CLASHING ON THE FAULT LINES
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BOOK REVIEW

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It is closing in on two decades since Samuel P. Huntington first published his civilization-based theory of post-Cold War conflict. He then expanded upon this in his 1996 book. So why is it that we are now reviewing this text a further 13 years on? Huntington passed away on Christmas Eve of 2008. At that time, many suggested that his Clash of Civilizations hypothesis might pass, too. Very recently, Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen identified Huntington’s hypothesis as an example of the kind of inadequate theories of violence that have gained widespread support and run the danger of having us continually oversimplify our understanding of violence in society.¹ He argued that we should choose, instead, to engage in a global debate about the multitude of complex causes of the various forms of violence that plague our societies. Yet, just two days after Sen’s speech, President Barack Obama laid out an important aspect of his foreign policy strategy in his Address to the Muslim World.² This speech would appear, on the face of it, to vindicate Huntington’s simple characterization of the post-Cold War world; in essence, Obama was acknowledging that the West is in some kind of stand off with its Muslim counterparts.

This review is designed, therefore, to offer a brief assessment of the potential value of Huntington’s model of post-Cold War politics as a guide to the post-9/11 environment. At the heart of his thesis, Huntington noted that the vacuum of post-Cold War politics would be short-lived; that the ideological battle that had defined divisions between humankind in the years since the rise of communism and fascism in the wake of

²B. Obama, “Address to the Muslim World”, (University of Cairo, Egypt. Lecture, June 4, 2009).
the Great War were already being replaced by divisions along the lines that separate civilizations. In detailing the implications of this bold assertion, Huntington stated very clearly that the most significant fault line,

runs along what are now the boundaries between Finland and Russia and between the Baltic states and Russia, cuts through Belarus and Ukraine…, swings westward separating Transylvania from the rest of Romania, and then goes through Yugoslavia almost exactly along the line now separating Croatia and Slovenia from the rest of Yugoslavia… The peoples to the north and west of this line are Protestant and Catholic…; they are generally economically better off than the peoples to the east… The peoples to the east and south of this line are Orthodox or Muslim…; they are generally less advanced economically; they seem much less likely to develop stable democratic political systems.\(^3\)

Writing in the early-to-mid 1990s, it was not exactly prescient to highlight the potential for conflict in the Balkans. However, in the years since, tensions have been heightened there and elsewhere along this and other fault lines between civilizations. Hostilities over territorial control of Kashmir have been recurrent; Russia has engaged militarily with Chechen and Georgian populations in the Trans-Caucus region and feuded with Ukraine (and indirectly, much of the rest of Europe) over energy supplies. Israeli-Palestinian violence has, rather unsurprisingly, continued to erupt but also been accompanied by increased Western involvement in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Notably, many of the transnational conflicts that appear to be defining our twenty-first Century experience have occurred on or very close to the fault lines between civilizations. Yet, surprisingly little empirical research has focused upon this inherent geography underlying the Huntingtonian hypothesis. Initial tests of the hypothesis, focusing upon whether or not warring countries were both neighbouring and of different

Civilizations tended to return no statistically significant findings. Such studies were typically undermined, however, by their minimal conceptualisation of geography. They would simply tend to include an interaction term of two dummy variables—one measuring similarity or difference in civilization, a second indicating whether or not the two parties in conflict share a land border. At no point did these studies seek to identify where conflict had broken out.

With the recent collection and publication of data on the precise locations of conflicts as well as the distribution of populations of ethnic groups, now may be the ideal time to more robustly test the validity of Huntington’s inherently geographic fault line hypothesis. Pending the publication of any such results, it may be difficult to offer any credible, categorical assessment of Huntington’s claims. It does seem, however, as if there is reason to suspect that those that were quick to dismiss Huntington may wish to reconsider their judgement.

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REFERENCES


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