The Coming Clash of Civilizations Or, the West Against the Rest

By Samuel P. Huntington

World politics is entering a new phase in which the fundamental source of conflict will be neither ideological nor economic. The great divisions among mankind and dominating sources of conflict will be cultural. The principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics.

During the Cold War, the world was divided into the first, second and third worlds. Those divisions are no longer relevant. It is far more meaningful to group countries not in terms of their political or economic development but in terms of their cultures and civilizations.

A civilization is the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species.

Civilizations obviously blend and overlap and may include sub-civilizations. Western civilization has two major variants, European and North American, and Islam has Arab, Turkic and Malay subdivisions. But while the lines between them are seldom sharp, civilizations are real. They rise and fall; they divide and merge. And as any student of history knows, civilizations disappear.

Westerners tend to think of nation-states as the principal actors in global affairs, but this has only been the case for a few centuries. The broader reaches of history have been the history of civilizations. It is to this pattern that the world returns.

Civilization identity will be increasingly important and the world will be shaped in large measure by the interactions among seven of eight major civilizations. These include the Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African civilizations. The most important and bloody conflicts will occur along the borders separating these cultures. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.

Why? First, the differences among civilizations are basic, involving history, language, culture, tradition and, most importantly, religion. Different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man; the citizen and the state; parents and children; liberty and authority; and equality and hierarchy. These differences are the product of centuries and they will not soon disappear.

Second, the world is becoming smaller. The interactions between peoples of different civilizations are increasing. These interactions intensify civilizations consciousness: awareness of differences between civilizations and commonalities within civilizations. For example, Americans react far more negatively to Japanese investment than to larger investments from Canada and European countries.

Third, economic and social changes are separating people from long-standing local identities. In much of the world, religion has moved in to fill this gap, often in the form of movements labeled fundamentalist. Such movements are found in Western Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. The “unsecularization of the world,” the social activist George Weigel remarked, “is one of the dominant social facts of life in the late 20th century.”

Fourth, the growth of civilization consciousness is enhanced by the fact that at the moment the West is at the peak of its power, a return-to-the-roots phenomenon is occurring
among non-Western civilizations – the “Asianization” in Japan, the end of the Nehru legacy and
the “Hinduization” of India, the failure of Western Ideas of socialism and nationalism and, hence,
the “re-Islamization” of the Middle East, and now a debate over Westernization versus
Russianization in Boris Yeltsin’s country.

More importantly, the efforts of the West to promote its values of democracy and
liberalism as universal values, to maintain its military predominance and to advance its
economic interests engender countering responses from other civilizations.

The central axis of world politics is likely to be the conflict between “the West and the
rest” and the responses of non-Western civilizations to Western power and values. The most
prominent example of anti-Western cooperation is the connection between Confucian and
Islamic states that are challenging Western values and power.

Fifth, cultural characteristics and differences are less mutable and hence less easily
compromised and resolved than political and economic ones. In the former Soviet Union,
Communists could become democrats, the rich could become poor and the poor rich, but
Russian could not become Estonians. A person can be half-French and half-Arab and even a
citizen of two countries. It is more difficult to be half Catholic and half Muslim.

Finally, economic regionalism is increasing. Successful economic regionalism will
reinforce civilization consciousness. On the other hand, economic regionalism may succeed
only when it is rooted in a common civilization. The European community rests on the shared
foundation of European culture and Western Christianity. Japan, in contrast, faces difficulties in
creating a comparable economic entity in East Asia because it is a society and civilization
unique to itself.

As the ideological division of Europe has disappeared, the cultural division of Europe
between Western Christianity and Islam has re-emerged. Conflict along the fault line between
Western and Islamic civilizations has been going on for 1,300 years. This centuries-old military
interaction is unlikely to decline. Historically, the other great antagonistic interaction of Arab
Islamic civilization has been with the pagan, animist and now, increasingly, Christian black
peoples to the south. On the northern border of Islam, conflict has increasingly erupted between
Orthodox and Muslim peoples, including the carnage of Bosnia and Sarajevo, the simmering
violence between Serbs and Albanians, the tenuous relations between Bulgarians and their
Turkish minority, the violence between Ossetians and Ingush, the unremitting slaughter of each
other by Armenians and Azeris and the tense relations between Russians and Muslims in
Central Asia.

The historic clash between Muslims and Hindus in the Sub-continent manifests itself not
only in the rivalry between Pakistan and India but also in intensifying religious strife in India
between increasingly militant Hindu groups and the substantial Muslim minority.

Groups or states belonging to one civilization that become involved in war with people
from a different civilization naturally try to rally support from other members of their own
civilization. Decreasingly able to mobilize support and form coalitions on the basis of ideology,
governments and groups will increasingly attempt to mobilize support by appealing to common
religion and civilization identity. As the conflicts in the Persian Gulf, the Caucasus and Bosnia
continued, the positions of nations and the cleavages between them increasingly were along
civilizational lines. Populist politicians, religious leaders and the media have found it a potent
means of arousing mass support and of pressuring hesitant governments. In the coming years,
the local conflicts most likely to escalate into major wars will be those, as in Bosnia and the Caucasus, along the fault lines between civilizations. The next world war, if there is one, will be a war between civilizations.

If these hypotheses are plausible, if is necessary to consider their implications for Western policy. These implications should be divided between short-term advantage and long-term accommodation. In the short term, it is clearly in the interest of the West to promote greater cooperation and unity in its own civilizations, particularly between its European and North American components; to incorporate into the West those societies in Eastern Europe and Latin America whose cultures are close to those of the West; to maintain close relations with Russia and Japan; to support in other civilizations groups sympathetic to Western values and interests; and to strengthen international institutions that reflect and legitimate Western interests and values. The West must also limit the expansion of the military strength of potentially hostile civilizations, principally Confucian and Islamic civilizations, and exploit differences and conflicts among Confucian and Islamic states. This will require a moderation in the reduction of Western military capabilities, and, in particular, the maintenance of American military superiority in East and Southwest Asia.

In the longer term, other measures would be called for. Western civilization is modern. Non-Western civilizations have attempted to become modern without becoming Western. To date, only Japan has dully succeeded in this quest. Non-Western civilizations will continue to attempt to acquire the wealth, technology, skills, machines and weapons that are part of being modern. They will attempt to reconcile this modernity with their traditional culture and values. Their economics and military strength relative to the West will increase.

Hence, the West will increasingly have to accommodate to these non-Western modern civilizations, whose power approaches that of the West but whose values and interests differ significantly from those of the West. This will require the West to develop a much more profound understanding of the basic religious and philosophical assumptions underlying other civilizations and the way in which people in those civilizations see their interests. It will require an effort to identify elements of commonality among Western and other civilizations. For the relevant future, there will be no universal civilization but instead a world of different civilizations, each of which will have to learn to co-exist with others.