

**CIVILIZATION IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS:
A Review of Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations**

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After the end of Cold War, several influential theories in international relations emerged explaining the new world order. Among them was Samuel P. Huntington's theory on the "clash of civilizations," now well-known for its unique cultural perspective. According to Huntington's famous book: *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, civilizations are crucial sources of influence in international affairs. Moreover, international conflicts will likely happen among countries from different civilizational entities. However, the importance of civilizations in relations among states is improperly overemphasized; this can be demonstrated by three political theories: realism, liberalism and lateral pressure theory. These theories emphasize national interests, political identities and domestic pressure, respectively, as fundamental in determining international relations—rather than cultural identity. Regardless of their different perspectives towards international affairs, all three are able to prove that Huntington's theory about clash of civilizations is ultimately flawed.

According to Samuel P. Huntington,

the term 'civilization' refers to the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have that distinguishes humans from other species¹. On the one hand, in the post-Cold War period a civilization-based world has emerged as countries tend to group themselves around the core states in their civilizations, based on cultural affinities. Due to the differences formed in aspects such as languages, religion, customs and history, the world can mainly be divided into seven or eight major parts: Sinic, Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Western, Latin American, Slavic-Orthodox, and African civilizations.² Countries within the same civilization are inclined to cooperate, while ones from distinct civilizations are more reluctant to do so. On the other hand, conflicts will often occur between countries from different civilizations. Even though cultural and religious dissimilation can be the major reason for some bloody and long-lasting

¹Huntington Samuel, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.(New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

² Huntington, Samuel. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

conflicts between Muslim and non-Muslim nations, Huntington's theory is not universally applicable to all international rivalries or affinities, such as the territorial disputes in South China Sea or the friendly U.S.-Saudi Arabia relationship.

Realism

For realists, the world is anarchical with endless competitions and no cultural affinities. Core countries in a certain civilization that enjoy some form of 'cultural pull' do not exist. On the contrary, due to the lack of global authority above all states, countries compete for relative gains in such zero-sum game regardless of their cultural similarities.³ One of classic examples indicating the weakness of cultural linkage is the recent series of territorial disputes in Asia. Six countries claim the right to part or all of the land and surrounding waters of the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, including China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. According to Huntington's definition of civilizations, most of them belong to the same Sinic Civilization and thus should have a friendly and smooth foreign relationship. Moreover, China should enjoy its cultural centripetal advantage derived from a leading role in Asian

civilization history. However, these six Asian "brothers" have no intention to give up fighting for the sovereignty of the Spratly Islands and thus, the dispute cannot be explained by the logic of Huntington.

Once national interests are jeopardized, cultural affinities become too weak to influence policy-making in international affairs because only the relative strength of power determines the very survival and security of individual states. In territorial disputes on South China Sea, China often gains advantages due to its stronger economic and military power rather than its cultural attractiveness. In addition, the division of the world into seven civilizations is vague and ineffective since interests are evaluated at the national level. States, as political rather than cultural entities, are the most important players in international affairs. As a result, it is a clash of interests, rather than a clash of civilizations, that is the paramount driver of conflict. For example, in South Asia, even though Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Philippines belong to the same civilization and one international organization of ASEAN, they choose different sides to defend their national interests. Thailand and Laos stand firm with China for trading benefits while Vietnam and Philippines build closer ties with the United States asking for support in territorial disputes against China.

³ Morgenthau, Hans. *Politics Among Nations: the Struggle for Power and Peace*. 7th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 2006).

Liberalism

Not only realists, but also liberalists deny the significance of civilizations in international affairs. They consider political preferences and regimes far more crucial than civilizations, and democracy will enhance peace and mutual understanding among them.⁴ Specifically, the democratic political system and the correspondent ideologies will prevent states from launching wars against other democracies due to the anti-war sentiment from the public and the institutional and legal restrictions on policy-making while conflicts often occur between non-democratic states or between democratic and non-democratic states. For instance, South Korea and North Korea cannot get along, though they not only belong to the same civilization, but were also the same nation half century ago, sharing almost every crucial element in culture. The liberal explanation for the intense hostility between South and North Korea is the struggle between two different political regimes. In the eyes of South Korean leaders, the dictatorship in North Korea casts threats on regional peace and doubts on cooperation since the Kim family in North Korea may act radically and irrationally without sufficient power check and public consensus. As a result, South Korea prefers to cooperate with Japan and the

⁴Doyle, Michael. "Liberalism and World Politics," *American Political Science Review* 80-4 (1986): 1151-1169.

United States as democratic regimes in international trades even though they all belong to different civilizations.

Furthermore, Huntington's view towards globalization is challenged. He argues that the modernization and the increasing economic interdependence with the process of globalization will increase possibilities for clash of civilizations and conflicts.⁵ However, such tendency is actually beneficial for a peaceful international environment based on the liberal commercial peace theory. As the level of economic interdependence increases, costs of conflicts largely increase between states with business connections.⁶ States, as rational actors, will carefully evaluate the costs and benefits of certain foreign policies and avoid costly disputes that threaten their commercial benefits. Under such circumstances, few rational states will choose to fight for civilizational differences at the expense of economic gains. For instance, the United States and Saudi Arabia stay close due to their interdependence in energy trading. Their economic interdependence facilitates mutual cultural understanding from two distinct civilizations. Another example is the Sino-Japan relationship: Regardless of historical conflicts and resentment,

⁵Huntington, Samuel. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

⁶Doyle, Michael. "Liberalism and World Politics," *American Political Science Review* 80-4 (1986): 1151-1169.

China (Sinic civilization) and Japan (Japanese civilization) are reluctant to act aggressively due to substantial economic interdependence.

Lateral Pressure Theory

According to lateral pressure theory, instead of the clash of civilization, the domestic pressures from growth within countries are reasons for conflicts. Lateral pressure theory refers to the states' tendency to expand their activities beyond their established boundaries for their political and economic aims.⁷ Sources of conflicts are rooted in three elements: population, technology and access to basic resources, which are all materialized rather than being cultural considerations. Following the domestic phenomenon of population growth, technological improvements and resource scarcity, states are forced to search for resources and opportunities for the development beyond territorial boundaries. However, since many states will act similarly, the intersection among spheres of influence is inevitable, which ultimately cause conflicts or even wars among states.⁸

Following the logic of the lateral pressure theory, if conflicts between China and the United States could happen, the reason would be irrelevant

to their civilizational difference. China, as an increasing power with rapid economic growth and high pressure from its huge population and the limited natural resources per capita, its expansion of influence in Asia is inevitable. However, the United States tries very hard to maintain its dominant influence in the same region. As a result, tensions may occur on various issues between two great powers. Moreover, Huntington's expectation that the rise of China will strengthen the influence of Sinic civilization (selective Asian community) as a whole against Western civilization is contrary in reality. On the contrary, the rise of China has triggered mutual distrust and suspicion among Asian countries since they are worried about their regional influence being threatened by China.

Conclusion

In conclusion, based on analysis through the respective lenses of realism, liberalism and the lateral pressure theory, Huntington's analysis in his most famous work, indicating that civilizations are fundamental in shaping the world order and forming future international conflicts, is ultimately flawed and unpersuasive. Realists consider the civilizational unit too big and vague to explain the clash of interests among nations. Liberalists disregard the credibility of civilization since it cannot explain affinities among democratic nations from distinct civilizations. In addition, the value of

⁷Tammen, Robert et al. *Power Transitions* (New York: Chattam House, 2000): 7.

⁸Wickboldt, Anne-Katrin and Choucri Nazli. "Profiles of States as Fuzzy Sets: Methodological Refinement of Lateral Pressure Theory," *International Interactions* 32 (2006): 153-181.

civilization is treated negligible compared to domestic pressures from population, technology and access to basic resources by scholars supporting the lateral pressure theory.