating if possible, but confrontational if necessary. In the final analysis, however, all civilizations will have to learn to live in mutual tolerance and respect with each other.

If Huntington is right that clashes between civilizations are the greatest threat to world peace in the future, if he is right about our arrogance and conceit in believing that Western civilization is in the end of history; and if our leaders see no need to plan for the inevitable rise of other civilizations, I fear that the world map is due for another big change.

**References:**

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Part V of the book - The Future of Civilizations - is the really interesting part. Huntington points out that civilizations can reform and renew themselves. The central issue for the West is whether it can meet the external challenge while stopping and reversing the process of internal decay. He paints a scenario for a major war of civilizations and points out that the great beneficiaries will be those who abstain and closes by saying: "If this scenario seems a wildly implausible fantasy to the reader, that is all to the good. Let us hope that no other scenarios of global civilizational war have greater plausibility."

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