

# Afghanistan: A Critical Insight into Huntington's Civilizational Approach

Written by Deepshikha Shahi

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DEEPSHIKHA SHAHI, MAR 11 2017

**This is an excerpt from Understanding Post-9/11 Afghanistan: A Critical Insight into Huntington's Civilizational Approach. An E-IR Open Access Book by Deepshikha Shahi.**

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Civilization as a significant unit of analysis and locus of debate in contemporary International Relations is largely an intellectual contribution of Samuel P. Huntington. His celebrated and controversial article and book about 'civilizations' (1993, 1996) have become some of the most widely quoted and translated analyses of the post-Cold War international order. Huntington had predicted a *civilizational turn* in post-Cold War world politics. In his bold rendering, civilizations were primeval entities that would replace ideology and geopolitics as the animating sources of cooperation and conflict in the post-Cold War world.<sup>[1]</sup> Huntington warned:

In the post-Cold War world flags count and so do other symbols of cultural identity, including crosses, crescents, and even head coverings, because culture counts, and cultural identity is what is most meaningful to most people. People are discovering new but often old identities and marching under new but often old flags which lead to wars with new but often old enemies... There can be no true friends without true enemies. Unless we hate what we are not, we cannot love what we are...The unfortunate truth in these old truths cannot be ignored by statesmen and scholars. For peoples seeking identity and reinventing ethnicity, enemies are essential, and the potentially most dangerous enmities occur across the fault lines between the world's major civilizations.<sup>[2]</sup>

Huntington's attempt to provide a new mental map for perceiving the transformed 'civilizational' realities of post-Cold War world politics, led to the generation of two critical by-products: first, the *lofty picture of Western civilization*; second, the *tarnished image of Islam*. What has euphemistically, and possibly prematurely, been termed the 'New World Order' in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, has been idealised by references to a supposed superiority of Western civilization – its vision of humankind, including human rights and the economic and political system of liberalism. Huntington wrote: 'The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion, but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence.'<sup>[3]</sup>

A similar sentiment was echoed in the writings of Victor Davis Hanson. He asserted that there was a Western way of war, which because of certain features of Western civilization, had always been superior to non-Western ways, giving Westerners great military advantage. These features were generally derived from the Greek tradition and included concepts like limited government, civic participation, freedom of speech, critical inquiry, personal rights, and basic egalitarianism. According to him, these concepts produced superior aspects of Western war including massive formations like phalanxes and legions, as well as brutally annihilative tactics and goals.<sup>[4]</sup> Western scholars generally took great pride in their civilization which they claimed to be 'mightier' than other civilizations in both ideational and material senses.

The Western scholarly inclination for an inflated presentation of their 'civilizational' background was readily

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internalised and endorsed by Western leaders. A few days after 9/11, the Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, boasted of the supremacy of Western civilization by making the following controversial statement at a press conference:

We should be conscious of the superiority of our civilization, which consists of a value system that has given people widespread prosperity in those countries that embrace it, and guarantees respect for human rights and religion. This respect certainly does not exist in the Islamic countries.<sup>[5]</sup>

In the post-9/11 world, 'civilization' has filled the vacuum left by religion in the West's secularised environment. Western civilisation has emerged as an exemplar that is to be emulated either by will or by force. The norms inherent in the 'Western' way of life, of which the US is the epitome, have increasingly become the bases of legitimacy for economic and military policies across the globe.

On the flip side of this exalted status of the West, a myth pertaining to the dichotomy of good and evil has been deliberately produced, the most pronounced manifestation of which is the construct of the 'axis of evil.' This term was often used by US President George W. Bush to describe governments that he accused of harbouring terrorists and seeking weapons of mass destruction. The 'good' embodied in Western civilization has been highlighted in contrast to the alleged 'evil' intrinsic to Islam. Huntington's assertions were in line with the Western scholarly tradition of denouncing Islam:

Islam's borders are bloody and so are its innards. The fundamental problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power.<sup>[6]</sup>

Alexis de Tocqueville, for instance, had commented:

I studied the Koran a great deal...I came away from that study with the conviction that by and large there have been few religions in the world as deadly to men as that of Muhammad. As far as I can see, it is the principal cause of the decadence so visible today in the Muslim world, and, though less absurd than the polytheism of old, its social and political tendencies are in my opinion infinitely more to be feared, and I therefore regard it as a form of decadence rather than a form of progress.<sup>[7]</sup>

Likewise, John Wesley said:

Ever since the religion of Islam appeared in the world, the espousers of it...have been as wolves and tigers to all other nations, rending and tearing all that fell into their merciless paws, and grinding them with their iron teeth; that numberless cities are raised from the foundation, and only their name remaining; that many countries, which were once as the garden of God, are now a desolate wilderness; and that so many once numerous and powerful nations are vanished from the earth! Such was, and is at this day, the rage, the fury, the revenge, of these destroyers of human kind.<sup>[8]</sup>

It was believed in Western scholarly circles that the inferiority of Islam in comparison to Western civilization chiefly emanated from its failure to blend 'reason' with 'faith'.

Ernest Volkman wrote: 'The Christian philosopher Thomas Aquinas described "reason" as the "bride of faith"'. Aquinas' idea that science, or rational inquiry into the laws of nature, could coexist with religion, was accepted by Western Civilization. In contrast, at the very moment Aquinas was telling his fellow Europeans how faith and reason could coexist, his Iranian counterpart, the Arab philosopher Ghazzali, concluded that the treasure of ancient texts represented social dynamite. The study of science and philosophy, he wrote, was harmful because it would shake man's faith in God and undermine the Muslim religion.<sup>[9]</sup> To a great extent, the unscientific nature of Islamic faith was held responsible for the backwardness of Muslim societies. Beyond Western scholars, some Western leaders also express similar viewpoints. Taking an early example, Winston Churchill once said:

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How dreadful are the curses which Mohammedanism lays on its votaries! Besides the fanatical frenzy, which is as dangerous in a man as hydrophobia in a dog, there is this fearful fatalistic apathy. The effects are apparent in many countries. Improvident habits, slovenly systems of agriculture, sluggish methods of commerce, and insecurity of property exist wherever the followers of the Prophet rule or live... Far from being moribund, Mohammedanism is a militant and proselytizing faith.<sup>[10]</sup>

In the aftermath of 9/11, George W. Bush and Tony Blair tried to be politically correct by making rhetorical statements about the appreciable credentials of Islam. However, they have frequently vilified Islam by publicly defining criteria for its 'genuine' interpretation.<sup>[11]</sup> The over-simplified attribution of almost all post-9/11 terrorist activities to Islamic maxims has resulted in a distorted image of Islam, that in turn is being used to justify the 'civilizing mission' underlying the post-9/11 US-led global war on terrorism.

9/11 has demonstrated how the world's only superpower is not immune from the dangers and fragility of the current international system. A decade after 9/11, the ranking Republican on the Intelligence Committee, Senator Richard Shelby, said: 'If there was any certainty in the weeks and months after the 9/11 attacks, it was that these were just the first in a campaign of terror on American soil. You can just about bet on it'.<sup>[12]</sup> The Chairman of the 9/11 Commission, Thomas Kean, expressed a similar apprehension at the Bipartisan Policy Center in Washington D.C. He stated: 'We are safer but we are not as secure yet as we can or should be'.<sup>[13]</sup> Emphasising the political discomfort caused by post-9/11 wars, George Will wrote: 'Today, for reasons having little to do with 9/11 and policy responses to it, the nation is more demoralized than at any time since the late 1970s, when, as now, feelings of impotence, vulnerability, and decline were pervasive'.<sup>[14]</sup>

While 9/11 exposed the vulnerability of the US on the one hand, it seriously questioned the ethical premises of US foreign policy, especially towards Afghanistan, Iraq and the Middle East, on the other. Stephen Eric Bronner wrote: 'American foreign policy in the aftermath of 9/11 has increasingly been associated with the use of a double standard by much of the world'.<sup>[15]</sup> Joan Hoff critiqued post-9/11 US foreign policy by showing how moralistic diplomacy had increasingly taken on Faustian overtones. She argued that as long as the ideological outcome of the Cold War remained in doubt, there was little reason for presidents or government decision-makers to question the unethical aspects of US relations with the rest of the world or the universal and exceptional nature of American values. 9/11 allowed the US to assert its exceptionalism and dominance more unilaterally than ever before.<sup>[16]</sup> Not surprisingly, discussion of Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis has frequently taken place in post-9/11 debates. Nevertheless, a simplistic understanding of 9/11 and the subsequent US-led war on terror in Afghanistan as exemplifications of a clash of civilizations seems to be thoroughly misleading and dangerous. It is misleading as it omits various crucial factors that refute the applicability of Huntington's thesis in the context of post-9/11 Afghanistan. It is dangerous as it reinforces the overly elevated status of the West in comparison to a maligned portrait of Islam, thereby provoking violent exchanges between the fanatic sympathisers of the two 'civilizations'.

A sincere attempt to check this misleading and dangerous tendency requires an alternative understanding of the post-9/11 Afghan scenario that may serve the following objectives: (i) Expose the theoretical loopholes and practical pitfalls implicit in Huntington's thesis of civilizational clash; (ii) Explain the popular receptivity of Huntington's thesis despite its inadequacies; (iii) Reveal the hidden political motives of the West behind projecting Islam as an evil force, particularly in relation to the war on terror in Afghanistan; (iv) Diagnose the historical and sociological roots of the post-9/11 Afghan conflict; and (v) Suggest a way out of the ongoing crisis facing Afghanistan, in particular, and Islam, in general.

This study undertakes the responsibility of fulfilling the above-mentioned objectives by adopting two theoretical strategies: first, evoking the academic discipline of psychology to grasp the interface between aggressive scripts and violent acts<sup>[17]</sup>; second, employing the alternative framework of *Critical International Theory* (CIT), developed by Robert W. Cox and Andrew Linklater, and inspired by the works of Antonio Gramsci and Jürgen Habermas respectively, to decode and propose a settlement of post-9/11 Afghan crisis. The study raises the following central question: Do the paradigms offered by CIT – namely 'production' and 'communication' – prove more effective in terms of their descriptive, explanatory and emancipatory capacity, than the paradigm offered by the clash of civilizations thesis in portraying post-9/11 Afghanistan?

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An appropriate response to this central question demands attention to several related questions:

- What are the basic propositions of the clash of civilizations thesis?
- Can we see the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent US-led war on terror in Afghanistan as the prelude to a renewed clash of civilizations?
- Does the case of post-9/11 Afghan politics fit into the frame of the civilizational conflict paradigm?
- What are the gaps in the clash of civilizations thesis that lead to its failure in providing an adequate portrayal of post-9/11 Afghanistan?
- How are these gaps exposed and filled up by taking a critical-theoretical standpoint?
- How can CIT provide an alternative understanding of post-9/11 Afghanistan?
- Can CIT offer a practical agenda to transform the post-9/11 Afghan crisis?

The study examines these questions against the following hypothesis: the dual paradigms offered by CIT can be effectively utilised for serving a twofold purpose – first, highlighting the hidden political and economic factors underlying the so-called civilizational conflict in post-9/11 Afghanistan; second, revealing the implications of distortions in the 'civilizational' dialogue for determining the dynamics of post-9/11 Afghan politics. This twofold approach can facilitate a critical appraisal of clash of civilization thesis as well as suggest an apt way of addressing and transforming the post-9/11 Afghan crisis.

The methodology of the study is textual, comparative, analytical, interdisciplinary, post-positivist and emancipatory. It relies on various texts – books, articles, interviews, reports, statements, speeches, and agreements – for empirical support. It compares the effectiveness and utility of the clash of civilizations thesis to that of CIT. It analyses the political developments in post-9/11 Afghanistan by taking various theoretical standpoints. It merges the insights gained from psychology with International Relations theory. It endorses the post-positivist view that the notion of truth/reality created by the positivist clash of civilizations thesis is formed from a certain perspective and for some purpose which can be interpreted by tracing its political consequences. It takes the path of self-reflection to perceive the Afghan society as a site of power-struggles and demonstrates the historical compulsions of the past which constrain its emancipation while simultaneously possessing the potential for its realisation.

The primary sources consulted in the study include a series of interviews with Kabul-based diplomats, politicians, UN officials, American and European volunteers associated with INGOs, activists, social-workers, journalists, academicians, and laymen. These interviews were conducted during the author's visit to Kabul in July 2011. Though the data collected through these interviews do not correspond to a fully-fledged empirical method normally associated with standard 'quantitative' field studies, the data nonetheless remain illustrative, authentic and vital primarily for their 'qualitative' value as these were produced by individuals on behalf of their respective organisations. The pen-portraits and organisation profiles of these individuals and the sample questionnaire used for conducting the interviews have been provided in the appendices.

The study is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 lays out the origin and character of Huntington's thesis and categorises its various criticisms under three heads – epistemological, methodological, and ethical. Since the existing criticisms are weak when it comes to explaining the widespread receptivity of Huntington's thesis, the chapter turns to the 'humanistic-existential model' of psychology for designing a 'psychological critique' of the clash of civilizations thesis, thereby explaining the popular receptivity of Huntington's thesis and suggesting a nexus between 'knowledge' and 'violence.'

Chapter 2 reveals the specific historical factors that refute the applicability of Huntington's thesis to 9/11 and the subsequent US-led war on terrorism in Afghanistan. However, the chapter argues that the inapplicability of Huntington's thesis does not automatically imply the absence of the popularity of Huntington's thesis in Afghanistan. The chapter sets out to examine the general history of 'political reception' in Afghan politics, thereby explaining the popular receptivity of Huntington amongst the Afghans, on the one hand, and exposing the harmful impact of Huntington's ideas on post-9/11 Afghan politics, on the other.

Chapter 1 uses the humanistic-existential model of psychology to challenge the theoretical authenticity of

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Huntington's thesis, whereas Chapter 2 throws light on the myriad complexities of post-9/11 Afghanistan to raise questions about the analytical potential of Huntington's thesis. However, the task of highlighting flaws in Huntington's thesis is not as significant and desirable as discovering an alternative theoretical framework that is more meritorious in terms of its capability to comprehend social reality. Chapter 3 attempts to establish Critical International Theory (CIT) as a more meritorious theoretical framework than Huntington's thesis. It constructs CIT as a single overarching framework, traces the overlap between the assertions of CIT and the humanistic-existential model of psychology, and demonstrates the relative strengths of CIT against the weaknesses of the clash of civilizations thesis. In general, CIT is often viewed not as an integral whole but as an amalgam of two distinct paradigms concerning two distinct concepts and processes. The production paradigm tends to focus on the concept of work and struggles over redistribution. The communication paradigm is concerned with the concept of interaction and identity struggles. Critics argue that neither paradigm is adequate for the task of understanding the problematic of the other. They hold that the 'work-interaction divide' is the fundamental problem of CIT. However, this study tries its best to counter this charge. It sets out to forge a strong nexus between the twin paradigms of CIT. The study asserts that the common emancipatory objective of the dual paradigms of CIT emanates from a common broad intellectual project wherein the themes of *hegemony*, *reason* and *transcendence* play a central role.

Chapter 4 aims at providing an alternative and comparatively more accurate understanding of post-9/11 Afghanistan by applying the dual paradigms of CIT. The alternative understanding reconstructs the post-9/11 Afghan scenario as an instance of clash of hegemonic aspirations. The chapter demonstrates that the shifting of perspective from 'civilizational' to 'critical' not only presents a finer vision of the post-9/11 Afghan crisis but also suggests a way out of it. In its effort to find a solution to the troubling state of affairs in post-9/11 Afghanistan, it explores the possibility of organising an effective 'counter-hegemonic struggle' that in turn would require designing an 'alternative knowledge-base', organising the critical social forces along 'alternative social relations of production', and creating an 'all-inclusive speech community.' The chapter finally toys with the idea of a 'humanistic re-interpretation of Quran' which might not only pave the way for transforming the post-9/11 Afghan crisis but also prove to be a decisive step towards redeeming Islam from both Muslim and non-Muslim extremists who project themselves as contenders for global hegemony in the contemporary world.

One of the intentions behind undertaking this study is to respond to those critics who disapprove of critical theorists for not developing testable theories. Robert O. Keohane, for instance, admits that the 'reflectivist' stance of critical theorists promises significant insights into the intersubjective bases of international relations, particularly institutional construction. He, however, laments that critical theorists have been more adept at pointing out what is omitted in rationalistic theory than in developing theories of their own with a priori content. He reiterates with Judith Goldstein that supporters of critical theory need to develop 'testable theories' and to be explicit about their scope.<sup>[18]</sup> By testing the theoretical assertions of CIT against the practical evidence drawn from post-9/11 Afghan politics, this study attempts to highlight the methodological edges of CIT over and above the traditional/rationalistic theories of International Relations.

Another motivating factor underlying this study is to demonstrate the reformative potential of CIT. Andrew Linklater lays emphasis upon the 'praxeological question of reform' which is best addressed by CIT.

He opines that 'due to the dominance of the realist emphasis on international systemic constraints on the tension between power and morality, and on the dangers of idealist praxeology, the question of how states and other social actors could create new political communities and identities has never been adequately addressed. Providing an adequate answer is a central requirement for the critical theory of international relations'.<sup>[19]</sup>

Likewise, Raymond Duvall and Latha Varadarajan argue that CIT shares a commitment to challenging the naturalness of the existing world order and the acceptability of its dominant relations and practices of power. They write:

Critical theory analyses the effects of power and the differential ability of actors to control their own circumstances. It also goes beyond that theoretical contribution to provide impetus for practical political action in challenging, confronting, and disrupting existing relations of power. Thus, in the contemporary era, critical IR theory is relevant,

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among other ways, as a stimulus to resist empire in its many guises.<sup>[20]</sup>

The present study is an attempt to shed light on the desirable course of action for resisting the imperialist tendencies in post-9/11 Afghanistan.

A heavy 'theoretical' orientation for the most part of this study might raise scepticism with regard to its practical relevance. However, the study endorses an indivisible yet detached linkage between theory and the practice of politics which is arguably best captured in the following words of a critical-theorist, Theodore W. Adorno:

However inseparable these two distinct disciplines – theory and practice – may be, since after all they both have their source in life itself, there is one further factor necessary for practice that is not fully explicable by theory and that is very hard to isolate. And I should like to emphasise it because I regard it as fundamental to a definition of the moral...One task of the theory of the moral is to set limits to the scope of theory itself, in other words, to show that the sphere of moral action includes something that cannot fully be described in intellectual terms, but also that should not be turned into an absolute... I find it extraordinarily difficult to find words to describe this factor...But I believe that we found a clue to it...when I was telling you about the concept of resistance...when someone decides not to do anything for once, but to retreat from the dominant realm of practical activity in order to think about something essential. Now what I wish to emphasise is the factor of resistance, of refusing to be part of the prevailing evil, a refusal that always implies resisting something stronger and hence always contains an element of despair. I believe that this idea of resistance, then, may help you best to see what I mean when I say that the moral sphere is not coterminous with the theoretical sphere, and that this fact is itself a basic philosophical determinant of the sphere of practical action.<sup>[21]</sup>

This study can be considered a small effort towards touching that philosophical zone of morality that according to Adorno lies somewhere between, and yet beyond, the theoretical and practical reach of existence.

## Notes

[1] According to Huntington, civilization means 'the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species.' See Huntington, Samuel Summer 1993, "The Clash of Civilizations?," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, p. 24.

[2] Huntington, Samuel P. 1997 *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon and Schuster, p.20.

[3] Huntington, Samuel P. 1996 *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Penguin, p. 51.

[4] Hanson, Victor Davis 2001 *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power*, Anchor Books.

[5] Hooper, John and Connolly, Kate September 27, 2001 'Berlusconi Breaks Ranks Over Islam', *The Guardian*, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/sep/27/afghanistan.terrorism7>

[6] Huntington, Samuel P. 1996 *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Penguin, p. 217.

[7] Benoit Jean-Louis 2007 Notes sur le Coran et Autres Textes sur les Religions (Notes on the Koran and Other Texts on Religion) by Alex de Tocqueville, Bayard; reviewed by Mazel, Michelle 2007 *Jewish Political Studies Review*, Vol. 19, pp. 3-4.

[8] Blanton, Stephen 2011 *The Heart of Islam*, Author House, p.xxi-xxii.

[9] Volkman, Ernest 2002 *Science Goes to War: The Search for the Ultimate Weapon, from Greek Fire to Star Wars*, Wiley, p.60.

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- [10] Churchill, Winston 1899 *The River War* available at <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1575199/posts>
- [11] See Pipes, Daniel 26 November 2001 'What's True Islam?: Not for U.S. to Say', *New York Post*; Sutton, Philip W. and Vertigans, Stephen 2005 *Resurgent Islam: A Sociological Approach*, Polity, p.150; Besteman, Lowe and Gusterson 2005 *Why America's Top Pundits are Wrong*, University of California Press, pp. 36-42.
- [12] Chapman, Steve September 8, 2011 'Who Kept Us Safe After 9/11?', *Chicago Tribune*, available at [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2011-09-08/news/ct-oped-0908-chapman-20110908\\_1\\_terrorist-attacks-car-bomb-domestic-terrorism](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2011-09-08/news/ct-oped-0908-chapman-20110908_1_terrorist-attacks-car-bomb-domestic-terrorism)
- [13] Mintz, Elianna August 31, 2011 '9/11 Commission Warns U.S. Still Vulnerable 10 Years After Attacks', *The Talk Radio News Service*, available at <http://www.talkradionews.com/news/2011/8/31/9-11-commission-warns-us-still-vulnerable-10-years-after-att.html>
- [14] Will, George September 11, 2011 '9/11, Wars Leave the US Feeling Vulnerable', *Newsmax*, available at <http://www.newsmax.com/GeorgeWill/9-11-iraq/2011/09/11/id/410468>
- [15] Bronner, Stephen Eric 2011 'On Judging American Foreign Policy: Human Rights, Political Realism and the Arrogance of Power', *Logos: A Journal of Modern Society and Culture*, available at [http://logosjournal.com/2011/summer\\_bronner/](http://logosjournal.com/2011/summer_bronner/)
- [16] Hoff, Joan 2007 *A Faustian Foreign Policy from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush: Dreams of Perfectibility*, Cambridge University Press.
- [17] Although most researchers focus on the use of aggressive scripts by delinquents, the scripts are as available for use in international conflicts, in bullying and gang wars. See Millon, Theodore 2003 *Handbook of Psychology: Personality and Social Psychology*, Volume 5, Wiley, p. 571.
- [18] Linklater, Andrew 2000 *International Relations: Critical Concepts in Political Science*, Volume 4, Routledge, p. 1789.
- [19] Linklater, Andrew 1992 'The Question of the Next Stage in International Relations Theory', *Millennium*, Vol.21, No.1, p. 96.
- [20] Duvall, Raymond and Varadarajan, Latha 2003 'On the Practical Significance of Critical International Relations Theory', *Asian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 11, Issue 2, pp. 75-88.
- [21] Adorno, Theodore W. 2001 *Problems of Moral Philosophy* edited by Thomas Schroder, translated by Rodney Livingstone, Stanford University Press, pp. 3-8.

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