

Critical Analysis Of “The Clash Of Civilizations” By “Samuel Huntington”

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Introduction

Samuel P. Huntington’s 1993 article “The [Clash of Civilizations?](#)” argued that the principal lines of conflict after the Cold War would become cultural and civilizational rather than ideological or primarily economic. He later expanded the thesis in a 1996 book. Huntington did not claim that nation-states would disappear. Instead, he proposed that states would increasingly define interests through affiliation with broad civilizations such as Western, Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, Orthodox, Latin American, African, and Japanese. (Huntington, “Clash Civilizations”; Huntington, “Clash Civilizations Remaking World Order”)

The thesis became influential because it offered a simple map for an uncertain post-Cold War world. It also became controversial because its categories risk treating internally diverse societies as unified actors. A critical analysis should ask three questions: Does civilization predict conflict better than power, geography, institutions, and political interests? Are Huntington’s civilizational boundaries coherent? And does the framework describe reality neutrally, or can it encourage policymakers to produce the antagonism it predicts?

Huntington’s Central Claims

Huntington argued that cultural differences are deep, historically rooted, and less negotiable than ideological disagreements. As economic and communication networks bring societies into closer contact, awareness of difference may increase. He expected conflict along “fault lines” between civilizations and believed that states would rally around “core states” that represented civilizational centers.

He also rejected the idea that modernization would create a universal Western civilization. Societies could adopt technology and industrial organization without adopting Western political or moral values. This remains one of the thesis’s strongest insights. Economic development does not automatically erase religion, historical memory, language, or local political traditions.

Why the Thesis Appealed After the Cold War

The collapse of the Soviet Union weakened the bipolar ideological framework through which many

analysts had interpreted world politics. Ethnic wars in the former Yugoslavia, violence in the Caucasus, political Islam, and debates about China's rise appeared to support a turn toward identity. Huntington supplied a large-scale explanation that linked these separate events.

His approach also challenged triumphalist claims that liberal democracy had become the final political model. He warned Western leaders not to assume that their values were universally accepted. The recommendation for restraint and recognition of a plural world can be read as a critique of cultural imperialism.

The Problem of Civilizations as Units

A civilization is not a government with a single leader, budget, or strategy. Huntington's categories contain enormous linguistic, religious, political, and economic variation. "Islamic civilization" includes monarchies, republics, democracies, military regimes, Sunni and Shia communities, secular movements, and competing national interests. "The West" includes states that have fought one another and disagree over trade, war, welfare, religion, and sovereignty.

Category boundaries are also inconsistent. Religion defines some civilizations, geography or language defines others, and Japan is treated as a civilization by itself. Africa is sometimes presented as a possible civilization despite extraordinary diversity. These choices make the framework difficult to test because categories can be adjusted after events occur.

Conflict Within Civilizations

Many severe conflicts occur within Huntington's proposed civilizations. Civil wars, coups, interstate rivalries, and political repression frequently involve actors who share religion or broad cultural heritage. The Iran-Iraq War, conflicts among Arab states, violence within the former Soviet sphere, and wars among historically Christian European powers cannot be explained mainly through civilizational difference.

Research by Bruce Russett, John Oneal, and Michaelene Cox found that realist and liberal variables offered stronger explanations of interstate disputes than a civilizational clash. Giacomo Chiozza similarly found limited empirical support for the claim that states located across civilizational boundaries were especially prone to conflict. Geography, alliances, regime type, relative power, and economic interdependence often provide more precise causal mechanisms. (Chiozza; Russett)

Conflict Across Civilizations Is Not Inevitable

States from different cultural traditions cooperate when interests align. International organizations, trade, scientific collaboration, security partnerships, and migration create durable cross-civilizational

relationships. Political leaders can emphasize or downplay identity depending on strategic needs. Civilizational difference may supply symbols and narratives, but it does not mechanically produce violence.

This distinction between identity and cause is essential. Two states may use religious or historical language during a dispute whose immediate drivers are territory, resources, domestic legitimacy, or alliance competition. Labeling the conflict civilizational can obscure negotiable interests and make compromise seem like betrayal.

Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism

Realist theory explains conflict through power, security dilemmas, military capability, and the absence of a central world authority. From this perspective, states may fight culturally similar neighbors because proximity and competing interests matter more than identity. Huntington incorporates power but gives culture a more independent role.

Liberal theory emphasizes institutions, trade, democracy, and domestic constraints. International organizations can reduce uncertainty, while economic interdependence raises the cost of conflict. Liberal variables do not eliminate war, but they identify mechanisms that can be measured more directly than civilizational belonging.

Constructivist approaches take identity seriously without treating it as fixed. Political communities are produced through education, media, institutions, memory, and leadership. An identity becomes politically important when actors mobilize it. This perspective explains why cultural boundaries can change and why the same difference produces coexistence in one period and conflict in another.

Edward Said's Critique of Simplification

Edward Said criticized the clash thesis for converting complex histories into large opposing blocs. Such a framework can reproduce Orientalist habits by presenting "Islam" and "the West" as coherent and naturally antagonistic. It pays insufficient attention to exchange, hybridity, minorities, migration, and intellectual traditions that cross boundaries. (Said)

Said's objection is not that culture is irrelevant. It is that cultural labels become dangerous when they replace analysis. A person may simultaneously identify through nationality, profession, religion, class, region, gender, and political belief. Civilizational theory privileges one identity before investigating which identity actually shapes behavior.

Methodological Concerns

A useful theory must specify what evidence could disprove it. Huntington's thesis sometimes treats conflict as proof of civilizational difference and cooperation as temporary or exceptional. This creates a risk of unfalsifiability. Researchers also face coding problems: where do mixed states belong, how are changing identities classified, and what counts as a civilizational conflict?

Quantitative studies require transparent definitions and comparison with alternative explanations. If neighboring states across a cultural boundary fight, researchers must determine whether culture matters after controlling for contiguity, territorial disputes, power, alliances, and regime type. Early empirical work did not find the robust post-Cold War pattern Huntington predicted.

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy Problem

The theory can influence the world it describes. If leaders assume that another civilization is inherently hostile, they may interpret ambiguous actions as threats, reduce diplomacy, support exclusionary policies, and invest in confrontation. The other side then responds defensively, producing a security dilemma. Cultural suspicion becomes institutional reality.

Political entrepreneurs can also use clash language to consolidate domestic support. By portraying minorities or foreign states as civilizational enemies, leaders distract from economic or political problems and narrow the space for dissent. An analytical category can become a strategy of mobilization.

Where Huntington Remains Useful

Huntington was correct that identity, religion, and historical memory did not disappear with the Cold War. He was also correct that modernization and Westernization are not identical. Policymakers who ignore cultural meaning can misunderstand resistance, legitimacy, or alliance behavior. His warning against assuming a universal civilization remains valuable.

The thesis is most useful as a question rather than a map: under what conditions do leaders and populations interpret disputes through civilizational identities? This narrower inquiry allows culture to interact with institutions, power, and domestic politics instead of replacing them.

Contemporary Evaluation

Recent international politics provides mixed evidence. Strategic competition between the United States and China contains cultural rhetoric, but it also involves military balance, technology, trade,

alliances, and regime security. Russia's war against Ukraine crosses Huntington's own Orthodox boundary and shows the limitations of treating shared civilizational heritage as a guarantee of peace. Conflicts in the Middle East often involve intense rivalry among actors Huntington would place within the same civilization.

At the same time, leaders frequently appeal to religion, history, and civilizational mission. These narratives matter because they shape public interpretation and justify policy. The evidence supports a conditional claim: civilization can be politically mobilized, but it is neither the single nor consistently dominant cause of conflict.

An Alternative Framework

A more complete approach begins with specific actors and mechanisms. It asks who controls institutions, what interests are threatened, how resources and military power are distributed, which identities leaders mobilize, and what alternatives are available. Culture enters the explanation through narratives, norms, and legitimacy. Geography, economics, and institutions remain equally important.

This multi-causal framework avoids two errors: reducing war to material power alone and reducing it to ancient cultural difference. It also preserves room for political choice. If identities are constructed and activated, cooperation can be built through institutions, leadership, and shared interests.

Conclusion

Huntington's clash thesis captured an important post-Cold War concern: cultural identities remain powerful, and modernization does not produce one universal civilization. However, its broad categories are internally diverse, inconsistently defined, and weak predictors of conflict when compared with geography, power, institutions, and domestic politics. Many wars occur within proposed civilizations, while extensive cooperation occurs across them. The theory becomes most dangerous when treated as destiny because it can encourage a self-fulfilling politics of exclusion. Civilizational identity should be analyzed as one variable that leaders and communities construct and mobilize, not as the permanent architecture of world conflict.

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