

Empirical Perspective On Huntington's "The Clash Of Civilizations"

Posted on June 22, 2023

Introduction

Samuel P. Huntington's "[clash of civilizations](#)" thesis remains one of the most influential and controversial interpretations of post-Cold War international politics. Huntington argued that the major conflicts of the emerging world would no longer be driven primarily by ideological competition between capitalism and communism. Instead, cultural identities and differences among major civilizations would become the principal sources of international conflict.

According to this argument, the end of the Cold War did not mean the end of serious global confrontation. It meant that political struggles would increasingly be organized around religion, culture, history, language, and civilizational identity. Huntington predicted that the most dangerous conflicts would occur along the "fault lines" separating different civilizations, particularly between the West and the Islamic or Sinic worlds (Huntington, 1993, 1996).

The original essay questions this prediction by discussing empirical studies conducted by Bruce Russett, John Oneal, Michaelene Cox, Jonathan Fox, and other researchers. These scholars used statistical data to investigate whether countries and ethnic groups belonging to different civilizations were actually more likely to become involved in violent disputes.

The available evidence does not establish that civilizational differences are irrelevant. Religion, culture, and collective identity can influence political mobilization and conflict. However, most quantitative studies do not support the stronger claim that civilization has replaced political interests, state power, geography, democracy, economic interdependence, or socioeconomic conditions as the principal explanation for international conflict.

Huntington's Main Thesis

Huntington first presented his argument in the 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article "The Clash of Civilizations?" He later expanded it in the 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.

His thesis was developed in response to the end of the Cold War. For much of the twentieth century, international politics had been interpreted through ideological and strategic competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union collapsed, scholars debated what type of

political order would replace the bipolar Cold War system.

Huntington argued that civilization would become the broadest and most important form of collective identity. He described civilizations as large cultural groupings defined by shared characteristics such as religion, history, language, customs, institutions, and self-identification.

His classifications included Western, Islamic, Sinic or Confucian, Hindu, Japanese, Orthodox, Latin American, and possibly African civilization. The precise number and boundaries varied somewhat across his publications.

Huntington did not argue that nation-states would disappear. States would remain the most powerful actors in international affairs. However, he believed that their alliances, rivalries, and foreign policies would increasingly be influenced by civilizational identity.

His theory produced several testable expectations:

- States belonging to different civilizations should be more likely to experience conflict than states belonging to the same civilization.
- Conflicts occurring along civilizational fault lines should become increasingly important after the Cold War.
- The West's relationships with Islamic and Sinic civilizations should become especially confrontational.
- States belonging to the same civilization should often cooperate around a leading or "core" state.
- Cultural and religious differences should become more important than ideological divisions.

These expectations turned the thesis from a general interpretation into a proposition that could be evaluated using empirical evidence.

What an Empirical Test Requires

An empirical test examines whether observable evidence supports a theoretical claim. In the case of the clash-of-civilizations thesis, researchers must translate broad concepts such as "civilization," "identity," and "clash" into measurable variables.

This process creates several challenges. Researchers must decide:

- Which civilization each country or ethnic group belongs to
- How to classify countries containing several major religious or cultural groups
- Whether civilization should be measured through religion, language, geography, or political identity
- What qualifies as a conflict
- Whether civil wars and interstate disputes should be studied together

- What historical period should be examined
- Which alternative causes of conflict should be controlled statistically

These decisions can strongly affect the results. A country such as Turkey, Russia, Nigeria, Lebanon, or Bosnia and Herzegovina may not fit easily into one civilizational category. Identities may also change over time or become politically important only under particular conditions.

An empirical study must also separate civilizational difference from other factors. Countries belonging to different civilizations may be geographical neighbors, economic competitors, military rivals, or former colonial adversaries. A conflict between them may be associated with cultural difference without being caused primarily by that difference.

Therefore, a strong statistical test must compare civilizational explanations with established realist, liberal, political, and economic explanations of conflict.

Russett, Oneal, and Cox's Statistical Test

The original essay refers to the analysis conducted by Russett, Oneal, and Cox. Their study examined militarized interstate disputes between 1950 and 1992, not merely between 1950 and 1952.

A militarized interstate dispute involves a threat, display, or use of military force by one state against another. Such disputes range from threats and limited confrontations to full-scale interstate wars.

Russett et al. (2000) evaluated whether pairs of countries located on opposite sides of civilizational boundaries were more likely to experience these disputes. They compared Huntington's argument with traditional realist and liberal explanations.

Realist variables included:

- Geographic contiguity
- Relative military capabilities
- Alliances
- The strategic position of states

Liberal variables included:

- Democratic political institutions
- Economic interdependence
- Participation in international organizations

Their findings did not provide strong support for Huntington's central prediction. After controlling for these other factors, pairs of states belonging to different civilizations were no more likely to become involved in militarized disputes than other pairs of states.

The researchers also found that conflict involving the West and Islamic civilization was not significantly more common than conflict involving many other combinations of states. Disputes across civilizational boundaries became less common rather than more common as the Cold War approached its end.

Traditional realist and liberal variables provided considerably stronger explanations of interstate conflict. Neighboring states were more likely to fight because they had territorial disputes, security concerns, and greater opportunities for confrontation. Relative power, alliances, democracy, and economic relationships also had measurable effects.

The study did not prove that culture never matters. It showed that civilization did not possess the broad independent effect predicted by Huntington when other major influences were considered.

Conflict Within the Same Civilization

One important point in the original essay is that states and communities belonging to the same civilization may fight one another as often as, or more often than, they fight members of other civilizations.

Russett et al. (2000) found that states within most of Huntington's civilizations were not significantly more peaceful toward one another. Only states within the Western civilization demonstrated a clearly lower likelihood of interstate conflict after relevant variables were controlled.

Even this finding does not necessarily prove that shared Western culture caused peace. Western states also became increasingly democratic, economically interdependent, institutionally connected, and strategically aligned after the Second World War. NATO, the European integration process, trade, and common security interests may explain much of the peaceful relationship.

Shared religious identity does not automatically prevent war. Countries with Muslim-majority populations have fought other Muslim-majority countries, while Christian-majority states have repeatedly fought one another. Civil conflicts also frequently occur among communities that share a broad religious or cultural background.

The Iran-Iraq War, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, conflict among factions in Afghanistan, and political rivalries within the Arab world demonstrate that shared Islamic identity does not eliminate competition over territory, political leadership, resources, ideology, or security.

European history similarly contains repeated wars among predominantly Christian states. The two world wars cannot be explained as conflicts between separate civilizations. They occurred largely within the West.

These examples support the original essay's argument that Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and members of other religious communities may experience serious disputes within their own broad

civilizational groups. Religious similarity may shape the language of political cooperation, but it does not remove material and political disagreements.

Huntington's Response to Russett, Oneal, and Cox

Huntington responded directly to Russett, Oneal, and Cox in the short article "Try Again." He argued that their evidence did not test his thesis adequately because most of their data came from the Cold War period.

His original argument focused on an emerging post-Cold War order. A dataset covering 1950 to 1992 included only a very short period after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Huntington maintained that findings drawn mainly from Cold War conflicts could not disprove a prediction concerning the world that would follow them (Huntington, 2000).

This objection has some validity. A theory predicting a new historical pattern should ideally be tested with substantial evidence from the period in which that pattern is expected to develop.

However, the response does not resolve every problem. Huntington's thesis had already described civilizational identities as historically deep and politically powerful. If civilization strongly shaped international relations, some evidence should have been visible before 1989.

Russett et al. (2000) also examined changes occurring as the Cold War weakened. They found that cross-civilizational disputes became less common rather than more common during that transition.

The debate therefore illustrates a broader problem in evaluating large historical theories. When evidence appears inconsistent with a prediction, supporters may argue that the relevant transformation has not yet occurred or that researchers measured the theory incorrectly. Such responses may sometimes be justified, but they can make a theory difficult to disprove.

A useful theory must identify sufficiently clear conditions under which the available evidence would count against it.

Chiozza's Analysis of International Conflict

Giacomo Chiozza conducted another major empirical test using patterns of international conflict involvement between 1946 and 1997. His research addressed several parts of Huntington's theory, including whether states belonging to different civilizations were more likely to become involved in conflict and whether this relationship became stronger after the Cold War (Chiozza, 2002).

Chiozza examined civilizational difference alongside other factors associated with international conflict. His findings did not reveal a consistent post-Cold War transformation in which civilization became the dominant source of conflict.

The effect of civilizational identity varied according to the specification of the statistical model and the characteristics of the states being examined. Civilizational difference did not operate as a universal cause that reliably increased conflict across cases.

The study is important because it extended the observation period beyond the dataset used by Russett et al. It included several years after the end of the Cold War and therefore addressed part of Huntington's criticism concerning timing.

Chiozza's findings did not prove that cultural identity has no political effect. They suggested that the world cannot be divided into stable civilizational blocs whose members consistently cooperate internally and conflict externally.

Fox's Study of Ethnic Conflict

Jonathan Fox shifted the analysis from interstate disputes to ethnic conflict. This was an important development because many of the violent conflicts following the Cold War occurred within states rather than between them.

Fox (2002) used the Minorities at Risk dataset to examine whether ethnic conflicts between groups belonging to different civilizations had increased in number or intensity after the Cold War.

His findings identified several problems with Huntington's thesis.

First, assigning ethnic groups to civilizations was difficult. Ethnic identities, languages, religions, and political affiliations do not always correspond neatly with civilizational categories.

Second, conflicts between groups classified as belonging to different civilizations represented only a minority of ethnic conflicts. Most ethnic disputes were not cross-civilizational clashes.

Third, the conflicts Huntington expected to become especially important, including those involving the West and Islamic or Sinic civilizations, formed only a small proportion of civilizational ethnic conflicts.

Finally, Fox found no statistically significant evidence that civilizational ethnic conflicts had become more intense relative to other ethnic conflicts after the Cold War.

These results directly support the original essay's view that religious diversity does not automatically produce armed conflict. Political conditions determine whether cultural differences become connected with organized violence.

Evidence Offering Partial Support

Not every empirical study has rejected all components of Huntington's argument. Andrej Tuscisny

(2004), for example, examined both interstate and intrastate conflicts and found some differences between conflicts occurring within and across civilizational boundaries.

His findings indicated that the intensity of intercivilizational conflicts remained high after the Cold War, while conflicts within civilizations became less likely to escalate into war. This could be interpreted as partial support for the idea that civilizational difference influences conflict severity.

However, other parts of the findings did not support Huntington's broader prediction. The relationship between civilizational difference and conflict duration was not statistically significant. The trends also appeared to change during the 1960s and 1980s rather than suddenly following the end of the Cold War.

This mixed evidence is important. It prevents the debate from being reduced to a simple claim that Huntington was either entirely correct or entirely incorrect.

Civilizational difference may influence particular conflicts, especially when political leaders frame disputes through religious or cultural identity. However, the evidence does not show that civilization consistently overrides geography, institutions, political interests, resources, or state strategy.

Problems With Defining Civilizations

One of the most persistent weaknesses in empirical testing concerns the classification of civilizations.

Huntington's categories treat civilizations as broad and relatively coherent cultural units. In reality, each category contains extensive internal diversity.

The so-called Islamic civilization includes Arab, Persian, Turkish, Kurdish, African, South Asian, and Southeast Asian societies. These populations differ in language, political institutions, ethnicity, history, religious interpretation, economic development, and foreign-policy interests.

Western civilization includes countries that historically fought numerous wars and developed different political and religious traditions. Latin America shares important historical and religious features with Europe but is classified separately. Orthodox countries also possess different national experiences and political interests.

India contains several major religious and linguistic communities but is classified primarily as Hindu. African states are sometimes grouped into one civilization despite the continent's extraordinary cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity.

These difficulties create a measurement problem. If a country is assigned to only one civilization, important internal identities are ignored. If countries can belong to several civilizations, the categories become less clear and harder to test.

Civilizations may therefore be better understood as political narratives or flexible identity frameworks than as fixed units comparable to states.

Culture as a Political Resource

Rejecting a deterministic clash of civilizations does not require dismissing culture. Cultural and religious identities can become powerful political resources.

Political leaders may use identity to define an in-group and an out-group, mobilize supporters, justify policies, or portray opponents as existential threats. Historical memories, religious symbols, and cultural grievances can give emotional power to political conflicts.

However, identity does not become politically important automatically. It must be activated, interpreted, and connected to concrete disputes.

Two culturally different communities may coexist peacefully when institutions protect rights, political representation is meaningful, resources are distributed reasonably, and leaders discourage violence. Communities sharing a religion may enter conflict when political institutions collapse or when elites compete over territory and authority.

The relevant question is therefore not simply whether cultural differences exist. Cultural differences exist in nearly every society. The important questions are:

- Who politicizes those differences?
- Under what conditions do people mobilize around them?
- What institutions manage or intensify disagreement?
- Which material interests are connected with identity?
- How do governments and outside powers respond?

This approach explains why the same cultural difference may remain peaceful in one setting but become associated with violence in another.

Political and Socioeconomic Causes of Conflict

The original essay argues that political changes and socioeconomic arrangements can produce disputes in religiously divided societies. This argument is strongly supported by the broader conflict literature.

Political exclusion can make identity more important when certain ethnic or religious communities are denied meaningful representation. Discriminatory laws, unequal citizenship, state repression, or unequal access to public employment may transform cultural identity into a basis for political resistance.

Economic inequality can contribute to resentment when wealth, land, employment, education, or public services are distributed along communal lines. The effect is especially strong when economic disadvantage is interpreted as deliberate discrimination by another group or by the state.

Weak state institutions may also allow local disputes to escalate. When courts, police, and political bodies cannot resolve disagreements fairly, communities may rely on armed organizations or informal systems of protection.

External intervention can further intensify conflict. Foreign states may support cultural or religious allies for strategic reasons. These interventions may appear civilizational while being driven by regional influence, security, or access to resources.

Geography remains important because neighboring states have more opportunities for conflict. Shared borders create disputes involving territory, migration, natural resources, cross-border communities, and military security.

Democratic institutions and economic interdependence can reduce conflict under some conditions by creating nonviolent methods of resolving disagreement and increasing the cost of military confrontation.

These factors do not operate separately from culture. They interact with identity. Nevertheless, they show why civilizational difference alone cannot explain when violence occurs.

Religion and Civilization Are Not Identical

The original essay sometimes uses religion and civilization as though they were interchangeable. They are closely related in Huntington's theory, but they should be distinguished.

Religion may be one important component of a civilization, but civilizations also include language, history, institutions, customs, collective memory, and political experience. Members of the same religion may belong to different ethnic, national, or cultural communities.

Similarly, people associated with the same civilization may have different levels of religious belief. Secular citizens, religious minorities, and mixed identities complicate any simple classification.

A dispute involving Muslim and Christian communities is not automatically caused by Islam and Christianity. The conflict may involve land, political office, regional autonomy, state repression, or economic inequality. Religious labels may correspond with the opposing groups without being the original or principal cause.

Researchers must therefore avoid treating every conflict between communities with different religions as evidence of a civilizational clash.

Interstate and Intrastate Conflict

Another methodological issue is the difference between interstate and intrastate conflict.

Russett et al. examined disputes between states. Fox focused largely on ethnic groups within states. These are different forms of political violence.

Interstate conflict is influenced by national security, military capability, alliances, borders, and foreign policy. Intrastate conflict is often connected with government legitimacy, minority rights, state capacity, political exclusion, and territorial autonomy.

Huntington's argument includes both levels, but the causal processes may differ. A general civilizational explanation may hide these differences.

For example, two states may fight even though their populations share a broad religion. An ethnic minority may rebel against a government belonging to the same civilization because it seeks independence or protection from discrimination.

Researchers must specify which type of conflict they are explaining rather than treating every form of political violence as one phenomenon.

The Importance of Time Periods

The debate between Huntington and his critics also demonstrates why the selection of a time period matters.

A study covering 1950 to 1992 contains mostly Cold War observations. Political alliances and conflicts during that period were strongly influenced by competition between the United States and the Soviet Union.

A study beginning in the 1990s may capture post-Cold War patterns but contain fewer observations, making statistical conclusions more uncertain. It may also be influenced by temporary events such as the breakup of Yugoslavia, the Gulf War, or conflicts following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Longer datasets provide more observations but combine very different historical systems. Shorter datasets may better match a theory's intended period but can be overly influenced by a small number of cases.

Researchers should therefore test whether their results remain consistent across different time periods rather than relying on one selected range.

A Balanced Empirical Assessment

The empirical record provides limited support for Huntington's strongest claims.

Civilizational identity can influence:

- Political rhetoric
- Alliance preferences
- Public perceptions
- The framing of enemies
- External support for communal groups
- The escalation of particular conflicts

However, the evidence does not consistently show that states belonging to different civilizations are generally more likely to fight than other states.

Russett et al. found that realist and liberal factors explained interstate disputes better than civilizational boundaries. Chiozza did not identify a clear post-Cold War transformation dominated by civilization. Fox found that civilizational conflicts formed a minority of ethnic disputes and had not become significantly more intense. Tuscisny found partial evidence related to intensity but not to duration or a uniquely post-Cold War shift.

Huntington's thesis may therefore be more useful as a provocative interpretive framework than as a precise predictive theory. It draws attention to the political importance of identity, but it simplifies the diversity within civilizations and underestimates the continued importance of states, institutions, geography, economic interests, and domestic politics.

Conclusion

Huntington's central thesis argued that cultural and civilizational differences would become the primary sources of conflict in the post-Cold War world. His work correctly emphasized that the end of ideological bipolarity would not eliminate identity, religion, history, and culture from international politics.

However, the empirical evidence does not demonstrate that the world has been reorganized into coherent civilizational blocs whose members remain peaceful internally and confront one another externally.

Russett, Oneal, and Cox found that states separated by civilizational boundaries were not more likely to enter militarized disputes after controlling for realist and liberal factors. Their study showed that contiguity, power, alliances, democracy, and economic interdependence provided stronger explanations.

Huntington reasonably responded that much of their evidence came from the Cold War era. Nevertheless, later studies examining additional post-Cold War years also failed to establish civilization as the dominant cause of conflict.

Fox demonstrated that most ethnic conflicts did not occur between different civilizations and that civilizational conflicts had not become significantly more intense. Other findings offered partial support for particular components of Huntington's argument but did not confirm its broadest predictions.

The original essay's disagreement with Huntington is therefore defensible. Cultural and religious differences do not automatically generate violence. Political exclusion, socioeconomic inequality, weak institutions, territorial disputes, leadership strategies, military power, and foreign intervention often determine whether cultural differences become violent.

Civilization matters when political actors make it matter. It can shape identity and the language through which conflicts are understood, but it does not independently explain the full pattern of international or domestic violence.

The strongest empirical conclusion is not that civilization is irrelevant. It is that civilization should be treated as one possible influence among several rather than as the unavoidable fault line of twenty-first-century world politics.

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