# Westphalianism to Civilizational Statism: Trendy Mirage or Foundational Shift?

After centuries of feudal wars between empires, a period of relative and enduring peace was established in Europe through the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. The treaty brought an end to the destructive Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), created political stability and diminished regional insecurity, allowing European nations to focus on industrial and economic advancements. The legacy of treaty makes it a pivotal moment as it laid the framework for modern international relations (Steven 2019, 91). Its principles, values, and notions continue to have several far-reaching implications (Ikenberry 2011, 59). Many of the modern geopolitical and power struggles continue to be shaped by the consequences of selective application of its principles of territorial sovereignty, mutual recognition, and non-interference that categorized states into a hierarchical order of superior colonizers, subordinate states, and colonies; and created lasting inequalities and conflicts between countries (Philpott 1999, 583).

First, the Treaty of Westphalia established the modern system of sovereign states in Europe, a system that Western scholars argue originated in the West and later spread globally on the back of Scientific and Industrial Revolutions. As the model globalized, it supplanted various indigenous political, cultural, and economic institutions (Ferguson and Mansbach 1996, 268). In the centuries that followed, it became the foundation of global political order (Ikenberry 2011, 60).

Second, the treaty played a crucial role in shaping global hierarchies. By recognizing European states as sovereign entities, it created a dichotomy between "civilized" sovereign states, those adhering to the European model, and "uncivilized" societies that operated under different political, cultural, and social systems (Seth 2013, 44). The non-European societies were excluded from the international order, their sovereignty denied, and their territories subjected to colonial domination by European powers.

Third, the treaty marked the beginning of an era dominated by transatlantic powers—initially European colonizers, and later, the United States' rise to supremacy and global hegemony. Many of the modern international institutions of the Liberal International Order (LIO), such as the United Nations and European Union, that have helped elongate Western global dominance reflect the principles and framework that was laid out in the Treaty of Westphalia (Paton 2019, 97). For centuries, the Western-dominated order and political landscape created by the treaty persisted but is now increasingly challenged by emerging global powers in the East. International relations scholars, the discipline bulwarked by the Westphalian world order, are now debating the decay of its pillars and the global political theatre now moving to a "post-Westphalian" and "post-liberal order" (Osiander 2001, 252). One of the key challenges to this order is posed by the rise of civilizational states.

While the idea of civilizational state is often associated with populist and autocratic regimes desiring to consolidate domestic electorate by channeling the historic pride and hyper-nationalism, the scope of this paper is to analyze the use of civilizational statism in the international political realm. This paper offers an understanding of the conceptual framework of 'civilizational states,' its meaning, evolution, and current state of knowledge, followed by an analysis of how the concept is being maneuvered into a geopolitical strategy aimed to challenge liberal hegemony and Western dominance.

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There is no single coherent widely accepted definition of the term civilizational states and is subject to varying interpretations depending on cultural, historical, and political contexts. In simple terms, civilizational states are those states that seek to channel their ancient cultural and political history to gain power and preeminence in the modern international order. They derive their identity, power, and influence from a deep connection to their historical legacies. In contrast to the more common state-centric approaches to global politics, civilizational states view themselves as embodiments of broader civilizational narratives. These narratives can be traced back to ancient empires or long-standing cultural traditions, which they believe provide them with unique wisdom, values, and a distinctive worldview that sets them apart from other states. They are not limited by geographical boundaries but are defined by their cultural history.

In exploring the distinctions between civilizational states, nation-states, and hegemons, Iranian scholars Mousavinia and Dareini provide valuable insights into the unique characteristics that define a civilizational state (2021, 148). They note that very few states possess the potential to evolve into civilizational states According to them, the primary requirement for a state to become a civilizational state is the presence of a "cultural and civilizational capacity" alongside a strong history of influencing peripheral societies and a rich cultural heritage. Distinguishing them from nation-states, they attribute nation-state's legitimacy being hinged on "territorial integrity, language, and citizenry." Nation-states derive their authority from their ability to maintain control over a specific geographic area and the people within it, typically focusing on political unity and national identity. In contrast, civilizational states draw their legitimacy from "its distinct civilization," their connection to a specific cultural and historical tradition which transcends geographical borders.

Zhang Weiwei, explaining Chinese as a civilizational state, contends that these states have "strong historical and cultural traditions," they do not "follow other models, western or otherwise" and "have their own intrinsic logic of evolution and development" (2012, 2). The concept is further elaborated by sociologist Göran Therborn, who views these states as an "invocation of ancient past" (2021, 235). This process of looking backward and reconstructing history is seen as a way for these states to reassert their sense of distinct national identity as against the one imposed on them by the Westphalian order and foreign domination.

In his influential work The Rise of the Civilizational State, Christopher Coker provides a comprehensive analysis of the emergence of civilizational states in the modern world, with particular focus on China, India, Russia, Japan, and the Islamic Caliphate. Coker argues that in the context of a post-liberal world order, one in which the dominance of Western liberalism is increasingly contested, these states are channeling their unique cultural and historical heritages to assert their own exceptionalism and identity. This resurgence is characterized by a rejection of Western liberal universalism, which has historically promoted values like democracy, individual rights, and free-market capitalism as global norms. Instead, civilizational states seek to assert the primacy of their own cultural and civilizational frameworks, positioning them as alternatives to the Western vision of global governance and political order.

Coker's analysis aligns with the broader theoretical contributions of Samuel Huntington, who in his seminal work *The Clash of Civilizations* proposed an influential framework for understanding global politics in the post-Cold War era. Huntington's account also provided an elaborative list of nine civilizations viz. Western, Confucian, Islamic, Hindu, Japanese, Latin-America, Slavic-Orthodox, and Buddhist civilizations (Therborn 2021, 234). He emphasized the idea that cultural and religious identities—rooted in deep historical traditions—are increasingly becoming the driving forces in global conflict and cooperation, rather than political ideologies or economic systems.

Therborn further mentioned that civilizational states seek to erase or rewrite the modern history of their countries, which often includes periods of chaos, internal conflict, foreign domination, and cultural decline (2021, 235). Instead, they look back to a time in their history when their civilizations were at the height of political, economic, and cultural achievement, a "golden age" that represents an idealized vision of their nation's past. Examples of this can be seen in various contemporary political movements: China, for instance, has made concerted efforts to rewrite its imperial history under the Qing dynasty, emphasizing its historical achievements while downplaying the chaos and foreign occupation of the nineteenth and twentieth. In India, the rise of Hindu nationalist politics under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has led to the removal of significant portions of Mughal history from textbooks, as part of an effort to reshape national identity and emphasize a more Hindu-centric historical narrative. This selective reconstruction of

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their pasts helps these states strengthen their claims to legitimacy and power.

Mousavinia and Dareini identify several countries that they believe possess the potential to become civilizational states due to their long-standing cultural and historical legacies (2021, 149). This includes India, China, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Italy, each of which have the potential to become civilizational states in the region by building upon their rich cultural heritages and historical influence. On the other hand, they state that countries like Iraq or Lebanon cannot play the role of civilizational states as they lack an ethnic and historical unity. Furthermore, comparing civilization-statism with hegemonic strategy, they state that hegemons primarily depend on "material capabilities" that is, political, economic, and military advancements. While hegemons may eventually mobilize cultural influence, their initial strength lies in their material power. In contrast, civilizational states start from a different position, they begin with "cultural and human components" and then transform into material and objective powers. This progression from cultural depth to material strength marks a key difference between civilizational states and hegemonic powers, with the former privileging cultural heritage as the core of their power and identity and the latter holding material capabilities as primary source of power.

As Amitav Acharya explains, invoking civilizationism is not a novel phenomenon, but rather a recurring theme throughout history, particularly among the postcolonial emerging states. Leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru of India, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk of Turkey, and Sun Yat-sen of China invoked civilizational narratives to challenge Western domination while simultaneously grappling with the complexities of internal diversities within their countries (2020, 148). These leaders sought to unify their populations, often composed of diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious groups, under the banner of a shared civilizational identity. They turned to the legacies of their respective civilizations to resist Western influence and establish political legitimacy. Thus, civilizationism in the postcolonial world was a tool for both anti-imperialist resistance and the promotion of national unity.

Today, the concept of clash and dialogue among civilizations has garnered significant attention from political elites and academics worldwide. Many have argued that the post-Cold War world is likely to be dominated by a global confrontation between these distinct civilizations, each seeking to preserve and promote its unique cultural and historical heritage. They often argue that the rise of civilizational states will lead to a decline in international cooperation, as these states, driven by their unique cultural and historical identities, are expected to prioritize their civilizational exceptionalism over the universalist principles that have long underpinned the liberal international order. Following this, academicians across the world advocate for greater interaction and discourse between these civilizations to foster mutual understanding and resolve conflicts (Bettiza, Bolton and Lewis 2023, 3). The "Dialogue among Civilizations" initiative, proposed by figures like former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami and endorsed by international organizations such as the United Nations, reflects the growing importance of cultural engagement in international relations. In this evolving global landscape, state actions in the future are likely to be determined less by traditional geopolitical considerations and more by the cultural and civilizational affiliations that shape national identities.

Acharya has pointed out that the "civilizational-state-syndrome" phenomenon is not exclusive to non-Western societies. Emerging nation-states, western or non-western, often invoke distinct national identity and cultural superiority to build national unity (Acharya 2020, 148). In the west, political elites have rallied around the Judeo-Christian heritage of Europe and North America. Similarly, Islamic leaders, including a variety of non-state actors, have articulated a narrative centered on the unity and greatness of Islamic civilization. This has served both as a unifying force and a platform for political action in the Muslim world.

Furthermore, western thinkers and policymakers saw the post-Cold War period as a time of unchallenged Western dominance. Francis Fukuyama's proclamation of the 'End of History' after the Cold War resonated widely in the West, suggesting that human civilization had reached an epoch of ideological evolution, with liberal democracy emerging as the universal model. In his view, the triumph of liberalism, characterized by individual rights, market economies, and democratic governance, signified the ultimate victory of the Western political model. Fukuyama argued that ideological struggles had effectively ended, and liberal democratic civilization would now serve as the guiding force for governance and political development for all countries.

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In contrast, the civilizational statism espoused by emerging Asian powers like India and China is seen as more threatening to the Western order. Western scholars and policymakers tend to differentiate between these two sets of civilizational imaginaries on the basis of democratic values and freedom. Western thinkers criticize the civilizational visions of countries like China and India, labeling them as autocratic, divisive, and intolerant. This critique reflects the ideological competition between the liberal civilizational model and the civilizational statism of the East, where nations like China and India present themselves as ideological and cultural alternatives to the West. On the international political reordering, Weiwei notes, "[these civilizational states] converge on the theme that they are respectively unique civilizations, fed up with the Western imposition of its values on them in the name of universality". He further mentions how these countries are "challenging the so-called liberal international order, with the result that the global order is shifting from a vertical one, with the West on top, to a horizontal one, in which the West and the are on a par with each other."

Civilizational statism challenges both the epistemological foundations of Western superiority and the political legitimacy of the liberal international order. Epistemologically, the notion directly challenges the racialized knowledge and dichotomy of "civilized" versus "uncivilized" by asserting the historical richness and cultural depth of non-Western societies. These nations present themselves as bearers of distinct, highly developed civilizations, each with its own political, social, and philosophical traditions and pledge to restore the ancient glory that was disrupted by the Westphalian system. Ideologically, the civilizational state seeks to fosters a sense of solidarity among Asian nations and subtly advances a broader idea of "Asia for Asians." It promotes a collective identity that challenges Western imperialism and emphasizes regional unity.

The West's wariness is not just motivated by their fear of challenge to liberal values and liberal universal civilization from the civilizational states. It also comes from the political reordering advocated by civilizational states that would shift the balance of power away from the West, at least in their respective spheres of influence. In geopolitics, civilizational statism allows these nations to redefine their spheres of influence, create acceptance in their neighborhood and assert regional power. By framing their rise as a civilizational resurgence, these countries aim to position themselves as an alternative to the Western powers, thereby countering the West's regional interference and the longstanding control of global governance.

The growing strength of Asian civilizational states further adds to the wariness and contention. As Acharya points out, the leaders of these nations are now presiding over countries that are not only economically stronger but also more demographically and politically robust (Acharya 2021, 148). Countries like China, with its massive population and burgeoning economic might, and India, with its rapidly growing economy and democratic framework, are becoming increasingly self-reliant and assertive on the world stage. This newfound power gives these nations the capability to turn their civilizational imaginaries into tangible political and social realities. The rising influence of these Asian civilizational states signals a potential shift in the global balance of power, and the West, particularly the United States and Europe, finds itself confronting the prospect of a multipolar world where Western ideals are no longer the sole guiding framework.

In conclusion, while the civilizational state remains a contentious and evolving idea, its potential to reshape global geopolitics should not be underestimated. Though critics in the West dismiss it as an illiberal or fragmented project with limited prospects, such a view overlooks the growing power of countries like China and India, which are increasingly positioning themselves as key proponents of this model. If the civilizational state project succeeds, it could lead to a reordering of the international system, where the influence of Western powers is diminished, particularly outside the Atlantic world.

For Western leaders, for liberal civilization and its influence to remain relevant, it will be pertinent to rework the concept into an encompassing and inclusive framework and not an exclusive Western creation. For leaders of civilizational states, the crucial challenge will be to translate the concept into a coherent and strategic framework, one that unites their diverse populations and strengthens their global standing. If they manage to do so, the civilizational state could become a formidable force in global politics, reshaping not just regional dynamics but also the broader ideological struggle between competing visions of governance. Ultimately, the success or failure of the civilizational state will not only affect the future of Asia but could catalyze a deeper division in global politics, fundamentally

altering the balance of power for the coming decades.

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