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The Clash of Perceptions

Testing the "Clash of Civilizations"
with Global Survey Data



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Foreword

One of the most popular, influential, and controversial paradigms for explaining international and intergroup conflict in the post-Cold War era has been the “Clash of Civilizations” by Samuel P. Huntington, which emphasizes the importance of cultural identification as a determinant of conflict. The post-Cold War era has indeed been rife with international conflicts, many of which – from the Kosovo war, through the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, to the war in Ukraine – have been interpreted as evidence in support of Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations.” Since its first publication in 1993, Huntington’s work has been cited almost 35,000 times and has been translated into no less than 39 languages. What is more, there is empirical evidence to suggest that the global mass media have promoted the “Clash of Civilizations” as a popular frame for interpreting global conflict phenomena, thus establishing its salience outside academia. Precisely because of its popularity, however, it is feared that the “Clash of Civilizations” could one day become a self-fulfilling prophecy by shaping people’s perceptions, which may translate into actions.

But do people really think along the lines of Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations”? Are the mutual public perceptions of Muslims and Westerners truly antagonistic? Is the Western civilization the focal point of perceived conflict? What role does cultural identification play in shaping the stereotypes of cultural out-groups and foreign countries? By answering these questions, the “Clash of Perceptions” offers not only a new perspective on our understanding of the “Clash of Civilizations” and its potential impact around the world, but it also provides new insights into the very causes of international and intergroup conflict. Significantly, researching people’s perceptions helps to find ways for intervention and perhaps even conflict prevention.

The historical and social scientific analysis of international conflict has traditionally been one of the primary research foci of the *Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr* (ZMSBw, Bundeswehr Center of Military History and Social Sciences). However, with international relations becoming increasingly tense and fragile in recent years, the ZMSBw recognizes the need to intensify its research on current issues of international conflict and security even further. The social scientists at the ZMSBw conduct important research in this regard as they generate implications for policymakers and scholars alike. Bearing these thoughts in mind, it becomes evident that the “Clash of Perceptions” fits the research agenda of the ZMSBw perfectly.

With its interdisciplinary and holistic research approach, the “Clash of Perceptions” exemplifies the social scientific competence of the ZMSBw in the best way possible. Hence, I would like to congratulate the author on his work,

which demonstrates methodological excellence and sophistication across various disciplines, develops a truly integrative theory, and provides a rare empirical test at the global level. Moreover, the findings are highly relevant to many of today's discourses about international conflict. Finally, I would like to thank the publications department at the ZMSBw for the outstanding job in copy-editing, designing the tables and illustrations, and for realizing this publication in the book series "Social Science Studies."

I hope that the "Clash of Perceptions" will be well received within the academic and policy communities.

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I General Introduction

1. The “Clash of Civilizations”

The Cold War with its inherent logic of bipolarity and power politics had dominated both academic research and practical thinking about international relations for four decades when it came to an end in 1989. At the time, one of the most prominent visions of what the post-Cold War era in international politics could look like was formulated by Francis Fukuyama who predicted the absolute and global victory of economic and political liberalism, which was expected to herald a less conflict-prone era in international relations (Fukuyama, 1989 & 1992). However, Samuel P. Huntington challenged this very notion as early as 1993 with an article entitled “The Clash of Civilizations?” (Huntington, 1993), which was welcomed at first as a “useful corrective to ‘the end of history’ optimism” (Rosecrance, 1998: 980). Huntington proposed the original idea that in the post-Cold War era culture in general and cultural identification in particular would replace ideology as the primary determinant of intergroup relations in general and international relations in particular to the effect that the relations between groups and states belonging to different cultural spheres or “civilizations” would be more conflict-prone than the relations between groups and states that belong to the same civilization. So, contrary to Fukuyama’s optimism, Huntington predicted a future far more conflictual. For him, the end of the Cold War meant neither the end of history nor conflict but a new era of intergroup and interstate conflict shaped by cultural identities. States and groups would continue to fight over territory, material resources, and political influence but the alliances and antagonisms in this new era would be primarily determined by cultural identities.

Huntington’s proposition of a “Clash of Civilizations” (CoC) was received with considerable attention by academics, policymakers, and the mass media alike. Some even went as far as saying that it “sent shockwaves around the world” (Hassner, 1997: 63). Only three years after the article, Huntington published the book “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order” (Huntington, 1996), which provided a more detailed account of the envisioned CoC. To date, the article and the book together have been cited more than 37,000 times, contributing to Huntington’s status as one of the most cited political scientists of all times.¹ As well, the book has been translated into no less than 39 languages.

¹ Citation count according to Google Scholar as of February 1, 2019.

In recent years, both academics and the mass media alike have drawn on Huntington's ideas in an effort to explain (or frame) events such as: the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Abrahamian, 2003; Kibble, 2002; Kim, 2009; Powell, 2011); the so called Muhammad Cartoon Controversy of 2005/2006 (Eide et al., 2008; Hussain, 2007; Powers, 2008); the terror inflicted upon European nations by the so called "Islamic State" (Poulus, 2016; Rachman, 2015); and the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia that began with Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Eran, 2015; Hirsh, 2014; Johnson, 2014; Merry, 2014). Some even argue that the CoC presents a particularly powerful political myth, perhaps "the most powerful of our epoch" (Bottici & Challand, 2006: 322; see also Bottici & Challand, 2010). And while its visibility in the mass media has diminished since 2004 and especially after the death of its author in 2008, the CoC "remains a significant mediated construct, providing a dominant interpreting mechanism of global conflict phenomena" (Bantimaroudis, 2015: 83). More than 20 years have passed since the CoC was first published and yet "it remains a theory with which serious engagement ought to be made" (Barker, 2013: 5).

2. Previous Empirical Tests of the "Clash of Civilizations"

Notwithstanding its intellectual impact and enduring popularity, however, most empirical analyses to date have produced evidence that appears to contradict Huntington's most central hypothesis: intercivilizational conflict is not more likely than intracivilizational conflict. In fact, some empirical studies show that countries belonging to the *same* civilization are in fact *more likely* to be involved in interstate conflict with each other than countries belonging to different civilizations.²

Albeit the empirical evidence against the CoC appears, on the whole, to be rather conclusive, it is actually very constricted in its perspective. This is so because "scholarly work that has tested Huntington's theoretical predictions has focused exclusively on patterns of militarized interstate dispute, interstate and civil war" (Neumayer & Plümper, 2009: 712). Although intergroup and interstate conflict may also find expression in countless non-violent manifestations, previous empirical tests of the CoC have focused on the most extreme and the rarest manifestation of intergroup conflict: violence.

While it is true that Huntington writes about violent conflict between civilizations, especially between the West and Islam, he does not restrict his discussion (and conception) of the "clash" to violent behavior alone. In fact, Huntington does

2 See also Senghaas (2002) and Bilgrami (2003) on the idea of a "clash within civilizations."