

# Civilization as an Alternative Unit of Analysis in International Relations

Written by Hidayet Çilkoparan

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HIDAYET ÇILKOPARAN, FEB 6 2021

The concept of civilizations is ubiquitously used in the International Relations (IR) discipline. It has not yet been defined as a level of analysis across the discipline, yet its different conceptualizations may be an inspiring source to further enrich ontological, epistemological, and methodological aspects of the study of international relations. In basic terms, the level of analysis in IR refers to the choice of whether research is carried out on the level of the international system or its sub-components, such as the domestic and national level. This paper compares various approaches to conceptualizing and interpreting the role of civilizations in international relations as to whether differences of civilizations should be seen as a source of conflict and whether they can serve as an alternative unit to better analyze and explain the international reality. In this context, international reality may be defined as a portion of international relations abstracted for the purpose of analysis and limited through a framework defined by a specific time and space context.

The discipline of IR has developed impressively since the establishment of the Department of International Politics in the University College of Wales in Aberystwyth in 1918/19 and been able to come up with a variety of theoretical approaches, such as Realism, Liberalism, Marxism, the English School, Constructivism, Critical Theory, Feminism, and so on. Each of these IR theories looks at the world through its own distinct ontological and epistemological prism and attempts to understand, explain, predict, or change the course of events or the structure of international relations. Ontologically and epistemologically, the question of level and/or unit of analysis has been one of the primary areas of debate within the IR discipline.

The classic treatment of this issue in IR is J. David Singer's article *The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations* (1961). Singer's categorization suggests that one should choose 'the micro- or macro-level of analysis'. He thereby identified two levels of analysis for IR: the international system and the national sub-systems (Yurdusev, 1994). In contrast to that, scholars like Arnold Toynbee, Nuri Yurdusev, Raji Dutt Bajpai, and Gregorio Bettiza appear to suggest consideration of civilizations as an alternative unit/level of analysis and, accordingly, attempt to conceptualize civilizations in IR in their own ways.

In the historical sense, as suggested by Nuri Yurdusev, civilizations can be regarded as social identifications based on large-scale collectivities compared to other units of identity representing smaller social entities. They are large-scale both in terms of the time and space which they cover. As such, as Braudel wrote, 'Civilizations are realities of the extreme *longue durée* (*long duration*).' Toynbee made the same point in 'defining civilizations as societies, which are wider in space and time than national states or any other political communities and short of embracing the whole of mankind and covering the whole habitable or navigable surface of the earth' (Yurdusev, 2003).

Yurdusev in *International Relations and the Philosophy of History: A Civilizational Approach* (2003) describes civilizations as 'large-scale collective identifications'. Therefore, they can be considered as units of analysis not only for the study of history, but also in IR. Yurdusev's book makes significant contributions to the literature on the concept of civilization in IR. Yurdusev further explains that historically most civilizations have comprised international systems. He also notes that the concept of civilization is very often accompanied by the term culture, even though they are not synonymous, and that civilization has also been equated with progress and development. An important

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question remains, however: how to distinguish or delimit and compare multiple civilizations for the purpose of analyzing, understanding, and explaining international relations.

One answer was given in 1993 when Samuel Huntington came up with a controversial and widely discussed argument that, in the period ahead, the major source of conflict will not be ideologies or economic interests, but cultural differences. Cultural conflicts will dominate the agenda of the new world. As such, he claimed that the major conflicts will take place between civilizations, even though nation states will remain the most powerful actors in international politics. In other words, the 'clash of civilizations' will dominate the global agenda as the fault lines between civilizations will determine the future battle lines (Huntington, 1993).

Huntington's fundamental assumption reflected the view that civilizations are different from one another, that they have a 'fundamental incompatibility of beliefs, values, and cultural norms,' and these differences would pave the way for conflicts among them. In other words, he considered civilizational differences as a source of conflict, but not as a source of richness in the context of a collective human civilization, akin to the EU's famous motto of 'unity in diversity and diversity in unity'. His 'clash of civilizations' hypothesis was challenged by several other scholars, including Ian Hall and Anna Khakee. However, the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were interpreted as a corroboration of the 'clash of civilizations' hypothesis (Kapustin, 2009). Huntington's theory remains a contentious one, yet it continues to occupy a prominent position in contemporary IR discourses (Bajpai, 2018).

When he published his 'clash of civilizations' hypothesis in book form, Huntington defined civilization as 'the broadest cultural entity' and claimed that by disregarding the encompassing civilizations the units that constitute them cannot be fully understood (Huntington, 1996). Both Huntington and Toynbee acknowledge as a weakness of this approach the fact that civilizations have no clear spatial and temporal boundaries. It is therefore difficult to define a clear international reality for ontological and epistemological purposes.

Huntington argues that the West has technologically unified the world and facilitated the emergence of a 'multi-civilizational system'. This new system has been characterized by 'intense, sustained, and multidirectional interactions among all civilizations.' However, it had not, in his view, generated a 'universal civilization' (Huntington, 1998).

This observation, in fact, makes it clear that the civilizational approach has another weakness. It appears difficult to understand and/or explain international relations based on multiple civilizations because of their unclear boundaries and complex interactions. This poses a challenge to utilizing civilization as a unit of analysis instead of relatively well-defined and widely used concepts like international society, international system, the domestic level, and so on.

Considering the analytical approaches centered nation states, Huntington's theory is transcendental in a spatial way because it reaches beyond national boundaries. In other words, he argues that civilizations are transnational (Huntington, 1993). This observation of Huntington may be true, but his assumptions that civilizations will inevitably clash may be an exaggerated and prejudiced conclusion, particularly when it is criticized through the constructivist concept of intersubjectivity, which – in this context – could be referred to as 'civilizational intersubjectivity'. It may be construed as the way in which civilizations construct images of each other through their multi-faceted interactions.

Francis Fukuyama's approach to civilizations may be claimed to bear resemblance to that of Huntington. Fukuyama, based on past examples of clashing civilizations, argued that 'the expansionist and competitive behavior of 19<sup>th</sup> century European states rested on the belief in the legitimacy of force, particularly when applied to non-Europeans, also aiming to bring various provinces of human civilization up to the level of its most advanced outposts' (Fukuyama, 1989). By this observation, Fukuyama appears to be underlining the sense of superiority in Western civilization; this confirms the validity of endeavors to counter Western dominance in IR by coming up with non-Western IR theories.

In this vein, Pichamon Yeophantong argues that 'Huntington's foresight about the conflictual consequence of civilizational encounters in the post-Cold War era not only led to a deepening of Chinese dissatisfaction with Western theories and their misrepresentations of Eastern cultures, but it also gave Chinese scholars renewed impetus to

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establish a Chinese school of IR' (Yeophantong, 2018). A conclusion of these arguments may thus be that, through its weaknesses, the civilizational approach may have paved the way for a further fragmentation of IR on a global scale.

Looking back at the history of the civilizational approach, scholars like Ian Hall and Krishan Kumar emphasize the continuing importance and relevance of Toynbee's multi-volume *A Study of History*. They argue that Toynbee's general approach may suffer from some weaknesses – but, nevertheless, permits him to 'shed an illuminating light on many important historical questions'. Moreover, 'his belief in the equal value of all civilizations makes him attractive to those who reject Eurocentrism and are increasingly persuaded of the need to consider the total human experience from earliest times up to the present' (Kumar, 2014).

In *A Study of History*, Toynbee offered different accounts of what occurred when civilizations encountered each other and remained convinced that ideas transmitted by inter-civilizational encounters could bring about major social and political changes within civilizations (Hall, 2018). This statement can indeed be interpreted as a strength of this conceptualization as it helps explain human development through international interaction and exchanges.

As underlined by A. Nuri Yurdusev in '*Level of Analysis*' and '*Unit of Analysis*': *A Case for Distinction* (1993): according to Toynbee, 'an intelligible field of historical study cannot be parochial nation-states'; it has to be civilization, and thus an entity comprising several societies, but short of covering mankind. F. Braudel (1976) also considers civilization among the units of analysis for the 'history of groups and groupings', which include economic systems, states, classes, strata and civilizations (Yurdusev, 1994). In other words, Braudel views civilization as one large group next to all those listed above.

Kroeber (1953) argues that another strength of the Toynbeean conceptualization of civilization is that 'Toynbee seems to be the only historian who has committed himself not only to enumerating and defining his civilizations, but also to stating the criteria by which he defines them'. In his view, Toynbee was conscious of the problem of delaminating civilizations and making efforts to address it.

The civilizational approach is furthermore valuable since it takes other social facts into account. As argued by Robert Cox, civilizations undergo changes that are driven both from their internal diversity and from inter-civilizational encounters (Cox, 1995). Civilizations are different from nation-states in terms of their territorial boundaries, in that nation states usually have clearly demarcated borders, whereas civilizations tend to transcend national boundaries (Bajpai, 2018). Despite the challenges this come with, the civilizational approach has without doubt the potential to broaden and enrich the study of international relations, and to open new horizons for IR scholars.

Another interesting example for the civilizational approach lies in how Gregorio Bettiza promotes the concept of 'civilizational politics' and aims to broaden and develop theoretically and empirically the field of civilizational analysis in IR. In his view, 'civilizational politics offers an important avenue for theoretically inclined and empirically minded scholars to explore how social and political actors have come to understand, change, and construct world politics in view of plural civilizations and their relations' (Bettiza, 2014). Bettiza sees a strength of this approach in how civilizations can be deployed in IR to represent transnational and de-territorialized cultural communities.

Christopher Dawson argues that IR's engagement with civilizations coincided with fundamental changes in the global order that ushered in decolonization, globalization, and the end of the Cold War. By his definition, a civilization is considered the largest and highest socio-historical phenomenon and consists of numerous, diverse, and distinct cultures within itself (Bajpai, 2018). Martin Hall draws attention to the appearance of civilizational identities in IR and argues that 'civilizational analysis bears significance because the notion of civilization is an important transmitter of knowledge and corresponding preferences and policies' (Hall, 2007). This geographical and social diversity also means that civilizations entail some distinguishing components and are in a continued state of interaction within themselves and with each other.

The above-mentioned features of the civilizational approach offer a broader perspective and, at the same time, confront the researcher with the challenge of delimitating civilizational boundaries. This renders comparison and

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comparative analysis difficult. Research conducted on this basis may suffer from ontological ambiguity and epistemological unclarity.

Inter-civilizational interactions are ubiquitous. It is often argued, for example by Johann P. Arnason, that Europe's progress to a 'modern' civilization was assisted by exchanges with China, India, and the Islamic world (Arnason, 2006; Bajpai, 2018). For Bajpai, inter-civilizational interactions can become politically important, particularly when they have a role in constructing identities. In this process, civilizational identity may be instrumental in demarcating the boundaries of a community by discovering and highlighting the differences between the self and the other. It can also be useful in locating the self at the global, regional, or individual levels and to evaluate others (Bajpai, 2018). Unlike Huntington's hypothesis of a 'clash of civilizations', this interpretation of the civilizational approach may be useful for constructivist theorists as it further explains intersubjective civilizational identity formation in international relations.

As to the mainstream IR theories, Yurdusev emphasizes the importance which the English School attaches to the significance of cultural/civilizational factors in international relations. The English School, from early on, highlighted the significance of values and cultural/civilizational elements in international relations. Yurdusev highlights that Martin Wight (1977) even stated that a state system would not come into being without some degree of cultural unity. For the English School, identity, culture, civilization, and values are part of the practice of international system. International relations are not just composed of material factors, but also ideational forces (Yurdusev, 1996).

Artur Kuznetsov takes a different approach to interactions and potential clashes between civilizations. He puts forward his theory of 'grammatological geopolitics'. Unlike Huntington, Kuznetsov in his '*sui generis*' theory, defines civilizations based on the alphabets used by the nations and accordingly argues that a more accurate prediction of conflicts can be attained by the resulting fault lines (Aydınlı and Biltekin, 2018). Even though this approach is interesting, I tend to consider the explanatory power of this approach relatively weak as the defining elements of civilizations go beyond alphabets.

As to the discussions about a non-Western IR, Amitav Acharya, who prefers to use the concept of *Global IR*, argues that international systems need to be studied not only based on political-strategic interactions, but also cultural and civilizational interactions. He furthermore notes that many modern IR concepts such as 'economic interdependence, balance of power, and collective management of security' are commonly considered as traditional European ideas and practices – but, in fact, they have come into existence from multiple points of origin within and outside Europe. Accordingly, he further argues that by applying such a widened scope, IR can offer more room to the history, culture, economic systems, interactions and contributions of non-Western civilizations and states. He then concludes that 'IR is best understood as the product of interactions and mutual learning between all civilizations and states, even though some have been more powerful than others at different stages in history' (Acharya, 2017).

Similarly, Gurinder Bhambra chooses to explain differences between peoples and acknowledges the existence of a plurality of civilizations that goes beyond earlier binaries of 'civilized' and 'non-civilized', modernity and tradition. As such, Bhambra's new paradigm of 'multiple modernities', which can be interpreted as the existence of different civilizations constantly interacting with each other, brings in an important cultural focus in its attempt to move beyond the perceived deficiencies of the Eurocentric civilizational approaches (Bhambra, 2011).

John Hobson claims that the IR discipline makes continuous efforts to regard and defend Western civilization as the highest or ideal referent in world politics. Accordingly, in his view, such an approach runs counter to the opinion that 'international theory is value-free and produces positivist, universalist explanations of world politics that apply to all states regardless of cultural or racial difference'. In fact, it turns out that, when viewed through a non-Eurocentric lens, most international theory produces a parochial or provincial analysis of the Western priorities that are presented as universal (Hobson, 2013). Judging by the Euro/Western-centric nature of IR as a discipline, Hobson's claim seems to have a strong and credible justification.

Given the challenges facing the liberal international order around the world, the hypothesis of the 'end of history', which can be broadly described as the spread and acceptance of the Western civilizational values on a global scale,

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as Francis Fukuyama announced its arrival in 1989, has proven to be a mere speculation. Yet, as to the use of civilization as a unit of analysis in IR, based on the different conceptualizations of civilization as discussed above, one can further explore the possibility that the civilizational approach to some extent can help bridge fault lines in IR.

To sum up, civilization has been conceptualized and used in different ways in IR. A major weakness of the civilizational approach results from the blurred spatial and temporal boundaries of civilizations. The plurality of civilizations – or, in other words, the lack of a universal civilization – makes it also difficult to take civilization as an all-inclusive level/unit of analysis. The possibility that encounters of different civilizations may lead to conflictual outcomes is an unsubstantiated argument for IR to study as the causes of these conflicts need to be further examined and analyzed to see whether such conflicts are inevitable. Despite all the critiques, the civilizational approach to international relations may be helpful in opening new perspectives and enable scholars/researchers to broaden their ontological and epistemological approaches. In particular, placing more emphasis in IR on the study of civilizations and their mutually enriching interactions may be useful for non-Western IR approaches to make a stronger case against Western/Eurocentric IR studies.

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