Exhuming Samuel Huntington's theorems: Civilizational clashes, world order, and the impact on Europe

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Abstract

In the summer 1993 Foreign Affairs issue Samuel Huntington published a pathbreaking article titled "The Clash of Civilizations." He followed it up in 1996 with a book carrying the modified title The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order. What was the reason for listing a fuller title? This article focuses therefore on the remaking of world order calling into question Huntington's second theorem instead of his celebrated first – civilizational clashes. It provides greater explanatory power to the unipolarity-versus-multipolarity debate that dominates international relations and, presumably, was behind Huntington's title extension. As a potential civilization clash Huntington categorized Ukraine as a cleft state divided along significant ethnic, linguistic, regional, religious, and urban-rural lines. But the conversion from cleft state to a rebranded Western national identity was not part of his analysis and was instead confirmed following Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territories. Much overlooked by contemporary scholars today is the banal fact that territorial contiguity was regarded by many international relations specialists as the chief cause of conflict proneness between neighbouring states. The remaking of world order leading to a multipolar system was not what Huntington had predicted and overshadows his 'clash-of-civilizations' theorem. Inadvertently, this article maintains, his logic was sidetracked by a more crucial development emerging in international relations, the matter of multipolarity.

Keywords: clash of civilizations, hegemony, multipolar order, Samuel Huntington, Ukraine-Russian war

Huntington's intuitions

Causes of interstate conflicts are best tackled using multivariate analysis. In the majority of cases they cannot be reduced to a single causal factor. For instance, identifying causal variables differ depending on whether researchers are carrying out systemic, domestic, or individual levels of analyses. In examining global crises in the third decade of the 21st century, no simple answers can be given to the outbreak of crises even if neighbouring countries are most often one source; case studies entailing extensive empirical research become a *sine qua non*.

How was it then that late esteemed Harvard political science professor Samuel Huntington (1927-2008) set aside methodological complexities to create a paradigm-shifting vision about how and when inter-state conflicts develop? The author supposed that a post–Cold War world was arranging itself based on a set of different factors. Ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic differences among countries were to become the new *explanans,* or at least not new but revived. These variables combined into what were termed civilizational characteristics. The civilizational turn in international

relations was intended to put an end to the all-too-predictable Cold War options characterizing a clash between communist and liberal democratic systems.[1]

Research into inter-ethnic relations in particular took off in the 1990s. It linked the study of comparative politics with that of international relations.[2] The focus on the over 80% of countries that were multi-ethnic, and not nation-states, produced an energy that Huntington made full use of. Among multi-ethnic countries was Yugoslavia which was torn apart by brutal wars and great power involvement. It would take another decade for Ukraine to surpass the breakup of Yugoslavia. Individual nations threw off the shackles of Cold War alliances, made full use of anarchic conditions reigning in the international order, and baited and switched their alliance partners.

In retrospect, whatever degree of anarchy existed was quickly exploited in the 1990s and thereafter by the sole remaining country, the United States, in order to aggrandize its unipolar, hegemonic aspirations. For Huntington, nationalizing narratives were swept away by the appeal of the Western world. Thus, "In the post–Cold War world, the most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political, or economic. They are cultural."[3] In the case of Europe, ready-made institutions and structures like the European Union and NATO were greased so as to absorb newcomers. On the outside looking in was the former Soviet Union sinking deeper into economic and political failures. Quickly the Baltic states declared independence followed by the crown jewel of the Russian empire, Ukraine.

The clash of civilizations caught the imagination of scholars, pundits, the burgeoning social media, and curious students. Variations on the meaning of "clashes" and "civilizations" were plentiful in the years that followed. Huntington himself was less interested in the validity of his theory and preferred to touch on its sketchy and even anecdotal ramifications. But for many analysts the presumed clash of civilizations became the only game in town. Let me therefore label a civilizational clash replacing Cold War thinking as Theorem 1.

There was more to Huntington's theory than scholars imagined. It created a booming academic industry that was well served by one of its foremost proponents, Ted Robert Gurr; indeed it was the United States Institute of Peace that began to specialize in ethnic conflicts throughout the world.[4] But the term added to the book's title—the remaking of world order—appeared less visionary at the time even if its *Realpolitik* implications suggested a feature marking *la longue durée*. When combined, the material base embedded in the clash of civilizations, replete with polarized domestic wrangling, became transformed into an ideological superstructure of international relations. It helped structure new strategic alliance making. Implicit in this transformation would become the all-important question of whether the globe would remain unipolar so that the United States got its way on all issues of importance to it including the appointment of leaders of global political and economic institutions. Or

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[1] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996); see also his earlier "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993), 22–49, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1993-06-01/clash-civilizations

[2] One of the first studies was by Ray Taras and Rajat Ganguly, *Understanding Ethnic Conflict: The International Dimension.* (New York: Pearson Longman, 1st edn. 1998, 4th edn. 2010).

[3] Huntington, *Clash*, 21.

[4] Ted Robert Gurr, *Minorities at Risk: A Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflicts* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1993).

was there space left for some form of multipolarity to emerge? As we shall see, it was at this juncture that cleft-ridden Ukraine came into play.

To be sure, a resurgent China long challenged the existing unipolar world order and the Russian Federation was all too eager to join. Its own relations with the West had steadily deteriorated whether involving the EU-27, NATO, and the G-7, or the demise of many nuclear weapons agreements and ancillary institutions and processes. The impact of the global pandemic that reached its height in 2020-21 further hardened variations in policy making among states, and within states too.

Many other states were sympathetic to the notion of a remade world order. BRICS states (which now comprised Brazil, India, and South Africa along with China and Russia) were largely supportive of multipolarity. Many opposed what they regarded as the continuance of US hegemony exemplified by the over 700 military bases that the country had established outside the United States. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—a Eurasian political, economic and security institution encompassing 60% of Eurasian territory, 40% of the world's population, and more than 30% of global GDP, was no longer a trivial organization and, inclusive of China's membership, was now able to flex its muscles. Even United Nations' voting blocs—for example, on Resolution ES-11/1 (voted on in March 2022) condemning Belarus's complicity in Russia's invasion resulted in 93 nations supporting the Resolution but 24 who were against and 58 which abstained.

Lost in the mire of Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022 was how fractious the world order had already become. In the 2020s, the major split entailed the crucial issue of a new world order. Establishing it can lead to Huntington's Theorem 2 then, but in some respects he may have been barking up the wrong tree. His first theorem requires deeper examination since Ukraine appears as an important variable.

Clashes generating conflicts

The defining characteristic of a civilization is its religion which forms a fundamental part of its culture. Huntington noted this as he traced major civilizations in human history defined by the world's great religions. For him civilizational categories included Sinic, Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Orthodox, Western, Latin American, African, and Buddhist civilizations. States not falling into these categories were categorized as "other."[5] His insistence that shared religion was the defining feature of a civilization led to his claim that inter-civilizational clashes represented conflicts "between peoples of different religions."[6]

To begin with, Huntington deferred on the question "Which side are you on?" regarding clashes and replaced it with a basic one: "Who are you?" For him "that answer, its cultural identity, defines the state's place in world politics, its friends, and its enemies." While no specialist on Ukraine, he understood eastern Orthodoxy as a civilization comprising numerous states that included Armenia, Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Georgia, Greece, Kazakhstan, Macedonia, Moldova,

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[5] Huntington, *Clash,* 47-48.

[6] Huntington, *Clash,* 253.

Romania, Russia, Ukraine, and Yugoslavia before it disintegrated.[7] His predictor variable indicated that it was in Ukraine that a developing crisis was emerging. His prognosis that nations would return to their historical and cultural roots included a corollary that assigned an exceptional place to Ukraine: nations that were divided between civilizations called "cleft" countries were spaces most likely to engender conflict. This had already happened in former Yugoslavia where the US, Germany, Russia, and Islamic states such as Saudi Arabia backed their proxies and worsened civilizational strife.

In the Soviet Union a federal system supposedly had made all fifteen republics equal in political weight. But there was no question that the Russian republic was *primus inter pares* and at worst an aggressive empire-builder that suffocated the other fourteen republics. President Vladimir Putin had fumed about the fallacies of nation-building that took place in the Soviet federal system, believing that artificially created new countries were given a lease on life, for instance, Moldavia. He even added that territorial boundaries were dramatically changed, an example being Poland's acquisition of Western lands from Germany and naming Josef Stalin as its placeholder.[8]

After Soviet disintegration in 1991 the three Baltic states were the first to claim they had been innocent victims at neighbouring Russia's hands. For some time the term "genocidal acts" committed against Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia was used against the USSR. But it was Ukraine that got off the mark earlier, calling Stalin's man-made famine taking close to four million Ukrainian lives in 1932-1933 a Holodomor, or genocide. Connections were even made how that famine explained Russia's February 2022 unprovoked attack on Ukraine.[9] In these cases parallels were drawn about Soviet/Russian objectives and their scorched-earth methods.[10]

The famine was one of many Soviet atrocities committed against neighbouring states and their own minorities in the leadup to World War II. Other civilizational clashes also occurred such as the millions of Jews murdered in the western Soviet Union. Eventually German Nazis realized the trauma these killings caused to its troops and the switch from mass shootings to murdering Jews in gas chambers was introduced.[11] In Ukraine the extermination of civilian Polish populations by pro-Nazi organizations such as the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) were crimes that may have cost up to 200,000 Polish lives. For Huntington whose focus was on more recent demographics, the absence of political and social cohesion in Ukraine was compounded by the emergence of oligarchies in postwar Ukraine.

To sum up, for Huntington Ukraine represented a deeply fractured cleft country divided along historic, territorial, ethnic, linguistic and religious lines. The call for national unity by President Volodymyr Zelensky in 2022 was an attempt to patch over

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[7] Huntington, *Clash,* 45-48, Map 1.3.

[8] "Władimir Putin oskarża Polskę o plany 'interwencji' na Ukrainie," *Rzeczpospolita*, 21 July 2023, https://www.rp.pl/swiat/art38766851-wladimir-putin-oskarza-polske-o-plany-interwencji-na-ukrainie

[9] Benjamin Dunbar and Raymond Taras, "Mode of Production as Contributing Factor to the Holodomor," in Natalia Khanenko-Friesen (ed.), *Narrating the Holodomor: The Social and Cultural History of Collectivization and Famine in Soviet Ukraine* (Edmonton, AB: Holodomor Research and Education Consortium, 2022).

[10] Daria Mattingly, "Understanding Russia's War on Ukraine through the Holodomor." Presentation at the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, University of Toronto, 15 November 2022**.**

[11] Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2022).

multiple schisms. Published fifteen years before Ukraine's 2014 regime change, Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* warned that Ukraine "could split along its fault line into two separate entities, the eastern of which would merge with Russia."[12] Secessionism and annexation first came up with respect to Crimea but did not end there. From being regarded as a cleft schismatic-prone state with an abundance of nationalities, religions, and languages,[13] Ukraine ruler Zelensky now referred to it as pro-Western liberal democratic nation state having no minority problems.

Huntington was no Russian dissident nor a specialist on Eastern Orthodoxy. He overlooked observations about Ukraine made by a legendary Russian anti-communist who had opposed Stalinist tyranny. After 17 years in the Gulag, Nobel Prize literature laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn, today more despised than admired, was viewed as an outspoken "Russian imperialist" even though he had crusaded against Russia's totalitarianism. His views on Ukraine (his mother was one) were especially contentious and he maintained that only on the basis of an oblast-by-oblast referendum could the local population living in the Ukraine Soviet Republic decide the fate of their region.[14]

In principle Huntington opposed US democracy promotion whether in the Middle East or former Soviet space or, tangentially, in Ukraine. He believed that "The principal responsibility of Western leaders, consequently, is not to attempt to reshape other civilizations in the image of the West, which is beyond their declining power." Nevertheless, political analyst William Smith inferred how "American policy toward Ukraine has been the opposite of what Huntington would have advised. It has been a crusading democracy promotion that led to a US-backed coup d'état in Kiev, a refusal to recognize any legitimate Russian interests in Crimea and eastern Ukraine despite their deep historic ties, and the sponsorship of a proxy war in eastern Ukraine, the goals of which are unclear.[15]

Ukrainian specialist Ivan Katchanovski, a political science expert at the University of Ottawa, acknowledged its cleft country identity which entangled the country in regional divisions, separatist movements, ethno-secessionist grievances, emergent political cultures, elite preferences, ethnic schisms, and economic hierarchies—for starters. He underscored that "were it not for the Western regions of Ukraine, this post-Soviet Ukraine would most likely have continued to follow Russia's authoritarian path and pursue a pro-Russian orientation."[16]

Arguably such thinking exaggerated the country's cleftness. Political observers are increasingly convinced that Ukraine's territorial integrity is strong in eastern regions and growing in Russian-speaking western areas. Ukrainian national identity, particularly after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion in

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[12] William S. Smith, "Ukraine and the Clash of Civilizations," *The National Interest,* May 12, 2020, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/ukraine-and-clash-civilizations-153636

[13] Ray Taras, Olga Filippova and Nelly Pobeda, "Ukraine's Transnationals, Faraway Locals, and Xenophobes: the Prospects for Europeanness," in *Europe-Asia Studies* 56, no. 6 (September 2004), 835-56

[14] "Alexander Solzhenitsyn Predicted Current Situation in Ukraine Almost 50 Years Ago," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta,* May 21, 2014, https://www.rbth.com/arts/2014/05/21/alexander_solzhenitsyn_predicted_current_situation_in_ukraine_alm ost_50__35395

[15] William S. Smith, "Ukraine and the Clash of Civilizations," *National Interest*, May 12, 2020, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/ukraine-and-clash-civilizations-153636

[16] Ivan Katchanovski, Cleft Countries: Regional Political Divisions and Cultures in Post-Soviet Ukraine and Moldova (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2006), 208.

2022, has grown exponentially.[17] A consensus among Western scholars emerged that it was Putin who had lost Ukraine for Russia. For political scientists Errol Henderson and Richard Tucker, this led to the clash of civilizations: "Proposition 1.1: During the post–Cold War era, inter-civilizational difference is associated with an increased likelihood of interstate war."[18]

A cursed resource: contiguous territory

A simple fact—arguably even an "iron law" of international relations—is that disputes over territory have caused more wars than any other possible explanation in the period from 1648 to 1989. Civilizational clashes may be a distant second. Such territorial, at times better viewed as irredentist clashes, also result in the probability that full-scale wars will erupt.[19] Political science professor Stuart Bremer unearthed how territorial contiguity had a greater impact on the likelihood of war within a dyad of states than most other differences, for example, alliance memberships, regime types, levels of economic development, degrees of militarization, their power status, and differentials in relative capabilities.[20] Conflict over who owns what land between neighboring states tends to trump other considerations.

The classic case of war-proneness, analyzed by international relations experts Melvin Small and David Singer in the 1970s, accentuated how neighbors were most likely to be, paradoxically, both culturally similar and prone to conflict. Proximity more than culture (Huntington's preferred explanation) was therefore a stronger predictor to war onset because "cultural cousins" are likely to be neighbors, and neighbors are more likely to engage in conflicts.[21]

If we disregard the many cultural, regional, religious, and linguistic differences within Ukraine—a big "if"—and instead focus on the part played by neighboring states, then a strong argument in support of this prediction can be made: war-proneness of territorially contiguous states, as in the case of Ukraine and Russia, can spell violence and warfare. Advanced by Penn State professor Errol Henderson, the claim is that Ukraine's domestic demographics exacerbate ethnic and linguistic similarities rather than reduce them.[22] In other words, "from a cultural perspective, the most dangerous dyads are religiously dissimilar, territorially contiguous, and ethnically similar pairs of states."[23] Thus Eastern Orthodoxy becomes schismatic when autocephalous churches appear in each country. Whether Ukraine and Russia share common ethnicity, however - they are both Eastern Slavic peoples - is a different matter today.

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[17] Raymond Taras, "Putin's Sochi Hubris: Righting the Ship of Sport, Wronging the Ship of State?" *Sport in Society,* 20, no. 4 (April 2017), 489-504, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17430437.2015.1100892

[18] Errol A. Henderson and Richard Tucker, "Clear and Present Strangers: The Clash of Civilizations and International Conflict," *International Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (June 2001), 321.

[19] Kalevi J. Holsti, *Peace and War: Armed Conflicts and International Order 1648-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[20] Stuart A. Bremer, "Dangerous Dyads: Conditions Affecting the Likelihood of Interstate War, 1816-1965," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 36, no. 2 (June 1992), 309, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022002792036002005

[21] Melvin Small and J. David Singer, *Resort to Arms: International and Civil Wars, 1816-1980* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1982).

[22] Errol A. Henderson, "Culture or Contiguity: Ethnic Conflict, the Similarity of States, and the Onset of Interstate War, 1820–1989," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41 (1997), 649–668.

[23] Henderson, "Culture or Contiguity," 666.

Insights from psychoanalysis and psychiatry can offer deeper explanations for why conflicts in dyads of this kind occur. Sigmund Freud came to believe that the narcissism of minor differences comes into play in states resembling each other: "it is precisely communities with adjoining territories, and related to each other in other ways as well, who are engaged in constant feuds and in ridiculing each other—Germans and South Germans, the English and the Scotch, and so on. I gave this phenomenon the name of "the narcissism of minor differences," a name which does not do much to explain it.[24] But Freud was uncertain how constant this factor was.

Freud's analysis was taken up by Vamik Volkan, long-serving professor of psychiatry at the University of Virginia. He was convinced that "the best reservoir for our bad externalized parts, originally our own, would be located in things and people who resemble us or are at least familiar to us—such as neighbors." Elaborating on this, he averred that "while the differences themselves may be minor, the psychological role they play is major. This is why a group has a need to create and to protect these differences, and, as I have noted, to die for them in highly charged situations."[25]

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Volkan and a colleague outlined the traumatic phases that Putin had gone through. Embarking on "malignant political propaganda is creating a societal preoccupation with the large group's psychological borders through an obsession with physical borders, such as Putin's wish to expand present-day Russia's physical borders." The propaganda campaign was followed by "an entitlement ideology [which] turns into dehumanizing the 'enemy,' revengeful actions, thus allowing mass killings and other inhumane actions to be committed."[26] Combining the presence of a narcissism of minor differences with a psychoanalytic explanation for why Russia launched the war may help us better understand the events of 2022.

Some analysts skirted the territorial contiguity thesis and launched critiques of Huntington's first theorem on the clash of civilizations argument. A case in point is Errol Henderson's observation that "While the clash of civilization thesis is interesting narrative, clearly it oversimplifies the extent of cultural convergence within 'civilizations' and the degree of antagonism between them."[27] He compared causal factors generating conflicts and concluded that "joint democracy is not only a more powerful predictor than cultural similarity but it is the most powerful of all our predictor variables, followed by contiguity, major power status, and the cultural variables."[28] In other words, the democratic peace thesis that democratic states do not clash with each other is the key predictor.

Pouring cold water on Huntington's Theorem 1, Henderson even proposed a theory of a clash of siblings, not civilizations: "Ethnic and linguistic cousins appear to be more likely to fight each other while, among the cultural factors, only shared religion is

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[24] Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and its Discontents," in Standard Edition of the *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XXI (1927-1931) (New York: Vintage, 2001), 114.

[25] Vamik D. Volkan, "The Narcissism of Minor Differences Between Opposing Nations," *Psychoanalytical Inquiry* 6, no. 2 (1986), 175-192.

[26] Vamık Volkan and Jana D. Javakhishvili, "Invasion of Ukraine: Observations on Leader-Followers Relationships," *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 82 (June 2022), 205, https://doi.org/10.1057/s11231-022-09349-8

[27] Errol A. Henderson, "The Democratic Peace Through the Lens of Culture, 1820–1989," *International Studies Quarterly* 42 (1998), 466.

[28] Henderson, "The Democratic Peace," 479.

negatively associated with the onset of interstate war. These preliminary findings seem to suggest that the "clash of civilizations" is more a "clash of siblings."[29]

World order, Ukraine and Russia

The flashpoint that sealed brewing great power divisions involving Ukraine was Russia's full-scale invasion. Discursive comments made by political rulers can fill the gaps on reasons for the flashpoint. In discussions with Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SHO) summit in Samarkand in September 2022, Putin argued that Russia's overall mission was to "lay down the foundations of a multipolar world order and send the American 'rules-based world order' into the dustbin of history." The Russian President stressed that attempts to push for a unipolar world "have taken an absolutely ugly form lately which the overwhelming majority of nations of the planet find unacceptable."[30] He claimed that both Russia and the PRC "stand together for a just, democratic, multipolar world order based on international law and the central role of the UN, and not on some rules that somebody invented and attempts to impose on others without even explaining what they are."

An endorsement of multipolarity emerged from an unexpected, establishment-rooted source. In an op-ed article in the *Financial Times* journalist Edward Luce asserted that "Like the Holy Roman Empire, which was not holy or Roman, nor an empire, the liberal international order was always more western than global—and often failed to uphold order. Russia's invasion of Ukraine offers a chance to reconsider this largely western concept."[31] He emphasized that much of the non-Western world was not fooled by invoking "abstract rules... devised by powerful nations but only selectively enforced by the US." Luce reminded readers that "Even the most pro-western countries can see the glaring problem with "rules for thee but not for me." While it was true that "For all their hypocrisies, western values offer the closest thing to universal justice the world has seen. But they will only endure if the west applies them to itself. The US can no longer afford to be selective. Either everyone submits to the rules or they will end up in history's dustbin." Following political scientist Graeme Gill, we can add that even in the Soviet Union communists had rules which were not often flouted - although most communist parties did end up in the dustbin.[32]

Paradoxically, Luce's reference to the dustbin of history was reproduced in Putin's speech at the SCO summit in Samarkand five months later. A cross-reference comes from Luce's 2017 book on *The Retreat of Western Liberalism:* "In Moscow's view, history is back and nothing is inevitable, least of all liberal democracy. Others, in Beijing, Ankara, Cairo, Caracas, and even Budapest, share Russia's hostility to Western notions of progress, as do growing numbers of apostates in the West. Are they wrong?"[33]

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[29] Henderson, "The Democratic Peace," 474.

[30] "Push for Unipolar World 'Turning Ugly' – Putin," *RT,* September 15, 2022, https://www.rt.com/russia/562853-unipolar-world-turning-ugly-putin/

[31] Edward Luce, "Biden Should Scrap Talk of the 'Liberal International Order,'" *Financial Times*, April 21, 2022, https://www.ft.com/content/41d10062-ebe7-4fe4-ba63-c530e61b8f20

[32] Graeme Gill, *Bridling Dictators: Rules and Authoritarian Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

[33] Edward Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017).

Polarity to the fore

As inevitably had to be the case, in the latter part of his book Huntington speculated about what a new world order would bring. Would he argue against the Western world's universalist pretensions and desire for hegemony? It was not Huntington but John Mearsheimer who took the lead and disowned the West's "liberal" condescending approach to global politics.[34] For good measure, even Pope Francis, in an interview with Swiss television in March 2023, asserted that "there are imperial interests there, not just of the Russian empire, but of the empires of other sides. It's typical of empires to put nations in second place." This interview was published by the *Kyiv Post*![35]

Huntington's American identity came to the fore in elaborating on theorem two. He acknowledged that Western states had expanded, conquered, and colonized many parts of the globe and had shaped other world civilizations. In his view challenges from non-Western countries had to be acknowledged by world leaders in an accepting, cooperative way. His was a curtsy to the growing multi-civilizational emergence of global politics but genuine multipolarity remained an afterthought.

The search for peace in the international system has preoccupied IR scholars since the time of Thucydides. In a pathbreaking study titled The Puzzle of Peace, Gary Goertz, Paul F. Diehl, and Alexandru Balas contrasted two sets of norms that surfaced two centuries apart. In the 18th century international norms that were applied to the conquest of territory (as an example, Russia's land grab of Ukrainian lands in 2022) had a different set of rules:

- Conquest is legal.
- Conquest is a normal and accepted goal of governments.
- Peace treaties confirm and legalize territorial conquest.
- The primary criterion for territorial transfers is effective control over territory.

However, norms held dear and dominant in the post–World War II international system indicated radical rebranding:

- Conquest is illegal.
- Territorial integrity is the norm.
- Postwar/post-conflict peace agreements after 1945 are rare and do not confirm territorial gains during war.
- The primary criterion for territorial acquisition is recognition by the international community.

The authors noted that "Violating the territorial integrity principle has become much less frequent over time and particularly in the post-1945 period.[36] Russia's annexations of Ukraine land in 2014 and then again in 2022 were viewed as anathema by postwar standards, therefore. The question arises how different in a *Realpolitik* world the

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[34] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

[35] "Pope Francis: Ukraine War Fueled by 'Imperial Interests' of Not Just Russia," *Kyiv Post,* March 10, 2023, https://www.kyivpost.com/post/14135

[36] Gary Goertz, Paul F. Diehl, and Alexandru Balas, *The Puzzle of Peace: The Evolution of Peace in the International System* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 12-13.

conquest of territory by a unipolar power is where the re-colonialization of lands through neoliberal globalization policies in practice reflects a conquest.

In an earlier volume Diehl and Goertz explored contiguous states and their "severe rivalries" as the context in which the majority of international conflict occurred. Statistically "these rivalries account for approximately three-fourths of militarized disputes; that is, when states engage in a military confrontation, it is not likely the first or the last time that the states will clash over the same or interrelated issues. Such confrontations also are more likely to escalate to war, as more than 80 percent of wars take place within rivalry contexts."[37]

"Severe rivalries" are based on historical links over space and time and are drawn from incidents that come from the proverbial "pull of the past" Particularly past military confrontations exercise an influence on present and future behaviours. "States 'lock in' policies and strategies for the rivalry based on those initial confrontations; these include weapons acquisition, defense planning, and the like."[38] Thus decisions to build up military capabilities or join an alliance anticipate continuing threats.[39] In fact, mechanisms develop so as to keep the rivalry going, thereby guaranteeing continuity between present and future conflicts.

Such linkages reflecting a fatalistic approach to recurring rivalries may frame relations between Ukraine and Russia over *la longue durée*. To be sure, an independent Ukraine has existed since 1991 and not earlier. While conflicts did occasionally emerge between Ukrainian and Russian nations, if they can be so distinguished, a reference to recurring rivalries seems not to be a good fit. In a study of Russia as exceptional in the way it conducts international relations a connected topic is how exceptional Ukraine is today in its politics.[40] For example, which other country has benefited from a process of accelerated admission into the European Union? Or its exceptional status in banning the use of Russian in the public sphere when, in the 1990s, President Bill Clinton personally phoned Latvia's leader to prevent such anti-minority policies from being implemented?[41] At the time the Protection of National Minorities Framework was under discussion and went into full force after 1998.[42] It seems not to be respected by states which receive Western support.

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[37] Paul F. Diehl, Gary Goertz, and Yahve Gallegos, "Peace data: Concept, measurement, patterns, and research agenda," in *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 38, no. 5 (September 2019). 608-610.

[38] Goertz et al, *The Puzzle of Peace,* 30-31.

[39] Goertz et al, The Puzzle of Peace, 31.

[40] Yulia Kurnyahova and Andrey Makarychev, "Exception and Analogical Reasoning in Ukrainian and Russian Political Discourses," in Raymond Taras (ed.), *Exploring Russia as Exceptional in International Politics* (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2023), ch. 5.

[41] Thomas L. Friedman, "Clinton Makes Appeal to Latvia To Accept Its Russian Civilians," *New York Times*, 7 July 1994, https://www.nytimes.com/1994/07/07/world/clinton-makes-appeal-to-latvia-to-accept-its-russian-civilians.html

[42] Council of Europe, "Factsheet on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities," 1994, https://www.coe.int/en/web/minorities/fcnm-factsheet

Moving toward multipolarity?

Charting a timeline of polarity in the international system is not self-evident. There are just three possible ways to assay world politics employing polarity: 1) unipolar with one center; 2) bipolar with two, and 3) multipolar with three or more.[43] It can be argued that in Thucydides' lifetime (about 400 BCE) classical Greek civilization comprised two rival city-states, Athens and Sparta. If we listen to this Greek historian and philosopher, it consisted essentially of a bipolar system having corresponding alliance systems. On the other hand, when wars were waged outside of Greece, bipolarity seemed contrived and defeats to external adversaries were as common as victories.

The consensus among international relations historians is that from early times to the 17th century, unipolar actors consisted of far-flung empires; classic examples were the land-based Roman empire and the sea-based British one. Historian Paul Kennedy would disagree and identify other great powers.[44] The center of gravity of the international system was transformed in 1648 when the Peace of Westphalia allowed the creation of multiple sovereignties which were based on population and territory located in a region. Thus multipolarity, with a string of changing participants, became dominant and in the classic balance-of-power system of the later 19th century it was England, France, Germany, Austro-Hungary, and Russia which made up the multipolar system. That period ended with World War I when the international system crumbled and these self-same countries started to fight each other.

By the end of World War II the United States had emerged as one of two principal pretenders to the bipolar system. The other was the USSR which was capped with its successful test of a hydrogen bomb in 1955.[45] In 1991 the international system reverted to unipolarity with Soviet collapse; the unipolar moment for America appeared at last. But power does not tolerate a vacuum and within a decade China joined Russia in challenging the US and insisting on the advantages of multipolarity. The US countered with a well-disguised claim to hegemony even if it was regularly defeated in far off battlefields. The frustration of other aspirant powers became difficult to overlook.

Conflicting evidence was brought to the fore in the degrees of system polarization that were occurring in the international system and brought to our attention by scholars Melvin Small and David Singer. Their Correlates of War (CoW) project in the 1970s was pioneering in its sophisticated application of quantitative methods. In 1979 it claimed that "the legitimacy and the expectancy of war remains all too firmly embedded in the structure and culture of the system and its nations."[46] Admitting methodological issues, Small and Singer highlighted "the most sensitive issue of all: the extent to which our coding rules themselves affect the results."[47]

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[43] John J. Tierney, Jr., "Polarities We Have Known," *The Institute of World Politics,* August 31, 2020, https://www.iwp.edu/articles/2020/08/31/polarities-we-have-known/

[44] Paul Kennedy, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000 (New York: Vintage, 1989).

[45] David Holloway, Stalin and the Bomb: The Soviet Union and Atomic Energy, 1939-1956 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

[46] Melvin Small and J. David Singer, "Conflict in the international system, 1816-1977: historical trends and policy futures," in Singer (ed.), *Explaining War: Selected Papers from the Correlates of War Project* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1979), 81.

[47] Small and Singer, "Conflict," 74.

Both academics raised questions about the consequences of different levels of system polarization in the 20th century international system. A strong positive association existed, they argued, between alliance polarization and the magnitude and severity of war. They ranked all international wars by their impact and in terms of severity both world wars topped the list followed by the Korean and Vietnamese wars. This represented a stark contrast to the 19th century where the association between war and severity was negative.[48] Similarly University of Hawaii political scientist Michael Haas confirmed that in the past the number of independent power centers was negatively associated with the incidence, severity, and magnitude of war. In other words, in earlier times alliance polarization had a stabilizing effect on the system but that was not the case in the 20th century.[49]

Are we today confronting an international order of "unbalanced multipolarity?" In 2001 after the Cold War ended, international relations expert Mearsheimer made a prediction. Looking back at the past century he asserted that "This cycle of violence will continue far into the new millennium. Hopes for peace will probably not be realized, because the great powers that shape the international system fear each other and compete for power as a result." Would he be able to identify an optimal level of polarity that could reduce the threat of war? Mearsheimer cautioned instead what the worst threat would be: "multipolar systems which contain an especially powerful state—in other words, a potential hegemon—are especially prone to war." He enumerated three reasons for this. First, there are more opportunities for war because there are more potential conflict dyads within a multipolar system. Second, imbalances of power are more commonplace in a multipolar world and therefore great powers are more likely to have the capability to win a war, making deterrence more difficult and war more likely. Third, the potential for miscalculation is greater with multipolarity: states might think they have the capability to coerce or conquer another state when in fact they do not because of the presence of a potential hegemon. That hegemonic-aspiring state both has significant capability to cause trouble and furthermore spawns high levels of fear among the great powers.[50]

Multipolarity appears more war-prone than bipolarity. But "Unbalanced multipolarity is the most perilous distribution of power [because of] the presence of a potential hegemon. That state both has significant capability to cause trouble and spawns high levels of fear among the great powers." In contrast, "bipolarity is the most stable of the different architectures" providing fewer opportunities for conflict and confining anxieties caused by a state of fear.[51]

The desire of China, Russia, BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and other states in favour of a multipolar system differs significantly from the dynamics of civilizational clashes, Huntington's first theorem. The latter has a higher propensity for combustion given domestic demographics, but the former aspires to multipolarity, like the classic 19th century global order that kept the peace for an extended period of time. It remains an open question what may happen next, and it could be the case that

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[48] Melvin Small and J. David Singer, *Resort to Arms: International and Civil Wars, 1816-1980* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1982), 102, Table 5.1.

[49] Michael Haas, "International Systems: Stability and Polarity," *American Political Science Review* 64, no. 1 (March 1970), 98-123.

[50] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), xiii, 338.

[51] Mearsheimer, *Tragedy,* 346-47.

the quest for multipolarity will itself trigger global instability and insecurity. Huntington's world order has the makings of world disorder.

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