

Happy anniversary? Reflections on Samuel Huntington’s “clash” thesis at thirty

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Abstract

This article takes a retrospective look at the controversial “clash-of-civilizations” thesis articulated by Samuel Huntington in the early 1990s. In some respects, the “pearl anniversary” of the thesis reveals it to have stood up reasonably well. If one notable aspect of the Huntingtonian prognosis was its skepticism about the prospects of enduring peace subsequent to the ending of the Cold War, then it could be remarked that the Harvard professor turned out to be prescient. But one can be right for the wrong reasons, and the argument of this article is that Huntington erred in imagining that “civilizational rallying” would develop into the preeminent feature of future global conflict. Specifically, Huntington erred in conflating the affective pull of “nationalism” with that of “civilizationalism.”

Keywords

Samuel Huntington, civilizational rallying, First World War, Russia-Ukraine war, Uyghurs, Sikhs

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Introduction: The clash of civilizations turns thirty

International Relations scholars have had an uneasy relationship with the work of Samuel Huntington, and never more so than when it has transcended the epistemological and theoretical boundaries that separated his own subfield of comparative politics from theirs. But is not just, or even chiefly, turf protection that has prompted their critique; for even among those of his IR critics who recognized the Harvard professor to be one of “them,” there was always an ill-disguised disquiet with his normative orientation: in a word, he was getting taken to task for being a realist (and therefore a woefully misguided pessimist) at a time, in the decade and a half immediately following the ending of the Cold War, when the winds of scholarly change had been blowing in a direction clearly favouring constructivism and disfavouring realism.¹ That paradigmatic evolution in IR invariably was accompanied by an assumption, not necessarily a correct one, that constructivism correlated with optimism as much as realism did with pessimism.² And while Huntington may not really have been an IR scholar (he was a comparativist), he certainly hid his pessimism poorly—ergo this Doctor Doom must surely have been a realist, at a time when realism was in particularly bad odour. For many, this was reason enough to criticize him, and there was never any shortage of critics willing to do just that. As one scholar aptly observed, whatever else the *Clash of Civilizations* managed to accomplish, it confirmed to many its author’s paradigmatic (and dyspeptic) orientation, being widely interpreted at the time of publication and ever since as “an old realist argument in different ‘cultural’ clothing.”³

Added to this critical tendency was the frank manner in which Huntington couched his claims about political realities, as he took these to be. He was nothing if not controversial, remaining so until the very end of his long and fecund career, as witnessed by the debate that swirled around the last book he ever published, four years before his death, inquiring into the relationship between America’s “Anglo-Protestant” cultural foundations and its constitutional, or “creedal,” political identity.⁴ But as agitated as many of his readers had become when they encountered Huntington’s skepticism that America’s constitutional order could survive intact in the face of its rising Hispanic immigration, this agitation was as nothing compared with the pyrotechnics that had greeted another argument he had advanced a decade earlier. This, of course,

1. On those changing trends at that time, see Michael Lipson, Daniel Maliniak, Amy Oakes, Susan Peterson, and Michael J. Tierney, “Divided discipline? Comparing views of US and Canadian IR scholars,” *International Journal* 62, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 327–343.

2. But for an iconoclastic contemporary perspective, see Charles L. Glaser, “Realists as optimists: Cooperation as self-help,” *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994/95): 50–90.

3. Anastasia Xenias, “Can a global peace last even if achieved? Huntington and the democratic peace,” *International Studies Review* 7, no. 3 (September 2005): 358.

4. Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 9–10. For an appraisal of the controversy surrounding this book, see Carson Holloway, “Who Are We?: Samuel Huntington and the problem of American identity,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 40, no. 2 (April 2011): 106–114.

was his well-known “clash-of-civilizations” thesis, unveiled thirty years ago as an article in *Foreign Affairs*, and reiterated in greatly expanded form three years later in a book bearing a similar title.⁵

Now that the “pearl anniversary” of the clash thesis’s appearance is upon us, it is worth taking another look at why Huntington managed so to stir things up. Ironically, one might have thought that the current mood of despondency that seems to have swept over the IR scholars would have occasioned a retrospective softening in their assessment of his clash thesis, such that its thirtieth anniversary would be, perhaps perversely, a decidedly happier affair than previous anniversaries had been. Today’s intellectual climate, impregnated with a deep sense of dread,⁶ bordering at times on downright dystopianism, has not, however, witnessed any groundswell of admiration, *ex post facto*, for the predictive prowess Huntington wielded during the first half of the 1990s. This is surprising, given that one of the reasons for the chilly reception his clash thesis received back then was that it rained buckets on the parade of all those scholars who had been feting the ending of the Cold War as a moment of liberation, opening the door to a new and more cooperative era of interstate relations.

Today’s sombre mood might even be held, in a strange kind of posthumous way, to be a congenial one for Huntington, since with the benefit of hindsight it might be argued that what used to appear to be unalloyed crankiness on his part now represents the epitome of prescience. According to this way of looking at it, while those around him thirty years ago were swooning over visions of approaching geostrategic nirvana at a juncture when the world seemed so “new,”⁷ Huntington alone saw the future, and it did *not* work (to paraphrase the famous remark of the “muckraking” American journalist a century ago, Lincoln Steffens).⁸ Yet sometimes one can be right for the wrong reasons, and in these pages our objective will be to show why it is that the IR scholars, ourselves included, continue to be less than enthusiastic about the clash thesis, and this notwithstanding that in Huntington, the temperament of our times really does seem to have met its prophet.

But if Huntington’s presentiments appear less out of place now than they did then, there nevertheless remains something fundamentally wrong with his clash thesis.

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5. Samuel P. Huntington, “The clash of civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22–49; and Idem, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996). For a critique, see Emran Qureshi and Michael Sells, eds., *The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
 6. For pessimism as a cognitive default option, see Richard Ned Lebow, “Pessimism in international relations,” in Tim Stevens and Nicholas Michelsen, eds., *Pessimism in International Relations: Provocations, Possibilities, Politics* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 13–36.
 7. For a retrospective depiction of this upbeat mood, see Jeffrey A. Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2017).
 8. Upon returning from a visit to the new Soviet Union, he gushed, in a letter to Marie Howe of 3 April 1919, “I have seen the future, and it works.” See Peter Hartshorn, *I Have Seen the Future: A Life of Lincoln Steffens* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2011).

Demonstrating this will be our task in these pages. Our argument, in a nutshell, is that while Samuel Huntington may indeed have been sitting in the right church in foreseeing no end to international strife, he was definitely in the wrong pew in assessing the reasons for this. The key to this situational misalignment is to be found in a corollary assumption of the clash thesis—the assumption that future wars would come to be characterized by increasing displays of a “kin-country” rallying syndrome he equated with “civilizational” rallying. Accordingly, it is upon the shortcomings of the kin-country thesis that our article focuses.

One need only contemplate the current war between Russia and Ukraine to grasp the problem with Huntington’s exuberant assessment of the prospects of kin-country rallying: those future conflicts foretold by Huntington and now coming into view were not going to be, as he prophesied, *between* civilizations, but rather *within* them. Ergo, while political and cultural entities might indeed be capable of rallying when it comes to more circumscribed commonalities (as, for instance, shared nationality, such that kinfolk living in one country can rally to the side of embattled fellow nationals residing in the ancestral homeland), the degree to which such rallying could occur on a civilization-wide basis was greatly overstated by Huntington. Poignant testimony to the ability of nationalism to dominate “civilizationalism” has been offered recently by a 47-year-old doctor from Odesa who joined the Ukrainian military three days after the Russian attack on his country in late February 2022. The doctor, Oleg Gryb, noted that three decades ago, at the time Huntington was introducing to the world his clash thesis, he himself believed that it would be *China* that invaded Russia, and that he would be willing and happy to join the “civilizational” struggle on Russia’s side. Now, as a Ukrainian soldier fighting *against* Russia, he reflected sadly on current events: “Fighting against fellow Orthodox Christians—that I could never imagine.”⁹

In what follows, we take a close look at the dynamics of kin-country rallying. We proceed by first exploring the concept and implications of presumed civilizational commonality and the kin-country thesis in International Relations, before shifting our focus to two sets of case studies, each of which is intended to shed useful and critical light on the relationship between the clash hypothesis and its ostensive kin-country corollary. We conclude that the corollary, while not specious as some charge, does require care in the manner of its handling. It is not now, and never has been, the same as the phenomenon Huntington conceived of as “civilizational” rallying.

Introducing the kin-country hypothesis

The immediate period following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ending of the Cold War was one of jubilation for the West, but also one of some bewilderment on the part of public intellectuals and policymakers alike. From our vantage point over thirty

9. Quoted in Roger Cohen, “Odesa is defiant. It is also Putin’s obsession,” *New York Times*, 21 August 2022, 1, 10–12.

years later, the inevitability of the Soviet decline and subsequent collapse appears clear as day. While one can now cite the typical reasons offered for the sudden dissolution of the USSR, such as galloping economic dysfunctionality, the Gorbachevian principles of glasnost and perestroika, or the years the Russians spent mired in Afghanistan, it is sometimes easy to forget that as late as the halfway mark of the 1980s, many were sensing the Soviet Union to be at the peak of its power and influence.¹⁰ This was a decade when the innumerable Ivans who populated the countless divisions of the Red Army all stood twelve-feet tall; in the judgement of historian Adam Ulam, “in 1985, no government of a major state appeared to be as firmly in power, its policies as clearly set in their course, as that of the USSR.”¹¹ As the Berlin Wall fell and the Eastern Bloc disintegrated, the experts addressed with growing optimism the question, “What next?” Political scientists lined up to offer their views on the future of the post-Cold War world, with some of them, most notably Francis Fukuyama, announcing the triumph of liberal democracy over any ideological alternatives, while others waxed enthusiastic on the prospects of an American-led world order generating a lasting era of peace and prosperity.¹²

By contrast, Huntington offered nothing so much as an ice-cold shower to those seeking to bathe in the warmth of the post-Cold War “peace.” His was a decidedly chilling forecast of that future, premised on the conviction that the coming years would see a new emphasis upon a world split between several “civilizations,” with these latter being defined by common cultural markers, such as language, historical memory, and religion, all combining to form the highest cultural groupings of people. The upshot was that future conflicts would arise due much more to cultural differences than to ideological ones. Needless to say, Huntington’s thesis was a provocative one, its notoriety being of such longevity as to make of its proponent a latter-day Lazarus, regularly brought back to life as the occasion warrants, so as to be given another thrashing. Tempting as it might be for us to join in the ritual beatings, that is not our purpose in this article. Instead, we seek to do something else. We want to show why Huntington, in being “right” about the persistence of conflict at a time when so many others wanted to imagine the onset of eternal peace, nevertheless misrepresented the contours of culture-engendered conflict. To understand this, we need to explore the supposition that there could be such a thing as “civilizational commonality.”

Civilizational commonality, taken by him to be a synonym for the kin-country corollary (or syndrome), was by no means an original idea of Huntington’s. As he was

10. For one example, see Michael Kort, *The Soviet Colossus: A History of the USSR* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1985).

11. Quoted in Paul Hollander, *Political Will and Personal Belief: The Decline and Fall of Soviet Communism* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999), 87.

12. For rebuttals of both the pessimism of Huntington and the optimism of Fukuyama, see the various essays in Mojtaba Madhdavi and W. Andy Knight, eds., *Towards the Dignity of Difference? Neither “End of History” nor “Clash of Civilizations”* (2012; reprint, London: Routledge, 2016).

writing his 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article, then *Boston Globe* correspondent H.D.S. Greenway was reporting on the war that had just broken out in Bosnia and the “ripple effects” it was having beyond its borders. Greenway noted that as gruesome ethnic cleansing raged in the Balkans, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (now the Organization of Islamic Cooperation) was meeting thousands of kilometres away in Jeddah, deliberating upon the military woes facing Bosnia’s Muslims and what should be done to relieve them. Greenway highlighted this and other conflicts that had wrought similar “rallying” from groups with shared cultural characteristics. He noted that the Russians had often intervened in the Balkan region for the protection of Orthodox Christian Slavs, even making the argument that Russian mobilization to aid Serbia had been a major factor for the start of the First World War, as indeed it was.¹³ He also pointed to Greek and Turkish rallying to the aid of their kinsmen in Cyprus, to the British in Northern Ireland, and to numerous other examples at different times and in different places as representing a general phenomenon he baptized the “kin-country syndrome.”¹⁴

Huntington embraced Greenway’s concept and merged it into his own civilizational thesis, even if the manner of his insertion left more than a little to be desired. Specifically, Huntington left remarkably undefined the notions of kin, kinship, and kin-country. This lack of definitional clarity was compounded by his suggestion that within civilizations there were “core states,” entities around which other states were distributed in a concentric circle reflecting their “degree of identification with and integration into the bloc.”¹⁵ In this circle, the core state acts as the “ordering” state of the civilization, serving as head of an “extended family” of states bound together by their cultural kinship. This kinship possessed significant geopolitical effects, the most powerful of which was the impetus to rallying behaviour.

The idea was simple enough. When conflicts arose between groups from different civilizations, the warring parties could count on support from countries and other groups within their respective civilizations, resulting in an expansion and escalation of fighting. The watchword, to Huntington, was this: “Kin stand by their kin.”¹⁶ So not only did the rallying effect imply the expansion of conflict *between* civilizations, but it did something else, too: it led to a reduction of strife *within* those larger cultural groupings, on the logic that “common membership in a civilization reduces the probability of violence in situations where it might otherwise occur.”¹⁷

Was he correct in these suppositions? To find out, we turn below to some case studies of conflict that clearly once had or continue to have cultural and even

13. See Thomas G. Otte, *July Crisis: The World’s Descent into War, Summer 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

14. Kim Richard Nossal, “The kin-country thesis revisited,” in David Orsi, ed., *The “Clash of Civilizations” 25 Years On: A Multidisciplinary Appraisal* (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2018), 64.

15. Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*, 154.

16. *Ibid.*, 217.

17. Huntington, “Clash of civilizations,” 38.

“civilizational” salience, in a bid to determine just how accurate are Huntington’s two claims. In the following section, we focus on his argument that states cohabiting the same civilizational space tend to be more peaceful in their intra-group relations than might otherwise be the case. We address the puzzling example of Europe.

The enigma of Europe

Europe can be considered the best of all possible cases for testing Huntington’s dual claims about the rallying impact upon international security—endangering in the case of inter-civilizational strife, yet irenic when it comes to intra-civilizational quarrels. After all, there is no shortage of scholars and other public enthusiasts prepared to tell us that such a thing as “European civilization” well and truly exists, with more than a few even prepared to argue that this civilization’s “values” are so clearly superior as to warrant Europe’s entitlement to world leadership in our twenty-first century.¹⁸ So why not take them at their word and use this geo-cultural construct, Europe, to probe Huntington’s dual contentions about the impact of rallying, with the major emphasis here being on the postulated pacifying effect exerted by civilizational commonality on interstate relations?

Europe well illustrates the problem of establishing civilizational boundaries, demarcation lines that would seem to be the first order of business to clarify for Huntington and anyone else seeking to understand both inter-civilizational strife and intra-civilizational peace. After all, for him to have made the case of conflicts falling along civilizational lines, those lines would need to be very carefully defined. But as David Welch has argued too convincingly, and as we will show in our penultimate section, those lines are nothing if not blurry. Nor did Huntington’s skirting the obligation to indicate which of the objective and subjective elements described as “constitutive” of civilizations were necessary, and which sufficient, contribute anything to advancing causal understanding.¹⁹ Welch’s skepticism regarding the warlike propensity of inter-civilizational relationships, and the opposite tendency for intra-civilizational relations, is amply supported by research showing the frequency with which civil wars—i.e., conflicts *within* and not between civilizations—have occurred.

The number of civil wars had been increasing substantially ever since the beginning of the twentieth century, and skyrocketing since the end of the Cold War. One analyst, writing shortly after that fabled post-Cold War decade of the 1990s, tabulated an end-of-century score of ninety-two “violent civil conflicts” as opposed to only seven interstate ones, with the discrepancy between the two forms of mayhem standing out in stark contrast to what had occurred in previous centuries, when there had

18. For two illustrative panegyrists, see Mark Leonard, *Why Europe Will Run the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005); and Jeremy Rifkin, *The European Dream: How Europe’s Vision of the Future Is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2004).

19. David A. Welch, “The “clash of civilizations” thesis as an argument and as a phenomenon,” *Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (June 1997): 202.

been a rough balance between incidents of interstate and intrastate (civil) war.²⁰ And this is what makes Europe such an interesting test of the Huntington thesis. Not only is its “civilization” so frequently vaunted as the *ne plus ultra* among world cultural groupings, but Europe has been a veritable motherlode of conflict ever since the dawn of the contemporary states system, half a millennium ago. If ever a “zone of war” can be sited on world maps, then Europe would seem to be that place, and never more so than during the twentieth century.²¹

The First World War is frequently regarded as the exemplar of a European tendency toward intra-civilizational bloodletting. Not surprisingly, among IR scholars it has also provided an ideal laboratory for testing any number of theories about why peace breaks down and war breaks out. As explained by the IR specialist Dale C. Copeland, “[a]side from its decisive role in shaping the twentieth century, there is probably one main reason why this particular war, above all others, seems to provoke such heated debate in the IR field: pretty well every major theory of international relations has a dog in this fight.”²² But if this conflict has been such a fountainhead for research into the causes of war and conditions of peace, it has also been something else: graphic testimony to the ability of civilizational kith and kin to set upon each other, at times gleefully, with the most murderous intentions and catastrophic consequences.

While we may never know the so-called “root” cause of the First World War,²³ there can be little doubt about the war’s civilizational nature. This war truly deserves being depicted as a “civilizational” struggle—and in the US it was sometimes called the “Great War for Civilization,” words that appeared on official medals the Army struck for the combat²⁴—but the reality is that it was primarily a *sub-civilizational* contest in Huntington’s own sense, given that all of the disputants shared similar “European” civilizational attributes at the time the fighting began in August 1914. Not the least of these shared attributes was the Christian religion, in its various branches. But even with Japan (in late August) and the Ottoman Empire (late October) joining the ranks of belligerents, the First World War continued chiefly to be a Western civil war pitting predominantly Christian and European peoples

20. Martin Griffiths, “Self-determination, international society and world order,” *Macquarie Law Journal* 3 (2003): 29–50.

21. Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1999).

22. Dale C. Copeland, “International Relations theory and the three great puzzles of the First World War,” in Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez, eds., *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 167.

23. On the war’s causes, scholars are divided between those favouring an interpretation centring on a German intention to start a preventive war (the “German paradigm”) versus those stressing how unintended the whole thing really was (the “Balkans-inception thesis”). Respective statements of each perspective are John C.G. Röhl, “Goodbye to all that (again)? The Fischer thesis, the new revisionism and the meaning of the First World War,” *International Affairs* 91, no. 1 (January 2015): 153–166; and Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., “July 1914 revisited and revised: The erosion of the German paradigm,” in Levy and Vasquez, eds., *Outbreak of the First World War*, 30–62.

24. Michael S. Neiberg, *The Path to War: How the First World War Created Modern America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 233.

against one another. No one has ever, to this day, improved upon Charles A. Beard's brilliant synopsis of the war as a "European adventure in Christian ballistics."²⁵ Indeed, if we were to take kinship in its most literal, and restricted form, to suggest belonging to the same family, then the First World War distinguishes itself even more, given that the German, British, and Russian rulers were all cousins—and that Kaiser Wilhelm II liked to boast, wrongly, of having been Queen Victoria's favourite grandchild!

But even relaxing the literal, and restrictive, sense of kinship as dependent upon familial connection, this still leaves us struggling to understand the puzzling absence of any discernable civilizational rallying to Britain's side on the part of a US that, in 1914, could still claim to be majority British demographically. The last federal census taken before the war, the census of 1910, revealed that the cohort of Americans who could trace their descent to England (mainly), Wales, and Scotland (including those Scots whose forebears had set up domicile in Ulster), accounted for approximately 60 percent of the country's 92 million inhabitants.²⁶ And while one could make the claim that by 1917 there had been developing some clear kin-country rallying in the US, it was *not* civilizational rallying as Huntington understood things.²⁷ And this is because the greatest war that had ever occurred up to that point in history was not a clash of civilizations, but rather a clash *within* a civilization. It was, from the Huntingtonian perspective, a civil war.

The European enigma, on such stark display at the start of the twentieth century, is no less apparent to us today, with the case in point being the war between Russia and Ukraine. Indeed, we might even concede that when Huntington took to the pages of *Foreign Affairs* in 1993 he did so to reflect upon the future of conflict, not its past. Even if the hideous bloodletting of the First World War could and did present such a golden opportunity for doubting the *retrospective* utility of the clash thesis, it said nothing about that thesis's current and future usefulness. According to this perspective, Huntington's clash was a thesis for the post-Cold War international order; it was emphatically future-oriented. Tellingly, in his 1993 article Huntington invoked the Russia-Ukraine relationship to *vindicate* his thesis, taken in the future tense not the preterit. For he told us that if "civilization is what counts," violence was simply not likely between Ukrainians and Russians, as both peoples possessed the same Slavic and Orthodox roots.²⁸ He noted that there had been virtually no bloodshed between the two since the ending of the Cold War a few years earlier, as both sides preferred to find negotiated solutions to whatever problems confronted them.

25. Quoted in Warren I. Cohen, *The American Revisionists: The Lessons of Intervention in World War I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 99.

26. Alexander DeConde, *Ethnicity, Race, and American Foreign Policy: A History* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 82–83.

27. For this argument, see David G. Haglund, *The US "Culture Wars" and the Anglo-American Special Relationship* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

28. Huntington, "Clash of civilizations," 38.

We see how that assertion has played out, in the real world. Today, on the thirtieth anniversary of the clash thesis, war has returned to the European continent, and it is precisely between the very peoples whom Huntington thought so unlikely to end up fighting each other! The current Russia-Ukraine war, very much like the First World War, is a “sub-civilizational” one, with both combatants easily even if not perfectly slotted into the “Orthodox” civilization in Huntington’s mapping of the world. Ukraine, despite its growing closeness with the West and its yearning to get even closer, remains as marked by its Slavic Orthodox roots as is Russia. Yet this so-called civilizational “commonality” has done nothing to reduce, and likely much to exacerbate, the savagery of the fighting, witnessed by events such as the Bucha massacre perpetrated in March 2022 by Russian troops. Notwithstanding the evidence of atrocities, the kinship motif persists, with France’s president, Emmanuel Macron, being among the ranks of observers inclined to call the two combatants “brothers.”²⁹

To his credit, Huntington did state toward the end of his 1993 article that he did not expect groups sharing a civilization *never* to have disputes, or even to fight each other outright; he just downplayed this likelihood in order to salvage his main point about what he took to be the principal cultural sources of future conflict. But, really, this is a point that cannot be salvaged, for if states within a civilizational grouping remain capable of engaging in conflict with each other, of what possible use is “civilizational rallying” as an explanatory construct? The case against such rallying, of course, is not simply, or perhaps even mainly, a European one. Ample evidence is provided by strife outside of Europe. In our next section, we turn to another region, Asia, to illustrate the second demerit of the clash thesis—the faulty assumption regarding “civilizational rallying.”

Of Uyghurs and Sikhs: Asia and the clash thesis

We saw above that civilizational commonality hardly prevents conflict. What can we say about the flip side of the clash thesis, which appeals to a civilization’s rallying capability? We start this section with an examination of the Uyghur people and their ethno-religious connections to the “Islamic civilization” that Huntington argued to have been of such growing geopolitical significance. The Uyghurs would seem clearly to be members of that civilizational grouping. They are a Turkic Muslim *ethnie*³⁰ whose historical homeland is in central Asia and east Turkestan, the region now referred to as Xinjiang province in western China. They originated from the Turkic peoples, a population with roots in southern Siberia and Mongolia who, starting in the sixth century, began to be dispersed through nomadic migration across Eurasia,

29. In April 2022 remarks reported by the British Broadcasting Company; see “Ukraine war: Biden accuses Russian troops of committing genocide in Ukraine,” *BBC News*, 13 April 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-61093300> (accessed 6 October 2023).

30. On this term, see Anthony D. Smith, “The ethnic sources of nationalism,” *Survival* 35, no. 1 (March 1993): 48–62.

resulting in the contemporary presence of a “diverse collection” of ethnic groups defined by Turkic languages in Siberia, China, the Middle East, and other parts of Asia.³¹

Initially, what came to be ascribable to this “Turkic” identity was primarily a linguistic characteristic, hardly a precise civilizational marker given the difficulties linguists have encountered with the classification of central Asian Turkic dialects, let alone Anatolian or western Chinese ones. These difficulties were such as to lead some analysts to liken the classification of the language and its various dialects to the challenge of “cutting soup.”³² In recent years, a different and stronger marker of identity has been added, as the religious aspect of the Uyghur identity has become increasingly emphasized, with Islam becoming the key signifier of an ethnic identity that depends upon but also transcends religiosity on the part of the majority of Uyghurs.³³

This increasingly solidifying affinity with Islam serves to highlight the Uyghurs’ distinctiveness from the Han Chinese, the dominant ethnic group in China.³⁴ At the same time, it is often said to indicate closer ties between the Uyghurs and their Turkic/Islamic neighbours (their “kin”). Yet, and this is the point, the Uyghurs’ recent suffering seems to have largely escaped the attention of those “civilizational” neighbours. Since the early 2010s, state-sanctioned ethnic cleansing of the Uyghurs by the People’s Republic of China has become an important staple of human-rights discourse in the West. It is reliably reported that more than one million Uyghurs, along with other Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang, have been transferred to “re-education camps” and subjected to what two scholars call “arbitrary detention, forced birth control and sterilization, religious restrictions, sexual abuse, torture, family separation, and forced labour,” among other abuses.³⁵

The US, Canada, and other allies have denounced the Chinese government’s actions, arguing that they are tantamount to genocide. Curiously, such denunciations have not found much of an echo from countries in the greater Middle East. This is all the more remarkable in light of Huntington’s claim in the 1996 book that Muslim countries were conspicuously involved in the active process of kin-country rallying in major fault-line conflicts. In particular, the governments of Saudi Arabia,

31. Bayazit Yunusbayev et. al., “The genetic legacy of the expansion of Turkic-speaking nomads across Eurasia,” *PLOS Genetics* 11, no. 4 (2015): 1–24.

32. John Schoeberlein-Engel, “Identity in Central Asia: Construction and contention in the conceptions of ‘Özbek,’ ‘Tâjik,’ ‘Muslim,’ ‘Samarqandi’ and other groups” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1994), 58.

33. See Malika Abdulbakieva, “‘Uyghur’ or ‘Muslim’? Identity development among Uyghur diasporas: A case study of Kyrgyzstan and Turkey,” *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* 19, no. 1 (2020): 6–31.

34. See Ge Zhaoguang, *What Is China? Territory, Ethnicity, Culture, and History*, trans. Michael Gibbs Hill (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2018).

35. James Waller and Mariana S. Albornoz, “Crime and no punishment? China’s abuses against the Uyghurs,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 22, no. 1 (2021): 100.

Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and Libya were said back then to be coordinating closely in providing “varying degrees of support [to] Muslims fighting non-Muslims” in several conflicts around the world.³⁶ Yet, despite the distinctive and shared religious identity between the Uyghurs and their fellow Muslims, the kin-country syndrome as Huntington understood it turns out to be a very damp squib, failing to contribute much to our understanding of contemporary relations between the Muslim world and the People’s Republic of China.

This failure is surprising to the point of being shocking, given how *religious* commonality plays such a significant part in the Huntingtonian clash thesis. Most of the Muslim world (the Islamic civilization in Huntington’s conceptualization) is made up of adherents to Sunni Islam. The “Hanafi School” of Islam, a branch of Sunnism, is practiced by a majority of Muslim countries, including Turkey, Pakistan, the Central Asian states, and parts of China wherein reside the Uyghurs. But contrary to Huntington’s thesis, there has been scant kin-country rallying, if any, for Muslims entrapped in the detention centres of Xinjiang. This silence on the part of Muslim countries is a stark contrast to the events of 2005, when the Muslim world was in an uproar from the publication of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad by the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*.³⁷ Massive protests were then raging from the streets of Cairo to those of Jakarta, and the reaction by some governments was swift, Iran cutting its trade ties with Denmark, and Kuwait boycotting Danish dairy imports.

But as the Uyghurs contend with ethnic cleansing, their fellow Muslims have either avoided the issue or, worse, been complicit in the oppression. In 2017, Egyptian police detained and deported dozens of Uyghur activists to China, while the Central Asian governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, despite their dual cultural and religious affinity as *Turkic* Muslims, have not lifted too many fingers on the Uyghurs’ behalf. Among larger Muslim countries, Pakistan and Turkey stand out for their flaccid responses. When asked in an interview with the American news agency Axios why he was so vocal about Islamophobia in the West while remaining silent on the ongoing oppression of the Uyghurs on his border, then Pakistani prime minister Imran Khan invoked his country’s friendship with China, noting it had helped at a time of great need and that any discussions with the Chinese on the subject occurred behind “closed doors.”³⁸ For his part, Turkey’s president, Recep Tayipp Erdogan, once so openly critical of the Chinese government’s actions in Xinjiang, has now opted to hear, see, and speak no evil. In a 2021 conversation with Xi Jinping, Erdogan noted it was important for Turkey that the Uyghurs

36. Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations*, 277.

37. Medina Bakayeva, “The Muslim world remains largely mute on Uyghurs’ plight,” *The Diplomat*, 4 December 2018.

38. “Pakistan PM mum about China’s crackdown on Uyghur Muslims,” *Axios*, 20 June 2021, <https://www.axios.com/2021/06/20/pakistan-imran-khan-china-uyghur-muslims> (accessed 6 October 2023).

lived in peace as “equal citizens,” yet he was careful, withal, to profess his respect for China’s national sovereignty.³⁹

Evidently, neither religious commonality, in Pakistan’s case, nor ethno-religious commonality, in Turkey’s case, has been able to make much of an impact in the matter of the Uyghurs. Khan and Erdogan, of course, have never been shy about flouting their defiance of the American government, so perhaps we should not be surprised that they also defy the predictions of the American scholar, Huntington. Their unwillingness to jeopardize relations with China speaks volumes about the alleged potency of Huntington’s civilizational rallying. They seek (or in Khan’s case, sought) to foster good relations with Beijing for reasons related to economics and good, old-fashioned geopolitics—ironically matters that the evidently “realist” scholar should have appreciated more than most. As China’s economic and political profile in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa has risen, there has been a “rallying” effect all right, but of the sort that realist scholars would recognize as “band-wagoning.”⁴⁰

They may not be bandwagoning for fun, but they show every sign of doing so for profit. Visions of economic gain have danced like sugarplums before the eyes of decision-makers in Pakistan and Turkey, as elsewhere. If the Uyghurs and their cause get in the way, then too bad for them and that cause. Put as bluntly as possible, we can say that China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), pledging trillions in economic investment and loans for Pakistan, Turkey, and other developing countries, has exerted a pull far exceeding that of any mooted civilizational commonality. The anticipated Chinese financial injection of billions of dollars in loans to Arab states and more than \$60 billion more for investment in Africa, along with the formation of major economic “corridors” across the region, has so far worked its magic.⁴¹

Take the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is the most grandiose of the corridors proposed: it involves the construction of critical infrastructure worth \$46 billion to facilitate trade between the two countries and make Pakistan’s economy more dependent on the Chinese. On the geopolitical front, the cultivation of warmer ties with China has been beneficial to Pakistan, given the latter’s obsession with China’s rival, India. Pakistan’s longstanding enmity with India has been a major point of conflict in South Asia since the partition of the two states in 1947, as both countries have engaged in multiple wars and clashes over the disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir. Of the numerous strategic motives linking China and Pakistan, there is a shared concern about India’s potential ascension as a powerful

39. “Turkey’s Erdogan, China’s Xi Discuss Uighurs in phone call,” *Al Jazeera*, 14 July 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/14/turkeys-erdogan-chinas-xi-discuss-uighurs-in-phone-call> (accessed 6 October 2023).

40. See Randall L. Schweller, “Bandwagoning for profit: Bringing the revisionist state back in,” *International Security* 19, no. 1 (Summer 1994): 72–107.

41. Bakayeva, “Muslim world remains largely mute.”

player in world politics, and both consequently have sought to balance against the country by deepening their bilateral relations.⁴²

Similarly for Turkey, dreams of a better future rest upon a stronger economic and political relationship with China. The political rapprochement between the two states has been gradual, but steady, and it has been responsible for the “mutual understanding” on such contentious issues as those raised by the Chinese treatment of the Uyghurs. More than the case of Pakistan, that of Turkey has occasioned some pangs of conscience, given the twin bonds of identity, Islamic and Turkic, that the Huntingtonian theory tells us should constitute such a strong basis for rallying. To be sure, the Uyghur issue had presented a policy dilemma to an Ankara split between an inclination towards its fellow Turkic Muslims and its desire for better relations with China. Until the mid-1990s, Turkey had given free rein to Uyghur diaspora organizations to advocate on behalf of kinfolk in China, some of whom even called for the liberation of Xinjiang from the government in Beijing.

However, the reins began tightening on those groups in 1997, when Turkey made the decision to pursue friendlier relations with China and withdraw its support (passive as it was) for separatist movements in Xinjiang. Fostering those friendlier relations, it was believed, would endow Turkey with enhanced influence throughout central Asia. Restrictions were imposed on active diasporic groups militating on behalf of the Uyghurs, and Turkey increasingly turned a blind eye to human-rights abuses in Xinjiang. Not surprisingly, stronger economic ties with China ensued as Ankara distanced itself from any whiff of civilizational rallying. It and Beijing even touted the formation of a “strategic partnership” resulting in ever increasing Chinese investment as well as infrastructure building. This enhanced relationship, to the surprise of no one, has further lowered the salience of the Uyghur issue in bilateral relations.⁴³

The *volte face* so effortlessly orchestrated by Turkey and Pakistan suggests, at the very least, that Huntington was exaggerating the strength of kinship ties; at the extreme, it completely obliterates the hypothesis of civilization rallying. Events have shown how easily these ties can become overshadowed by economic and geopolitical interests. Interests turn out to matter a great deal, and what is surprising is that Huntington himself should have forgotten this. But others knew it all along. Fouad Ajami, for one, noted at the very same time that Huntington was enunciating his clash thesis that “states avert their gaze from blood ties when they need to; they see brotherhood and faith and kin when it is in their interest to do so.”⁴⁴ Evidently, not all kin stand by their kin. On this very point, Kim Nossal has taken Huntington to task for playing fast and loose with his case selections, only choosing those few

42. Asma Shakir Khawaja, “China’s Middle East policy: Implications for Pakistan,” *South Asian Studies* 33, no. 1 (2018): 275–288.

43. Altay Atlı, “A view from Ankara: Turkey’s relations with China in a changing Middle East,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2015): 117–136.

44. Fouad Ajami, “The summoning: ‘But they said, we will not hearken,’ Jeremiah 6:17,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 4 (September/October 1993): 9.

instances where his thesis could be supported, while ignoring those many instances confuting it.⁴⁵

If the civilizational paradigm has severe flaws, and kin-country rallying can be so regularly subverted by realist interests, what then does this tell us about the pull of “identity” as an important feature of civilizational rallying? Here we turn to another Asian case, that of the Sikhs. Analyzing this community and its identity, we believe, is instructive, though we concede that the analysis may be tough sledding for those unaware of the religion and its historical background. So to conclude this section, we offer a brief primer on Sikh identity, intended to reiterate the caution about civilizational generalizations.

Three master narratives are often invoked when determining how Sikhism is constituted.⁴⁶ The first of these focuses on the *religious* aspect. Sikhism is a monotheistic religion that originated from the northern Indian state of Punjab in the fifteenth century. The term, Sikh, means “disciple,” and Sikhs follow the teachings of ten Gurus who were significant in the founding and moulding of the religion, starting with the founder Guru Nanak Dev and ending with the one who made them visually distinctive, Guru Gobind Singh. The principles of Sikhism were meant to transcend the existing religions of Hinduism and Islam and to be distinct from each of them: hence, Sikhism’s uniqueness, highlighted as being of “historical importance.” Central beliefs focus on 1) the assertion of social equality (a novel idea in fifteenth-century Indian society, to say the least); 2) a rejection of the caste system closely associated with Hinduism; and 3) the importance of *seva* (community service).⁴⁷

Another important element of the religion’s distinctiveness is the wearing of five symbols, the Panj Kakkar (“five Ks”), which are 1) *kes*h (unshorn hair covered in a turban); 2) *kangha* (a small wooden comb); 3) *kachera* (white shorts used as underwear); 4) *kara* (iron bracelet); and 5) *kirpan* (curved sword or knife). These symbols and associated principles facilitated the establishment of an ethno-religious boundary constituted around adherents of Sikhism, highlighting feelings of distinctiveness from both Hindus and Muslims, the two ethno-religious groups with whom they are so often associated.

The second narrative focuses on Sikhs as a distinct *nation*, an *ethnie* with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, culture, and an associated homeland. Sikhs share myths of common ancestry from the birth of the Khalsa, a religious-political organization founded in 1699 that bound the community strongly into one unit; memories of historical persecution at the hands of successive rulers on the Indian subcontinent; a common language of Punjabi; and an historical homeland in Punjab.⁴⁸

45. Nossal, “Kin-country thesis revisited,” 66.

46. Giorgio Shani, “Beyond Khalistan? Sikh diasporic identity and critical international theory,” *Sikh Formations* 1, no. 1 (2005): 57–74.

47. Rusi Jaspal, “British Sikh identity and the struggle for distinctiveness and continuity,” *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 23, no. 3 (2013): 227.

48. Shani, “Beyond Khalistan,” 59.

The third narrative considers the role of overseas Sikh communities that have become a sizable diaspora scattered across the world, from places like Singapore and Kenya to the United Kingdom and North America, with their own influences upon Sikh identity. All together, these three narratives combine to create a global “imagined community” (to use the concept popularized by Benedict Anderson),⁴⁹ where the Sikh community is seen as sovereign, such that all political and spiritual power is held to be located within the Khalsa, with this latter essentially constituting a civilization circumscribed by no set geographical limits.⁵⁰

Without going too far into the depths of Sikh history, we can assert that such distinctiveness sets Sikhs apart from the Indian identity. So what does this assertion have to do with Huntington and his clash thesis? It tells us something very important about the manner in which Huntington construed civilizational groupings. Interestingly—and to Sikhs, astonishingly—others have a tendency to construe Sikh identity in a confusing way, if they even see it at all. Huntington was not exempt from this failing, for when he conceived of his eight major civilizations and sited them on a world map, he simply tossed the Sikhs into the hopper he called the “Hindu civilization.”

To add to the confusion about civilizational boundaries, Jonathan Fox, himself a prominent Huntington critic, considers Sikhism an “Islamic offshoot,” along with the Druze and Baha’i ethnic groups—all of whom *he* lumps together into the “Islamic civilization.”⁵¹ Truth to tell, in Western societies, governments do struggle with exactly how to identify Sikhs distinctly from other groups. In the US census, Sikhs are classified as a distinct ethnicity. Yet in the United Kingdom, Sikhs are encouraged, when filling out census forms, to tick the box marked “Indian.” To further muddy the waters, Canadian Sikhs are instructed to identify as “South Asian.” All of this is to say that across the West, the identity of Sikhs is routinely, with the notable American exception, subsumed under some other regional or national classification, for instance “oriental,” Asian, Indian, East Indian, Afghan, Pakistani, Punjabi, and so on.⁵² This is not solely an issue in the West, by any means. Illustratively, article 25 of the Indian Constitution classified Sikhs, along with Jains and Buddhists, as Hindus!⁵³

What could possibly explain the breadth of classifications ascribed to the religion? This question goes to the crux our criticism of the Huntington thesis, summed up in the following, concluding, section.

49. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2016).

50. Shani, “Beyond Khalistan,” 67.

51. Jonathan Fox, “Clash of civilizations or clash of religions: Which is a more important determinant of ethnic conflict?” *Ethnicities* 1, no. 3 (September 2001): 303.

52. Pal Ahluwalia, “At home in motion: Evolving Sikh identities,” *Sikh Formations* 7, no. 2 (2011): 97.

53. Prema Kurien, “Shifting US racial and ethnic identities and Sikh American activism,” *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 4, no. 5 (2018): 81–98.

Conclusions

It is not that Huntington was wrong to descry in culture an important feature of international politics; all social constructivists worth their salt would make the identical claim that culture “matters,” and indeed within the camp of IR theorists there has sprung up a veritable cottage industry of scholars, many but not all of them constructivists, bent on demonstrating the promise of the exciting (if maddening) concept of “strategic culture.”⁵⁴ There need be nothing *prima facie* absurd about postulating kin-country rallying; historically, there have been times when such rallying has occurred, as the vast literature on the “lobbying” of ethnic diasporas in America’s (and other countries’) foreign policy demonstrates so abundantly.⁵⁵ But kin-country rallying, to the extent that it *is* a discernable feature in international relations, is hardly the same thing as “civilizational rallying.” To regard the latter as synonymous with the former is, to paraphrase Mark Twain, to mistake the lightning bug for the lightning.⁵⁶ If the Russia-Ukraine war teaches us nothing else, it is the necessity to make clear distinctions between the nature of the identity grouping that stimulates the rallying effect. The great rule seems to be, now as in the past, that as a vehicle for mobilizing affective action, nationalism always trumps “civilizationalism.”

The problem, in the end, is that Huntington painted with too broad a brush when he approached the cultural canvas. He generalized, when he might better have dedicated more of his energies to analyzing.⁵⁷ His approach to understanding identity and demarcating it is akin to doodling on the Mona Lisa, in which the artist presents an overly simplistic view of the world as conceived in eight major civilizations only, and thereby neglects the richness of the planet’s diverse cultures.

Compounding the conceptual difficulties with the Huntingtonian construe of civilizational rallying has been the prominence accorded it by policymakers, even if only unwittingly so. In taking a broad-brush approach to identity and oversimplifying the predispositional views of states or civilizations, some have taken from Huntington a narrow and misguided view of the world and sought to apply it to American foreign policy. There can be no question but that, for a time, the Huntington thesis had a certain resonance among a US foreign policy community who had, to an extent, bought into the notion that henceforth the principal challenge to American interests would be emanating from the Islamic countries.

54. Realist IR scholar Jack Snyder is often credited with being the first writer explicitly to employ the rubric, in his *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Nuclear Options* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1977).

55. See David G. Haglund and Elizabeth Stein, “Ethnic diasporas and US foreign policy,” in *Oxford Bibliographies in Political Science*, ed. Sandy Maisel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), available at www.oxfordbibliographies.com.

56. Mark Twain, *The Wit and Wisdom of Mark Twain*, ed. Alex Ayres (New York: Harper and Row, 1987).

57. Importantly, he missed fissures within the West itself; see for this point, Seth Cropsey and Harry Halem, “Sam was partly wrong,” *American Interest* 14, November/December 2018, 1–10.

Nor was it only those countries who were getting construed as the “enemy” in the immediate wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington; often it was simply folks adjudged to look “Islamic” who were suddenly caught up in the post-9/11 frenzy, when Turban-wearing Sikhs could become fantasized as followers of Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, solely based on appearance. Indeed, the first fatality on American soil in the days immediately following 9/11 was Balbir Singh Sodhi, killed by an Arizonan, Frank Silva Roque, who took him to be a Muslim because he wore a turban.⁵⁸ Sikhs elsewhere have come under threat in the immediate period following major terrorist attacks, for instance as happened twice in 2015, first in Paris in November, then the following month in San Bernardino, California.

We now know, with a Second Cold War upon us, that the threat of the present and the future will look, for the US and other Western democracies, remarkably like the threat of the First Cold War. This will be a contest with a binary ideological axis, and not the multiple civilizational axes foreseen by Huntington thirty years ago. This new bipolar contest will feature the West against a Beijing-Moscow tandem, but the cement solidifying the latter will not be the ideology of Marxism; rather, it will be the allure of authoritarianism in a world in which liberal-democratic values are increasingly being called into question. In this new-old clash, it cannot be excluded that leaders in much of the non-Western world will find themselves as unable to resist the temptations of economic intercourse with the authoritarian bloc as have been the leaders of Turkey and Pakistan, who when forced to choose between “civilizational” rallying and their sense of the “national interest,” opted emphatically for the latter.

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58. Kurien, “Shifting US racial and ethnic identities,” 93.