

# Huntington and Post-Cold War Paradigms: If Not the Clash of Civilizations, What?

Written by Terry Tucker

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TERRY TUCKER, SEP 23 2013

'Foreign Affairs' magazine recently ran a tribute to the 20th Anniversary of Samuel P. Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations?'.<sup>[1]</sup> The original essay in the summer of 1993 ignited a firestorm of debate, although the question mark in the title of the essay was generally ignored. Twenty years later, this article, and subsequent book, still captures attention and lights bonfires in political science debates.

Huntington's book was an attempt 'to provide a fuller, deeper and more thoroughly documented answer' to the question contained in the original article; the question mark that everyone ignored in the article's title. The themes developed include: the concept of civilizations; the question of a universal civilization; the relation between power and culture; the shifting balance of power among civilizations; cultural indigenization in non-Western societies; the political structure of civilizations; conflicts generated by Western universalism; Muslim militancy and Chinese assertion; balancing and bandwagoning responses; the causes and dynamics of fault line wars; and the futures of the West and of world civilizations.<sup>[2]</sup>

Two important themes are covered in the book that were not fully developed in the original essay. The first major theme is the crucial impact of population growth on instability and balance of power. The second theme, absent from the article, but summarized in the title, is that 'clashes of civilizations are the greatest threat to world peace, and an international order based on civilizations is surest safeguard against world war.'<sup>[3]</sup> Nevertheless, '[t]he central theme... is that culture and cultural identities, which at the broadest level are civilizational identities, are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration and conflict in the post-Cold War world.'<sup>[4]</sup>

### Geopolitics and the Clash of Civilizations

A recent essay by Zachary Keck claims that geopolitics doomed the clash of civilizations.<sup>[5]</sup> Keck's essay laments that '[n]o universal ideological challenge has been put forth to challenge liberal democracy, and even the most illiberal states in the world still adopt aspects of liberal democracy like (unfair) elections to enhance their legitimacy.'<sup>[6]</sup> The point on the Western attempt to impose variants of a universal ideology is precisely what Huntington identified as a source that would drive increasing instability – that attempts to impose western universalism denies the multipolar symbols of cultural and civilizational identity.<sup>[7]</sup> Keck's assessment wildly misses the point. Political actions, rhetoric and economic problems are just the supporting events.

Keck also laments the popularity of the book outside of academia. This veiled inference must mean that its popularity outside of academia somehow degrades its value. He goes on to argue that Huntington's theory is incorrect. Despite Keck's assertions, I argue that Huntington's theory is correct. The poverty of Keck's strategic and geopolitical thought ignores the interplay between theory and practice, the growing complexity of modern geopolitics and the superior merit of historical over the material school of thought. This poverty of thought on geopolitics is further reflected in the fact that soldiers tend not to be scholars, civilians tend not be comfortable theorizing about it, and the strategy of geopolitics falls somewhere between the political and military realms.

Huntington provides many clear examples throughout 'Political Order in Changing Societies' on the social forces,

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modernization, political consciousness, and the impact of modernization and relationships.<sup>[6]</sup> In fact, I offer that the two books are meant to compliment each other. Analytical comparison based on literature reviews provide no real frame of reference for the power of Huntington's most famous work. Huntington's thesis is that '[t]he great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural' and that the interaction between western and non-western civilizations will be the centerpiece of conflict. Huntington argues that religion, economics, governance and politics are reflections of culture and identity of a civilization.

## Contemporary Politics and a Clash of Civilizations

Contemporary politics provide support for Huntington's thesis. The slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood is one example that is representative of the cultural conflict to which Huntington refers: 'Allah is our objective; the Quran is our law; the Prophet is our leader; Jihad is our way; and death for the sake of Allah is the highest of our aspirations.' The crowds and supporters in Egypt, Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, et.al., calling for change, or, Kurdish, Shia, Sunni, Palestinian, or Armenian separatism, are too significant to attribute to radicalism; radicalism is the result of perceived threat to culture and those populations that perceive a vulnerability and threat to their existence and culture.<sup>[9]</sup>

Huntington defines a civilization as

'a cultural entity. Villages, regions, ethnic groups, nationalities, religious groups, all have distinct cultures at different levels of heterogeneity... European communities in turn, will share cultural features that distinguish them from Arab or Chinese communities. Arabs, Chinese and Westerners, however, are not part of any broader cultural identity. They constitute civilizations.'<sup>[10]</sup>

Huntington declared that identification with a civilization was the broadest level of identification. 'People can and do redefine identities and, as a result, the composition and boundaries of civilization change.'<sup>[11]</sup> One example Huntington provided was the 1994 protest of Proposition 187, a referendum that would deny state benefits to illegal immigrants and their children. Protestors carried Mexican flags. Observers questioned why they should be given benefits and a free education if they weren't carrying American flags. Two weeks later they demonstrated again, this time carrying American flags upside down. The Proposition was defeated. A recent Stratfor analysis entitled "The National Context of Mexico City's Teacher Protests" provides another example when it stated:

'The mobilization of teachers, for example, reflects a socioeconomic divide between Mexico's core and peripheral territories. The majority of protesting teachers come from the rural, mountainous states of Chiapas, Oaxaca and Michoacan, which are part of what is known as Mexico's outer core. The central government has traditionally had difficulty administering these states effectively and maintaining authority over their remote populations.'

In a recent Interfax article, Russian President, Vladimir Putin, takes several pages right from Huntington and defends values and religion – critical components that make up culture and cultural identity. These examples validates Huntington in several ways: the most important post-Cold War distinctions are that culture and cultural identity are important to geopolitics; geopolitics are multipolar and multi-civilizational; local politics are the politics of ethnicity; and global politics are the politics of civilizations

The increasing incidence of small wars validates Huntington's thesis that 'clashes of civilizations are the greatest threat to world peace, and an international order based on civilizations<sup>[12]</sup> is surest safeguard against world war.'<sup>[12]</sup> Limiting the number of direct annual fatalities to determine if the crisis is systemic does not make it less long-term, or less systemic; only latent. With some sources reporting as little as 30 and as many as 60 global conflicts for 2013, there are as many small wars today as there were during the height of the counterinsurgency era – 1958 to 1965.<sup>[13]</sup> The small wars that characterize contemporary conflict demonstrate the intra- and inter-cultural questions on what and who trumps sovereignty. In other words, these conflicts represent the destruction and consolidation of small groups, the diversification and consolidation of social forces and the emergence of political organizations that resist what they view as threats to their existence.

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## Conclusion

We recall Keck's assertion that '[n]o universal ideological challenge has been put forth to challenge liberal democracy...'. The reason that the clash of civilizations has not dominated world politics is because geopolitics that have operated since 1648 attempted to regulate and limit such conflict, and monopolized the use of force. International and state institutions assert the right to judge and constrain. Geopolitics places the political imperative first, yet it is the economic imperatives that exacerbate the political. Both economic and political stresses exacerbate the cultural. The failure is not Huntington's thesis; the failure is rather that the geopolitical techniques and engagements that were used during 'the time of Kings' remain unchanged and do not account for the complexity of today.

Keck emphasizes that 'the spread of communicative technology has resulted more in the decentralization of power than in the centralization Huntington foresaw, and upon which a theory of civilization required'[14]. Although the claim that communications technology has decentralized power is somewhat correct, it has only done so at the level of social mass mobilization – leaderless groups following 'ideas' and culture. It has not, however, diminished the power of any state or the power of non-state actors. The technology has made the duration of power merely 'transient' and entirely dependent on how geopolitics are addressed at two levels – local and civilizational.

Geopolitics continue to operate under simplified Cold-War concepts and 'an anomalous event(s) do not falsify a paradigm';<sup>[15]</sup> neither does failed understanding of complex environments, failed analysis, or failed geopolitical strategies. In reality, there was never any real doubt about the primacy of geopolitics in the Cold War or post-Cold War. The issue is that geopolitics occurs at multiple levels and this was ignored. Like the counterinsurgency doctrine, failure to understand and account for complexity means that it must automatically invalidate it.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Foreign Affairs, 'The Clash of Civilizations? The Debate: 20 Anniversary Edition', accessed 20 September, 2013, <<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/books/fabooks/the-clash-of-civilizations>>.

<sup>[2]</sup> Samuel P. Huntington 1996, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Touchstone Books, p. 13.

<sup>[3]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[4]</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>[5]</sup> Zachary Keck 2013, 'How Geopolitics Doomed the Clash of Civilizations', *The Diplomat*, accessed 20 September 2013, <<http://thediplomat.com/the-editor/2013/09/07/how-geopolitics-doomed-the-clash-of-civilizations/>>.

[6] Ibid.

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<sup>[7]</sup> Samuel P. Huntington 1996, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Touchstone Books, pp. 19-21.

<sup>[8]</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Yale University Press, pp. 8-71.

<sup>[9]</sup> See, for example, 'Al Qaeda-linked rebels gain control of Christian village, Syrian activists say, *Fox News*, accessed 8 September 2013, <<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2013/09/08/syrian-activists-say-al-qaida-linked-rebels-gain-control-christian-village/>>.

<sup>[10]</sup> Samuel P. Huntington 1993, 'The Clash of Civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs* 72(3) pp. 22-49, pp. 24-25.

<sup>[11]</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>[12]</sup> *Ibid.*, note 3.

<sup>[13]</sup> See, for example, The Center for Systemic Peace, accessed 8 September 2013, <<http://www.systemicpeace.org/>>; Global Security, accessed 8 September 2013, <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/>>; Wars in the World, accessed 8 September 2013 <<http://www.warsintheworld.com/?page=static1258254223>>.

[14] Zachary Keck 2013, 'How Geopolitics Doomed the Clash of Civilizations', *The Diplomat*, accessed 20 September 2013, <<http://thediplomat.com/the-editor/2013/09/07/how-geopolitics-doomed-the-clash-of-civilizations/>>.

<sup>[15]</sup> Foreign Affairs, *The Clash of Civilizations? The Debate: 20 Anniversary Edition*, accessed 20 September, 2013, <<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/books/fabooks/the-clash-of-civilizations>>.

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