

# Huntington vs. Mearsheimer vs. Fukuyama: Which Post-Cold War Thesis is Most Accurate?

Written by Glen M.E. Duerr

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GLEN M.E. DUERR, APR 22 2018

**This is an excerpt from *The 'Clash of Civilizations' 25 Years On: A Multidisciplinary Appraisal*. Download your free copy here**

In the aftermath of the Cold War – a 45-year ideological struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union – several scholars forecasted the future of conflict and geopolitics post-1991. Three prominent books – Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*, John Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, and Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History*, all with compelling theses, provide a roadmap as to possible future outcomes. These three books have been selected, in part, because Huntington actually criticizes the main theories of the two others authors in Chapter one of his book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Huntington 1997, 31, 37).

Francis Fukuyama's book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, outlines the success of democracy and free-market capitalism as the dominant ideology that would proliferate throughout the world after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the representative death of communism as a viable ideological position (Fukuyama 1992). In a sense, warfare in the post-Cold War is unlikely given the rise of democracy and interdependence, Fukuyama argues. Since democracy is the final form of human government, debating Karl Marx's admonition that communism would replace capitalism; Fukuyama effectively argues the opposite of Marx that capitalism has triumphed. Fukuyama also argues that although democracy is not a panacea to cure all problems of humanity, it is the final form of government.

John Mearsheimer's book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, provides an overview of the international system from a structural realist (also known as a neo-realist) perspective, specifically offensive realism. In contrast to early classical realist scholars like Hans Morgenthau, Mearsheimer argues that the structure of the international system is a cause of war, not necessarily moral concerns, or the particular characteristics of a given leader. In contrast to other structural realists like Kenneth Waltz, Mearsheimer argues that – on the questions of how much power states want to accumulate – states want as much power as they can get, rather than what he terms defensive realists who contend that states are interested in maintaining the balance of power (Mearsheimer 2001, 22).

Mearsheimer's core predictions circulate around the changing dynamics in geopolitics as related to 'great powers'. Mearsheimer argues that conflict is a fact of the international system because ultimately the dynamics of great power politics lead to wars over dominance of the system. Mearsheimer's book concentrates on an almost 200-year period from the start of the Napoleonic Wars, 1792, to the end of the Cold War, 1991. He argues that three central wars occurred – the Napoleonic Wars, World War I, and World War II – when the international system of balance of power politics was both unbalanced and multipolar (Mearsheimer 2001, 357). Thus, even though Mearsheimer does not directly discuss the post-Cold War world, his theory provides predictive power as to what will happen in the future based on characteristics that, he argues, have held over time. In the post-Cold War world, other 'great powers', given enough time, will seek to balance the power of the United States. The world is particularly conflict-prone when a multipolar world arises, especially if the balance-of-power becomes unbalanced (Mearsheimer 2001). Thus, when Mearsheimer published his book in 2001, the US was clearly the only superpower in the world.

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Finally, Samuel P. Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' article in *Foreign Affairs* spawned such furious debate in 1993 that Huntington published a full-length book in 1996 to assuage his critics (Huntington 1993; Huntington 1997). Revolving around nine civilizations, Huntington argues that the future of warfare would be fought along civilizational 'fault lines'. The civilizations include the West, Latin America, Africa, Orthodox, Sinic, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist and Japanese. From the 1993 article to the 1996 book, Huntington added Japanese as a separate civilization, and changed Confucian to Sinic. One of the most controversial components of Huntington's argument is the line 'Islam has bloody borders' (Huntington 1993, 35) inferring that the Islamic civilization in particular tends to become violently embroiled with other civilizations on its periphery. The case here is based on wars such as the Yugoslav war, conflict in Sudan and Iraq, as well as the Philippines.

Each thesis provides compelling reasons as to the future of the world, especially during the post-Cold War period. Huntington and Mearsheimer, in particular, utilize a theoretical argument in order to provide a forecast of the future. This is the major upside of using an accepted theory because it allows for predictions despite the fact that no scholar can readily predict what will actually happen. As John Mearsheimer is fond of saying, 'the leaders of tomorrow are in the fifth grade today, and we have no way of predicting how they will act. But, theory provides us with a framework of their expected behaviors'.<sup>[1]</sup>

Now that an overview of each scholar's major post-Cold War thesis has been presented, this chapter will first assess the arguments of Fukuyama and Mearsheimer as to their predictive power. Which topics and events has each author correctly predicted, and which topics and events has each author missed; in essence, which theory is most accurate? Given that this volume is an assessment of the work of Samuel Huntington, special attention is paid to the 'clash of civilizations' thesis in the latter half of the chapter, but always with a comparison of Fukuyama and Mearsheimer in the background. Ultimately, I argue that each scholars' prediction has, at periods of time in the post-Cold War era, looked very strong, whilst, at other times, their predictions have either not come to fruition, or been incorrect. Each thesis is still salvageable, but democracy is currently on the decline, which undercuts Fukuyama; great power competition has still not really emerged, which undercuts Mearsheimer; and civilizational identity remains limited, which undercuts Huntington. For each scholar, however, is known for their comprehensive grasp of history, so their work should be assessed regularly to see if their predictions correctly prognosticated events in the long term.

## Which Theory is Most Accurate?

At various points since the formal end of the Cold War in 1991, each of the scholars' predictions has looked at times like a successful explanation of the current era, but also, at other times, like respective theses that missed the central explanatory factors of the period – prognosticating after all is a very difficult endeavor. Fukuyama's thesis looked strong throughout the 1990s with the proliferation of democracies and states adopting free-market principles, even with requisite state protections (perhaps best called mixed economies). However, with 9/11, and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' theory began to take hold as a better explanation of why geopolitical actions happened the way they did. Moreover, with the rise of China, and the resurgence of Russia – both utilizing an illiberal model of governance – Fukuyama's thesis was likewise challenged by Mearsheimer's prediction that other states would attempt to balance the power of the hegemon. Despite the challenges, parts of Fukuyama's thesis still hold in that democracy remains an appealing force in world politics. Even though democracy has declined for the eleventh straight year, 87 of the 195 measured countries are still labelled as 'free' (Freedom House 2017). Tangentially, Fukuyama's work also buttresses the Democratic Peace Theory (DPT), which layers his prediction with a Churchillian argument that democracy is the best form of government despite its flaws. Although Fukuyama did not construct the DPT, his positions on democracy strengthened the DPT by emphasizing the importance of democracy as the final form of human government. The DPT still holds if democracy and war are given strict definitions, and if intrastate conflicts are omitted. These two points show that Fukuyama's *End of History* thesis is at the very least still relevant today.

For Fukuyama, democracy is central. The DPT posits that mature democracies do not go to war with other mature democracies (see Doyle 1986; Doyle 2005). The monadic version of the theory – assessing whether or not democracies are peaceful or not compared to non-democracies – is the argument that, yes, democracies are generally more peaceful than any other type of regime. For the monadic theory, the actual evidence however is at

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best mixed since democratic countries like the United States and the United Kingdom still frequently go to war against non-democracies. However, some evidence exists as to support the dyadic version of the theory – assessing whether *mature* democracies are more peaceful when surveying their likelihood of going to war against other *mature* democracies – that, yes, democracies do not really go to war with each other. In general, the dyadic version of the DPT is upheld statistically, and in the academic literature. Depending on how democracy and war are defined, it is possible to argue that the DPT has held from the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 to the present – a span of over 200 years. There are numerous cases that might upend this thesis, but if a democracy is defined as a mature democracy replete with robust democratic institutions, and a history of competitive elections. If war is defined as 1,000 battle-related deaths per year, rather than 25. Finally, if civil wars, or intrastate wars, are omitted, then the veracity of the dyadic version of the DPT might still hold. Fukuyama's adherence to democracy buttresses the concept that mature democracies are the final form of government due to a range of social goods for the people, but also in minimizing interstate violence in the future.

What undercuts Fukuyama's thesis, however, is the stubbornness of China to reform even with significant per capita economic growth; Russia's backsliding into authoritarianism under President Vladimir Putin; Turkey's authoritarianism under President Recep Erdoğan; and numerous strongmen that have emerged even since 2010 such as President al-Sisi of Egypt. In a sense, the 2010s have been dominated by an authoritarian resurgence where the strongman figure is seen as necessary in order to provide stability in a tumultuous economic and security environment around the world. In 2008, Fukuyama defended his thesis arguing that while autocracy has increased, especially in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Georgia, authoritarian leaders can only go so far – 'If today's autocrats are willing to bow to democracy, they are eager to grovel to capitalism' (Fukuyama 2008). In his op-ed in *The Washington Post*, Fukuyama concedes that democracy is not necessarily the end of history given the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, but he argues that this challenge may subside or be defeated.

The work of John Mearsheimer is still largely untested for two main reasons. First, because US power remains central to security discussions in Europe – his theory rests on a return to great power rivalry in Europe, which, he argues, would return if the United States vacated its troops from the continent. Second, because the US remains the sole superpower, even if great power rivals are emerging elsewhere in the world, no country can balance American power, thus an unbalanced multipolar world is impossible. On the first point, Germany has not yet developed the requisite strategic autonomy to become a military superpower, which is well within Berlin's arsenal should it pursue a more muscular foreign policy if latent tensions with the US continue to develop. For example, schisms between President George W. Bush and Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, and their contemporaries Trump and Merkel suggest that this division is possible. Mearsheimer cannot claim credit yet because the world remains devoid of great power conflict. Interdependence and cooperation still prevail and have disrupted the challenges that Mearsheimer predicted with rising multipolarity in the state system.

Mearsheimer also argues (2006) that given the Thucydidean trap of international relations – that one power cannot rise without coming into conflict with the falling power – China and the US will engage in some form of confrontation in the future. He ultimately argues that the US will treat China much the same as it did the Soviet Union during the Cold War with a policy of containment, and defeat China if Washington pursues smart policies. Multipolarity takes time to emerge, but with the rise of the Chinese economy coupled with technological improvements to their military, Beijing has emerged as a superpower for some academics, pundits, and policymakers. Russia's military actions in Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, and Syria in 2015 suggest that Moscow may be a resurgent actor in world affairs, worthy of great power status. There is some evidence of emerging multipolarity, then, with China, Russia, and other major actors like India. Questions, however, remain on the actions of Germany and Japan – both of which should emerge as 'great powers' under Mearsheimer's model. Thus, Mearsheimer's theory is still largely untested because the correct conditions of unbalanced multipolarity have not yet emerged.

## Huntington Debates Mearsheimer and Fukuyama

Interestingly, as noted in the introduction, Huntington specifically criticizes the theories of Fukuyama and Mearsheimer in Chapter one of his book because they both provide contrasting visions of the post-Cold War world. In a sense, Fukuyama's thesis is one of harmony in the post-Cold War world – a point that Huntington vigorously views

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as overly optimistic and unlikely – because, in Fukuyama’s view, there would be no major struggles over ideology in the future such as those that preceded World War I, World War II, and the Cold War (Huntington, 1997, 31). Fukuyama concedes that conflicts would still take place in the “Third World” (now usually called the developing world), but that the end of history marks ‘the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government’ (Huntington, 1997, 31).

Assessed from the vantage point of 2018, 25 years after his initial prediction, Huntington is certainly right in his pessimism of Fukuyama’s thesis, at least to some degree. Fukuyama’s thesis has not delivered the universalization of Western liberal democracy, and has eroded since its high point in 2010. However, unlike World War I with monarchism, World War II with fascism and the Cold War with communism (see Mazower 1999), the post-Cold War world does not have one, distinct ideology with which capitalism and liberal democracy are competing. Fukuyama therefore cannot be easily dismissed, especially if the backsliding of democracy in the 2010s is merely a blip on a wider trend towards democratization, and if there is no major competitor for liberal democracy. Perhaps the rise of authoritarian state-centric capitalism in China and Russia provides an alternate ideological model for post-Cold War conflict, but democratic variants in Japan and South Korea still show that democratization is highly prized in tangent with a state-driven form of capitalism.

Huntington also criticizes Mearsheimer, specifically over his predictions on Russia and Ukraine, although he makes two contradictory claims. First, Mearsheimer predicts that ‘the situation between Ukraine and Russia is ripe for the outbreak of security competition between them. For a great power like Russia that shares a long and unprotected common border, like the one between Russia and Ukraine, often lapse into competition driven by security fears. Russia and Ukraine might overcome this dynamic and learn to live in harmony, but it would be unusual if they do’ (Mearsheimer 1993, 54 cited in Huntington 1996, 37). Huntington refutes this argument and instead argues that a civilizational approach is a better explanation of the peace between the two countries because they share the same civilizational culture – thus, peace is the more likely outcome. However, in a later section of Huntington’s book, the second point he makes on Ukraine/Russia, is that he describes Ukraine as a ‘cleft country’, which is torn, in a sense, between two civilizations (Huntington 1997, 166). ‘A civilizational approach’, Huntington argues that it, ‘highlights the possibility of Ukraine splitting in half, a separation which cultural factors would lead one to predict might be more violent than that of Czechoslovakia but far less bloody than Yugoslavia’ (Huntington 1997, 37).

When viewing the world in 2018, 25 years after the publication of *The Clash of Civilizations*, Mearsheimer’s thesis certainly looks better than Huntington’s given Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the interjection of covert Russian forces in the Eastern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. Huntington is still correct in his assessment that a split of Ukraine would be bloodier than Czechoslovakia, but less so than Yugoslavia, but incorrectly diagnosed Mearsheimer’s state-centric argument that Russia and Ukraine would likely engage in some form of violent war over security concerns, rather than civilizational kinship. Against Mearsheimer, Huntington’s thesis is certainly less accurate in some places. Mearsheimer correctly predicts the likelihood of violence between Russia and Ukraine, something that Huntington dismisses because he assumed that civilizational identity would become paramount, rather than the security-based rivalry that Mearsheimer asserts. Huntington’s discussion of Ukraine as a ‘cleft country’ revitalizes his argument because it implicitly notes the possibility that Ukraine would splinter – a bold prediction to make when assessing any country. Moreover, Huntington’s assessment that Ukraine would split in a manner more violent than Czechoslovakia, but less violent than Yugoslavia, is currently correct. Mearsheimer thus holds some leverage over Huntington on this issue, but the depth and specificity of Huntington’s predictions purport his sophisticated foresight.

## 9/11, the Afghan and Iraq wars, the Failure of the Arab Spring, and the Rise of ISIS

Turning specifically to Huntington for the remainder of the chapter, what are the successes of his argument? Huntington’s thesis presents some explanation of 9/11, the failure of the Arab Spring, the rise of ISIS, and the threat of terrorism especially in the West. Yet, at the same time, inter-civilizational fault lines have not produced mass conflict. Civil wars are relatively rare even in places where civilizations meet (see Goldstein, 2011). Parts of Huntington’s thesis hold in the measures noted above, but his explanation should have generated more conflict, and less cross-civilizational cooperation such as the rise of BRICS, and the inter-civilizational coalition to defeat ISIS.

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Where has Huntington been successful? In his book, Huntington provides 19 bullet points (Huntington, 1997, 38-39) that show how the post-Cold War world is moving towards a civilizational approach. Since the publication of his book, there are certainly many more bullet points that could be added. However, four major events fall categorically successful for Huntington's prediction. As noted in the above section, Huntington's theory showed significant accuracy in 2001 with 9/11 – if Huntington's clashing civilizations thesis had been taken more seriously, some argue, the US could have better prepared for a 9/11-type event. In the aftermath of 9/11, the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq also provide some justification for Huntington. The war on Afghanistan received widespread support and NATO's triggering of Article V – Huntington predicted the concept of civilizational kin rallying, especially in times of war or major attack. The Iraq War was much more contentious, and, in some senses, caused inter-civilizational disagreements since France, Germany, and Canada, among others in the West opposed the invasion of Iraq, all trying to offset the 'clash of civilizations' thesis by not aligning with the wider Western civilization. This cuts against Huntington's thesis to some degree, but the waging of war by a country from one civilization (the West) against another (Islamic) bolsters the original 'clash of civilizations' thesis.

At the outset of the Arab Spring when Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated in Tunisia in December 2010, it kick-started a chain of protests across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). When President Ben Ali of Tunisia was ousted followed in quick succession by President Mubarak of Egypt in January 2011 and then President Gadhafi of Libya in the midst of a bloody civil war, it seemed like the MENA region – the last vestige of widespread autocracy – might begin the process of democratization. The President of Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh also resigned, and liberal reforms took hold in Morocco, Kuwait, and Jordan among other cases. Fukuyama's thesis recovered somewhat in 2011 and 2012 despite the downturn of democracy elsewhere in the world.

However, as protests in Syria beginning in March of 2011 segued into a fissiparous civil war, the early optimism of the Arab Spring began to wane, before finally petering out. Democratic successes are still evident in some MENA societies, and further reforms may still be enacted, but at least for now, the Arab Spring movement has subsided. Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' theory did not predict the short-term failure of the Arab Spring. However, he did predict that Islam would be the prominent defining feature of the MENA region as an Islamic civilization controversially implying that some of the values would be anathema to values in other civilizations such as democracy in the West.

The rise of ISIS as a significant player in the conflicts in the Middle East, especially in Syria and Iraq, but also in Yemen and Libya, does not necessarily uphold Huntington's thesis, but provides some suggestion of Huntington's prediction. Since Huntington (1997) divided the world into nine different civilizations including an Islamic civilization, the goal of ISIS is to unify this civilization under a radical Islamist banner. Huntington is incorrect in the sense that a majority of people in the Middle East and North Africa still reject the ISIS-vision of a radical form of sharia law, but Huntington argues that Islam will be the key defining feature of the civilization. At this point, Huntington's thesis still holds since a group like ISIS rose to prominence.

A global war involving core states of the world's major civilizations is highly improbable but not impossible. Such a war, we have suggested, could come about from the escalation of a fault line was between groups from different civilizations, most likely involving Muslims on one side and non-Muslims on the other (Huntington 1997, 312).

On one of Huntington's most controversial points, 'Islam has bloody borders' the rise of ISIS suggests some accuracy on the part of Huntington given the deadliness of this group. Missed in the wider narrative, however, is the prevailing peace in the world. The political scientist, Joshua Goldstein, shows that interstate war has declined dramatically such that in some years, there were no interstate wars at any place in the world (Goldstein 2011). Although conflict has increased since 2011, interstate violence remains relatively rare. Thus, Huntington's assertion that 'Islam has bloody borders' is on one level true, it ignores the decline of violence everywhere. Based on Huntington's prediction, one would actually expect a lot more violence in places where the Islamic civilization meets other civilizations, and yet political violence, and both interstate and intrastate wars remain relatively low compared to other points in human history.

Overall, on all four points, and despite some shortcomings, Huntington remains relevant to the post-Cold War debate.

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At the end of his book, Samuel Huntington openly wrestled with the idea of a clear civilizational identity. He argues, for example, that the United States should reject multiculturalism in order to preserve its place in the Western civilization,

The futures of the United States and of the West depend upon Americans reaffirming their commitment to Western civilization. Domestically this means rejecting the divisive siren calls of multiculturalism. Internationally it means rejecting the elusive and illusory calls to identify the United States with Asia (Huntington 1997, 307).

There is a portion of the above quote that suggests Huntington predicted the rise of an American presidential candidate like President Donald Trump – someone with an America First type disposition that is generally viewed as more nationalistic than previous presidents. Trump's success, in some ways, is due to a Huntingtonian admonition to rally around one's civilization (see Huntington 2004), one that President Trump has thus far fulfilled given his disdain for globalization, and his desire to reduce illegal immigration especially from civilizations outside of the West. Although there are some clear distinctions, President Trump's rhetoric and actions mirror some of the three sentences listed above as important by Huntington to maintain the United States' role as leader of the West. Huntington's work was very controversial when first published in 1993 leading to a vociferous debate in the pages of *Foreign Affairs* and elsewhere. When viewing the world in 2018, Huntington is no less controversial, but also still seems to speak to the present. As a means of testing whether his thesis still holds intellectual ground 25 years later, the mere fact that Huntingtonian assessments are still relevant in the 2016 and 2020 US Presidential Election debates, shows an answer in the affirmative. The same critiques of Huntington being too broad, not specific enough in some areas, and conceding some ground to his intellectual rivals exemplified by Fukuyama and Mearsheimer, all remain. Nevertheless, scholars cannot discount Huntington because core parts of his arguments still remain relevant to the narratives of today even if Huntington is clearly incorrect in some places.

\* *The author would like to thank Jacob Mach for his help with researching content for this chapter. The original idea for this chapter comes from Dr. Andrew Barnes and Dr. Steven Hook of Kent State University.*

## Notes

[1] Mearsheimer made this statement at the 2013 International Studies Association conference in San Francisco, California, on a panel discussion.

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## About the author:

**Glen M.E. Duerr** is Associate Professor of International Studies at Cedarville University. A citizen of three countries, he has a Ph.D. in Political Science from Kent State University and is the author of *Secessionism and the European Union*, which was published by Lexington Books in 2015.