How Inevitable Is A "Clash of Civilizations"?

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Abstract:

The period since September 11 attacks in 2001 has witnessed intense debates over to what extent a "clash of civilizations" is inevitable. This paper argues that the "clash of civilizations" thesis is a mistaken paradigm of understanding the Post-Cold War international order. While cultural and religious identities have increasingly become a source of political mobilization in the Post-Cold War world, the "clash of civilizations" thesis wrongly presumes that the civilization identities can override other major driving forces of political mobilization, which includes nation-state, global capitalism, and global governance based on common liberal values. All of these forces run against and will constrain the possibility of a clash of civilizations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there have been heated debates on the future of international order. The optimistic views argue that with the triumph of liberal democracy and market economy, the end of the Cold War has marked the end of history and the perpetual universal peace is eventually coming (Kant, 1970; Fukuyama, 1992). However, sharply contrasting these views, Huntington (1993a, b) provocatively argues that world peace is under severe threat of a "clash of civilizations"[1], which will dominate global politics in the Post-Cold War world. According to his analysis, the Post-Cold War world is divided into seven or eight civilizations[2], the fault lines between which will be the battle lines of the future. Huntington's claim has attracted a huge amount of attention and reaction. Notably, Ajami, Bartley, Liu, Kirkpatrick, and Mahbubani organized a collective attack against Huntington in the *Foreign Affairs* in 1993, which were followed by Tipson (1997), Holms (1997) and Said (2001).

Aiming to evaluate how inevitable a "clash of civilizations" is, this paper will develop a two-part argument: First, the idea of a "clash of civilizations" has captured an important aspect of the potential conflicts in the Post-Cold War world, i.e., cultural and religious identities have increasingly become a source of political mobilization. Second, however, the "clash of civilization" in general is a mistaken paradigm in perceiving the Post-Cold War international order in the sense that it wrongly presumes that the civilization identities can override other major driving forces of political mobilization, which includes nation-state, global capitalism, and global governance based on common liberal values. All of these forces run against and will constrain the possibility of a clash of civilizations. Indeed, to what extent a clash of civilization is inevitable depends on the relative strength of different forces of political mobilization. Although cultural identity has become increasingly important as a source of political mobilization in the Post Cold War world, it cannot override the other major forces in the foreseeable future. Therefore, a world of clashes of civilizations remains improbable.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section two will examine the insights of Huntington's idea on the clash of civilizations. It is argued that cultural and religion identities have revived as an important source of political mobilization in the Post-Cold War world. While conflicts caused by cultural and religion differences have indeed posed threats to world peace and should not be ignored, they have still been secondary in current world politics. Empirically, the clash of civilizations perspective in general is mistaken about the past, only selectively interpret the present and therefore cannot serve as a sound paradigm to perceive the

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[1] In Huntington's definition, the clash of civilizations will occur at two levels: "Adjacent groups along the fault lines between civilizations struggle, often violently, over control of territory and each other. At the macro-level, states from different civilizations compete for relative military and economic power, struggle over the control of international institutions and third parties, and competitively promote their particular and religious values." (Huntington, 1993a) This paper focuses more on the macro level.

[2] These include Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African civilization (Huntington, 1993a).

evolving Post-Cold War international order in the future (Russet, Oneal and Cox, 2000). Section three will show that cultural and religious identity as a source of political mobilization is severely constrained by other major forces of political mobilization, including nation-state, global capitalism and global governance based on common liberal values. A clash of civilization is far from being compatible with the maintenance and development of these forces. Section four will examine the general arguments in the context of China's case. It will be shown that despite potential threats of cultural and religious conflicts in China, political mobilization solely based on cultural and religious identities has largely been marginalized with little political significance. Section five will conclude the major findings.

2. IDENTITY, CONFLICTS, AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION: THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS AS A NEW PARADIGM OF UNDERSTANDING WORLD POLITICS?

As Russet, Oneal and Cox (2000) has pointed out, Huntington's idea that cultural differences produce conflict has its theoretical roots in social psychology. The distinction between the in-group members and the outsider are considered as fundamental in the sense that in-group cohesion is largely attained by nurturing conflict with outsiders. Consequently, the boundaries of identity become the field of conflicts. As Shaw and Wang (1988: 207) has argued: "Humanity's propensity for war is the outcome of thousands of years of evolution during which cognition and intolerance of out-group members have been shaped by priorities of gene-culture co-evolution". 'The sociological thought of this line can be traced back to Simmel (1898), with important expansion of Coser (1956)[3]. Group identities have different sources and can be defined in many different ways. There are tribe, race, ideology, class, nation, state, religion, culture and as Huntington has emphasized, civilization identity among others. What is peculiar about Huntington's thesis is that he insists that civilization identity is the most important group identity in the Post-Cold War world and "the clash of civilizations" should be considered as the new central paradigm of understanding world politics in the new era (Huntington, 1993b).

The insight of Huntington's thesis lies in that "clash of civilizations" has captured an important aspect of potential conflicts in the Post-Cold War world, i.e., cultural and religious identity has revived as an important source of political mobilization. During the period of the Cold War, countries were divided almost entirely in ideological terms. Ideological identity, i.e., communism versus liberal democracy, was the dominant source of conflicts and political mobilization. Other forms of group identities and conflicts were covered by the ideological division. However, since the end of the Cold War, cultural and religious identities have played an increasingly important role in mobilizing political actions. Religious fundamentalism has proliferated in many part of the world. As Huntington (1993, b) has documented, India's case is an illustrative example. While Nehru's vision of building a secular, socialist state with

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[3] This approach has been widely applied in international relations theory and research as a part of the so-called "Constructionism" which has resulted in intense debates and controversies. (Levy ,1989; Heldt, 1997)

parliamentary democracy dominated India's political agenda during the Cold War era, the Post-Cold War India has been increasingly affected by Hindu fundamentalism. According to New York Times (Huntington, 1993a), a growing Hindu rage toward India's Muslim has been spreading among the middle class Hindus. The most striking example of political mobilization based on the cultural and religious identity is the increasing influence of transnational religious organizations such as Al Qaeda. Termed as terrorists, these organizations have gradually mobilized considerable grass-root political support based on cultural and religious identities and indeed posed threats to world peace.

Admitting Huntington's insights in the above sense, it is nonetheless questionable that Huntington's general thesis on the clash of civilizations can hold. While the cultural and religious identities have revived as a source of political mobilization, the phenomena should not be exaggerated. There is no compelling evidence supporting that the conflicts inflicted by cultural and religious differences have overridden other forces of political mobilization. Indeed, a close look at Huntington's list of examples of civilization conflicts will immediately show that many so-call civilization conflicts were caused by factors other than cultural and religious division. For example, Huntington repeatedly refers to Bosnia as a perfect illustration of civilization conflict, since Bosnia is located astride the "fault lines" of three of the civilizations he defines: Western, Islamic, and Eastern Orthodox (Matlock, 1999). However, close examination shows that Bosnia has been highly secularized and religion only play a secondary sole in domestic politics. The violent struggle is more about political power and historical hatred against exploitation by unscrupulous politicians. More importantly, while the violent struggle broke out in 1992, there was no so-called civilizational coalition emerging. In Huntington's terms, Germany and many of its European allies had civilization ties to Croatia, Russia to Serbia, and Turkey and Islamic states to the Bosnian Muslims. However, while Serbs fought against Croats and both Serbs and Croats against Muslims, no escalation of conflicts happened at all (Matlock, 1999). Most counties simply treated Bosnia irrelevant to their core national interests and took no actions. While this did not mean that there was no political mobilization based on cultural and religious identities in those "kin-counties" in relation to Bosnia, it nonetheless shows that the politics of civilizations was only secondary.

Huntington (1993, b) insists that the clash of civilizations should be considered as the main paradigm of understanding the Post-Cold War world order. However, there is increasing empirical studies showing that the clash of civilizations perspective in general is more misleading than illustrative. Henderson (1997, 1998) finds only a modest role for cultural differences in explaining conflict during 1950-1989. Gurr (1994) shows that among the 50 most serious political conflicts during 1993-1994, only 18 conflicts fell across Huntington's civilization division. Gurr's (2000) finds that what many imagine to be a recent increase in ethno-national wars worldwide actually began in the 1960s and dropped considerably in the mid-1990s from its peak a few years earlier (Russet, Oneal and Cox, 2000). More recently, Tusicisny (2004) concludes that the relationship between civilization difference and duration of

conflict is not statistically significant. Contradicting Huntington's hypothesis, he finds that the frequency of conflict between the Islamic and Confucian civilizations and the West remains marginal among all conflicts. Based on these empirical studies, it is reasonable to question whether the clash of civilization perspective can serve as a sound paradigm to understand the conflicts in the Post-Cold War world. However, as Huntington's thesis is more about anticipating the future, empirical studies about the past data cannot entirely invalidate his claim. From a theoretical point of view, the following section will show that to what extent a clash of civilizations is inevitable in future world politics depends on the relative strength of different sources of political mobilization. Given the prevailing influence of nation-states, global capitalism and global governance based on common liberal values, far from being inevitable, a world of clashes of civilization is unlikely for a foreseeable future.

3. CONSTRAINING FORCES OF A "CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS": NATION-STATE, GLOBAL CAPITALISM, AND GLOBAL GOVERNACE BASED ON COMMON LIBERAL VALUES

In a peculiar way, Huntington privileges broad loyalties to civilizations over more specific ideological, ethnic and other identities. He argues, "The fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural...The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics" (Huntington, 1993a). This view presumes that the cultural and religion identities can override all the other group identities and serve as the major source of political mobilization. However, in reality, nation-states, global capitalism and global governance based on common liberal values are still the major sources of political mobilization in the Post-Cold War world. Although the three major forces are not entirely compatible with each other, they nonetheless share the same feature that they definitely run against a world of clashes of civilizations.

3.1 Nation states as the basic fabric of world politics

Obsessing about the nature of the Post-Cold War world order, Huntington claims in effect that civilization identities are more decisive than nationalism in accounting for sources of conflict (Russet, Oneal and Cox, 2000). Huntington also claims that civilization identity will become the major source of stateness in the sense that states will increasingly define their interests and threats in civilization terms, ally themselves with states with similar or common culture and are more often in conflict with countries of different culture (Huntington, 1996). However, in reality, national identity has been the major source of stateness. According to Breuilly (1993), national homogenization figured prominently in the rise of the modern state system. Since the absolutist period, states have largely been organized on a national basis. It is true that even in the most ethnically homogeneous societies there is not always a complete correspondence between state and nation, but this has not prevented national identity from being the major source of stateness. Indeed, as nationalism is an "imaged" community and can be flexibly

"invented" or adjusted within the framework of nation states (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983; Anderson, 1991), nation states often take active roles to promote nationalism through emphasis on shared symbols and national identity (Breuilly, 1993). In world politics, national interests lie in the core of nation states' foreign policies. Compared to national interests, civilization identity seems strengthless. Taking the Islamic civilization as example, the Islamic world has long been considered as a civilization characterized by a legacy of weak state (Kurth, 1994), but even in this case, interests tied to particular states have repeatedly triumphed over Islamic or pan-Arab sentiments (Russet, Oneal and Cox, 2000).

As national identities are critical for modern nation-states, there is clear inconsistency when Huntington simultaneously admits that national identities will be overridden by civilizational identities and that nation-states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs. Most existing nation states, including those powerful large ones, have been diverse in cultural and religious terms, with countries such as the United States becoming increasingly ethnically and racially complex. In Huntington's definition, civilization is a cultural entity with the religious identity at its heart. Taking it as the major source of stateness will inevitably require dissolving the unification and sovereignty of most current nation states. As a major source of political mobilization, modern nation-states have endeavored to confine domestic cultural and religious conflicts, preventing them from eroding their unification and sovereignty. While Huntington admits that nation states will remain the basic fabric of world politics, he in effect negates the likelihood of a world of clashes of civilizations. What he has proposed as "core states" of civilizations are just fictions in the sense that before these core states such as China, Russia and the United States become purified in civilization terms and fight against each other, they would have been dissolved onto the ash heap of history.

3.2 Taming the passions: the expansion of global capitalism

Another crucial flaw of Huntington's thesis is that he has largely overlooked the expansion of global capitalism and its implications for world politics. He refers to the development of global market economy as a source of the naïve belief on "universal civilization", which is based on the wrong idea that modernization necessarily implies westernization (Huntington, 1996). While modernization may not mean westernization in Huntington's simple "modernization versus westernization" framework, the expansion of global capitalism has nonetheless imposed huge influence on world politics. Indeed, it is an inherent requirement of global capitalism that the cultural and religious differences should be marginalized and political mobilization based solely on cultural and religious identities should be discouraged. As Hirschman (1977) has persuasively pointed out, Capitalism has performed political functions since the very beginning of its expansion, i.e., the spread of commerce and market economy in general are supposed to effectively call upon "interests" to counteract the passions of aggression which are often based on cultural and religious identities. This function has provided strong political arguments for capitalism even before its triumph. As Montesquieu affirms, "The natural effect of commerce is to lead to peace. Two nations that trade together become mutually dependent." (Hirshman,

1977: 80) The so-called "Golden Arches Theorem" has vividly illustrated the modern version of this view, i.e., no two countries both have McDonald's franchises have ever fought a war (Evans, 1997). Indeed, with the explosive growth of multinational firms and international business since the end of the Cold War, an increasing amount of people have been employed by the international firms. They have less and less attachment to a particular country or civilization. Rather, they share a common global capitalism culture (Nolan, 2008). These forces have posed tight constraints on potential mobilization solely based on civilization identities.

Indeed, the expansion of global capitalism has been and will continue to be a tamer of cultural and religious conflicts. It is required by global capitalism that societies should be increasingly homogenous at least in the spheres related to economic transactions and political mobilization based on cultural and religious identities should be marginalized. While cultural and religious conflicts certainly cannot be entirely eliminated by the global commerce and market economy, a clash of civilizations is high improbable given the sweeping influence of global capitalism.

3.3 Improving global governance based on common liberal values

Huntington sharply criticizes the idea that the end of the Cold War meant the end of significant conflict in global politics and the emergence of one relatively harmonious world (Huntington, 1996). According to him, this vision is an illusion, far too divorced from the reality. He is only half-right. It is true that liberal democracy has not universally triumphed and history is far from being ended since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but it is also difficult to deny that improving rather than overthrowing the US-led global governance based on common liberal values has been the mainstream political force in Post-Cold War world. States from different civilizations can peacefully co-exist within the global governance structure.

Global governance based on common liberal value originated from the liberal international order under the US leadership. After World War Two, the US led the creation of universal institutions that "not only invited membership but also brought democracies and market societies closer together" (Ikenberry, 2008). Under the US leadership, these universal institutions built a liberal international order that facilitated the participation and integration of both established great powers, and newly independent states. This structure has also properly functioned after the end of the Cold War in absorbing previously socialist countries. Most of these new comers have accepted important liberal values and has been keen to further transform themselves in order to be more compatible with this order (Ikenberry, 2006, 2008). Within this structure, people have increasingly identified liberal democratic values as the political ideal in the Post-Cold War world, be they belong to Confucian civilization or Islamic civilization. Although the current global governance structure is far from being perfect, the identity of liberal democratic polity has become a dominant source of political mobilization at a global scale. There is no compelling evidence showing that the cultural and religious difference can replace the common commitment of improving global governance based on liberal values (Raskin, et al., 2002; Rajan, 2006).

To summarize, to what extent a clash of civilizations is inevitable depends on the relative strength of different forces of political mobilization. Compared to the major forces such as nationalism, global capitalism, and universal liberalism, political mobilization solely based on the cultural and religion identities remains marginal on the stage of world politics. Indeed, systematically embodied into institutions such as nation-states, global market system, and core international organizations, all major sources of political mobilization in the Post-Cold War world politics run against a clash of civilizations [4]. Far from being inevitable, it seems improbable that clashes of civilizations will take over the world.

4. MARGINALIZE THE POLITICS OF CIVILIZATIONS: THE CASE OF CHINA

In Huntington's imagination, a Confucian-Islamic connection has emerged to challenge western interests, values and powers. As the core state of so-called Confucian or Sinic civilization, China will increasingly define its state interests in Confucian civilization terms and challenge Western civilization (Huntington, 1996). However, a close look at China's case will immediately show that Huntington's perception is wrong.

The influence of Confucianism is limited in modern China. For a long time after the beginning of the 20th century, Confucianism was regarded in China as a negative force and as an obstacle to national development. The New Cultural Movement and the May Fourth Movement in the 1910s initiated scathing criticisms against Confucianism. After that, Chinese elites increasingly viewed anti-Confucianism and rebellions against Chinese traditional culture in general as indispensable to promote China's modernization (Zheng, 1999). Soon after the Chinese Communist Party (the CCP) seized the power in 1949, the new regime launched ferocious attack against Confucianism. For Mao Zedong and many other leaders, Confucianism was the superstructure of feudalism and needed to be ruthlessly eliminated. With several generations of Chinese people being educated under the belief that Confucianism is generally a backward ideology, it can be said that the version of Confucian China has already ceased to exist.

Huntington (1996) has emphasized the significance of so-called "Confucian Renaissance" in the early 1990s. It is true that there is growing self-confidence emerging in China on traditional Confucianism culture during this period. However, these phenomena should mainly be interpreted as restoration of basic respect on Chinese cultural tradition. Huntington (1996) obviously has exaggerated the significance of these phenomena and mistakenly understood them as signs of a clash of civilization between China and the West. Indeed, contrary to Huntington's imagination, Chinese governance so far has never openly claimed Confucianism as the major source of national identity, let alone to define national interest and design foreign

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[4] Huntington (1993, a) imagines that political mobilization based on the civilization identities will take over the major institutions such nation-states and the international organizations. However, as these institutions are manifestations of identities and principles different from cultural and religious identities, they would have been dissolved if civilization identities really rein.

policy in Confucianism terms. In fact, among those active proponents of the "Confucianism Renaissance", most influential ones are oversea Chinese[5].

In terms of culture and religion, China has been a diverse country throughout its history. Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism have co-existed with each other for around one thousand years, most of the time peacefully. Muslim and Christianity have also prospered in China during more recent centuries. For example, recent years have witnessed an explosive growing of Christianity influence in China. According to the *Economist,* a conservative estimate shows that by 2008, there have been around 70 million Christians in Mainland China, almost equivalent to the total number of members of the Chinese Communist Party (74 million). A radical estimate even shows that there have been already 130 million Christian in Mainland China by 2008 (Economist, Oct 2nd 2008). If the radical estimate is true, then around one tenth Chinese have become Christian. In that case, it is highly questionable whether China can still be regarded as a core state of Confucianism civilization in Huntington's terms.

More importantly, no matter what the real balance of different cultural and religious identities is in contemporary China, they have only marginal influence in Chinese politics. Contrary to Huntington's perception, political mobilization based on cultural and religious identities has been entirely marginalized by other major sources of political mobilization in China, i.e., nation-state building, capitalism expansion, and participation into the global governance based on liberal values. First, national identity and patriotism have become the core identity of political actions in China since the end of the Cold War[6]. This was reinforced by the anti-US movement stimulated by the bombing by the US-led NATO forces of the Chinese Embassy in Bergrade. While it is hard to deny the xenophobic aspect of Chinese nationalism, it nonetheless has little to do with Confucianism identity. A crucial mistake that Huntington has made in China's case is that he has wrongly interpreted the relationship between Chinese nationalism and Confucianism identity. While Confucianism can certainly serve as an instrument of building nationalism and patriotism, Chinese government has nevertheless chosen to circumscribe this effect due to Chinese ethical and religious diversity. Indeed, Chinese government officials and intellectuals frequently call China a "unified multinational" state because there are different nationalities within China (Zheng, 1999). Chinese government clearly understands that any narrow-defined nationalism will inevitably erode the state unification and sovereignty. As a result, Chinese has endeavored to build a broadly defined patriotism as official nationalism and use it as a major instrument of nation state building.

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[5] Huntington (1996) repeatedly refers to Lee Kuan Yew as an example of increasing influence of Confucianism identity. However, Lee Kuan Yew is the previous Prime Minister of Singapore and can not represent the opinion of Chinese government. Indeed, he has long been hostile to the Chinese Communist Party and only changed his position in recent decades.

[6] In the 1950s, China rejected nationalism as a "bourgeois ideology" Under the influence of the Soviet Union. In accordance with the Marxism and Leninism doctrines, the CCP followed the principle of internationalism in dealing with international affairs. However, while China abandoned Maoism in the late 1970s, it soon found itself in a spiritual vacuum (Kang, 1994). Within this background, nationalism has become the dominant ideology as a response of the decline of the Maoism faith (Zheng, 1999).

Confucianism has only played a limited role in this process. Second, as economic developmentalism has increasingly become social consensus and political legitimacy in contemporary China, capitalism expansion is an important source of taming potential cultural and religious conflicts. While Huntington (1996) has noticed China's increasing economic power as a result of market reforms, he has overlooked the profound implications of capitalism expansion on Chinese politics. With the market reforms gradually deepening, more and more people have gained vested interests in the process of capitalism expansion. No matter what cultural and religious background they belong to, it is in their interests to maintain a relatively stable social environment. Indeed, in order to guarantee a safe environment for people to make money, political mobilization solely based on cultural and religious identities have been decisively marginalized. Third, in terms of the relationship between China and the West, China has clearly chosen to participate into rather than challenge the west-led liberal international order. China is already a permanent member of the UN Security Council, which gives China the same authority and advantages of "great power exceptionalism" as other permanent members (Ikenberry, 2008). China has joined the WTO and in effect become the major player in the international trade system. The role of China has been increasing in the World Bank and the IMF as well. It seems that rather than initiating a clash of civilization against the west on behalf of Confucianism, China is purposively integrating into the west. As Zheng (2004) has rightly pointed out, the key feature of Chinese modernization is selective importation of Western civilization with innovation. Although modernization does not equal to westernization, for developing countries like China, selectively importing western values, institutions and integrating into western civilization in general are nonetheless at the heart of modernization. Compared to above forces of political mobilization, cultural and religious identities have remained strengthless in political influence. Wherever conflicts based on cultural and religious identities pose substantial threats to the dominant political agenda, they will be decisively suppressed[7].

To conclude, despite increasing influence of cultural and religious identities, the political agenda in China has been dominated by nation-state building, capitalism expansion, and participation into the global governance based on liberal values. The politics of civilizations in Huntington's terms has been decisively marginalized. In a foreseeable future, it seems impossible for China to define its national interests and to design its foreign policies in civilization terms.

5. CONCLUSION

Admitting Huntington's insights in capturing the increasing influence of cultural and religious identities in world politics, this paper nonetheless argues that the "clash of civilization" in

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[7] For example, while the cult "Fa Lun Gong" launched a series of political attacks against the government in the 1990s, the state soon took decisive actions to dissolve the whole "Fa Lun Gong" organization. See Wang and Zheng (2000).

general is a mistaken paradigm in perceiving the Post-Cold War international order. In relation to China's case, this paper argues that to what extent a clash of civilization is inevitable depends on the relative strength of different forces of political mobilization. Although cultural and religious identities have become increasingly important as a source of political mobilization, it cannot override the other major forces for a foreseeable future, i.e., nation-state, global capitalism, and global governance based on common liberal values. Indeed, as major sources of political mobilization, nation-state, global capitalism, and global governance based on common liberal values all run against and will contain the possible happening of a clash of civilizations. First, most existing nation states, including those powerful large ones, have been culturally diverse. They have endeavored to contain domestic cultural conflicts and prevent a clash of civilizations, which would inevitably erode the unification, and sovereignty of existing nation-states. Second, the expansion of global capitalism requires that nations should be increasingly homogenous at least in the spheres related to economic transactions. The current expansion of market economy at a global scale is certainly reducing the passions of aggression based on differential cultural identity. Thirdly, although liberal democracy has not universally triumphed and history is far from being ended since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is undeniable that improving rather than overthrowing the US-led global governance based on common liberal values has been the mainstream political force in Post-Cold War world. As these forces will still dominate world politics in the foreseeable future, a world of clashes of civilizations seems to be improbable.

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