ESSAY

The Myth of the "Civilization State": Rising Powers and the Cultural Challenge to World Order

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"Civilization" is back at the forefront of global policy debates. In recent years, the leaders of major powers, such as Donald Trump in the United States, Xi Jinping in China, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, and Narendra Modi in India, have each stressed the civilizational identity of their respective nation in framing their domestic and foreign policy platforms. In a speech given in Poland in July 2017, Trump asked, "Do we have the desire and the courage to preserve our civilization in the face of those who would subvert and destroy it?"[1] In April 2019, Kiron Skinner, then the director of policy planning at the U.S. State Department, characterized the Trump administration's relationship with China as "a fight with a really different civilization and a different ideology," asserting that "the United States hasn't had that before."[2] Shortly thereafter, President Xi indirectly responded to the U.S. formulation in a speech at the Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations, stating that claiming racial superiority and "insisting on transforming or even replacing other civilisations is stupid in its understanding and disastrous in practice."[3] Xi called upon Asian civilizations to "strengthen cultural confidence" and use "the foundation of the brilliant achievements obtained by our ancestors" in order to reach a "new glory of Asian civilisations."[4] Like Xi, India's Modi, reelected as prime minister, has frequently invoked his country's ancient civilizational achievements in foreign policy speeches.[5] In Turkey, President Erdoğan responded to the perpetrator of the March 2019 terrorist attacks against two mosques in Christchurch in New

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Zealand by asserting that the "remnants of the Crusaders cannot prevent Turkey's rise" and "will not be able to make Istanbul [back into] Constantinople."[6]

Such statements have caused angst and anxiety, particularly in Western media and intellectual circles. Gideon Rachman, the chief foreign affairs commentator for the *Financial Times*, argues that the idea of the "civilization state" might replace the nineteenth-century idea of "nation-state" as the organizing framework of world politics. He sees in such states the rejection of "universal human rights or common democratic standards," and the rise of exclusionary domestic politics.[7] In his recent book on this subject, Christopher Coker examines China, India, Russia, and the Islamic caliphate, and concludes that the rise of the civilization state threatens to extinguish the "dream of liberal civilization."[8]

The idea of a civilization state (or "civilizational state") evokes Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis from the early 1990s.[9] That thesis, if one needs reminding, sparked a global debate that resurfaces every time there is a major international crisis, whether a terrorist attack or an outbreak of interstate and ethnic conflict. From the 9/11 attacks, to the civil war in Syria, to the Russian intervention in Ukraine, to spikes in U.S.-China tensions, pundits and policy-makers in the West have found Huntington's thesis to be a convenient lens for framing international crises.[10] At the same time, Huntington's thesis has been widely criticized and condemned for presenting a simplistic and sensationalistic idea of the world.[11]

World politics has changed since Huntington first presented this thesis over twenty-five years ago, and three global developments that have taken place since then make the new concern about civilizations different. The first is the crisis of the Western-dominated liberal international order, which was not anticipated in the 1990s (quite the opposite; the liberal order had claimed victory in the Cold War and seemed to be ever ascendant). The second is the growing populism afflicting both the West and the non-Western world, a trend that often rides on the back of claims about defending civilizational identity. Third, large Asian countries such as China and India have become much more powerful. Their foreign policies, as well as those of the United States and Turkey, stress civilizational identities to a much greater degree than they did in the 1990s. Given these three developments, the idea of the civilization state may seem to present a broader and more powerful challenge to the existing liberal order than one might initially suspect.

But are the concerns about the rise of the civilization state legitimate or are they unfounded? While Huntington blurred the relationship between civilization and

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state, his perspective remained, in essence, a state-centric one. The civilization-state discourse has the virtue of removing that ambiguity by hyphenating the two concepts, making them one. But like Huntington's thesis, the civilization state also oversimplifies the world's cultural and strategic fault lines and realities.

In this essay, I will provide a historically grounded evaluation of claims about the emergence of civilization states, focusing mainly on the four countries that have recently been the most widely characterized as civilization states: China, India, Turkey, and to a lesser extent Russia. While the atrophy of the U.S.-led liberal order is real (as I forewarned well before Trump's ascent),[12] and there is a distinct danger of intolerance and repression by certain governments using "culture" as a weapon (a danger that is apparent in both Western and non-Western countries), my main argument is that this does not mean the civilization state is displacing the nation-state and resulting in the emergence of a mosaic of competing civilization states bent on self-aggrandizement and mischief making. The political, economic, and strategic realities of world politics, which I will discuss below, set limits to the reach and writ of the civilization state.

The debate over civilizations is highly polarized, and despite supposedly drawing on historical claims, only reflects a short-term consideration of unfolding events, often driven by concerns for regime survival. This short-term outlook neglects or distorts both historical complexities and contemporary realities. Most importantly, it downplays the internal diversity of civilizations. And, regardless, the impulse to create a civilization state is constrained by strategic and economic realities.

Before going further, a few initial points about the civilization state are noteworthy. It is misleading to single out non-Western countries as being particularly susceptible to "civilization-state syndrome." The use of civilization to build a national identity and foreign policy is neither new nor exceptional to non-Western countries. Emerging nation-states and rising powers, whether Western or non-Western, have often invoked national cultural distinctiveness as a way to build national unity. A striking example is the United States. Despite, or perhaps because of, its very short history as a nation-state, America's leaders and intellectuals have never shied away from invoking the distinctiveness and superiority of the country's culture and institutions. In its early years, America's founders associated the country's heritage with European, especially Greco-Roman, civilization. The architectural style of the buildings in the nation's capital (strongly influenced by Thomas Jefferson's taste) provides a visual reminder of this deeply

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mythologized link. American civilization came to be defined in terms of the distinctive traits and institutions that were traced to its early frontier experience. But later, American intellectuals would view their country as a distinctive civilization, compared even to Europe. Thus Frederick Jackson Turner, one of the key proponents of American exceptionalism, argued that the expansion of the westward frontier in the United States produced a "practical, inventive turn of mind," "dominant individualism," and a "buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom." Turner viewed these as distinctively American traits that were not dominant in European civilization.[13]

Civilizational identity has almost always been part of the foreign policy of postcolonial states. The civilizational turn for these states was a conscious reaction to centuries of outright colonial rule or Western domination that used a racist, classist political "standard of civilization" criteria to exclude and marginalize the colonized populations. Among those that were dominated and exploited were two of the world's oldest and most advanced civilizations, China and India. As they entered the international arena facing a deeply unequal political playing field, the leaders of postcolonial states often resorted to their country's classical past to justify independence and project a new identity and voice in world politics.

As noted above, much like Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis, the civilization state discourse ignores the complexity and eclecticism within civilizations. According to Adrian Pabst, civilization states are known by their tendency to "define their countries as distinctive civilisations with their own unique cultural values and political institutions."[14] But civilizational purity or distinctiveness is often an artificial political construct. No civilization is a monolith.

Civilization States of the Modern World

The complex nature of civilizations renders simplistic and problematic the idea of the civilization state as the singular and exclusionary representation of a particular culture. These complexities and characteristics are illustrated by the cases of India, China, Turkey, and Russia.

India

India has often been noted and faulted in the West for its spiritual political culture, as articulated forcefully by early nationalist leaders Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, and Swami Vivekananda. But ancient India was a very eclectic civilization—far from a unified culture. Dominant political philosophies

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combined both idealism and realpolitik, as well as parochialism and tolerance. For example, ancient India's most important text of statecraft, the *Arthashastra* ("The Science of Material Gain"), prescribes "completely practical and unsentimental"[15] policies to conquer enemies and expand territory through such means as war, assassination, and spying. On the other hand, one of ancient India's most revered emperors, Ashoka the Great, emphasized moral statecraft and religious tolerance. During his rule of India from 269–232 BCE, he renounced war to focus on righteous governance.

In the mid-twentieth century, as India's nationalist leaders fought for independence from Britain, they drew on the legacy of the country's ancient civilization to make the case for national liberation. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, though often regarded as a beacon for liberal internationalism, did not hesitate to invoke civilizational history when it suited a political purpose.[16] In a bid to justify India's independence from British rule and to convince Americans who were concerned that an independent India might not be able to stand on its own feet, he wrote the following in an article in *Foreign Affairs* in 1938, seven years before becoming prime minister:

> [While] most Americans . . . sympathize with India's struggle for freedom . . . they are . . . wondering whether it is possible to build a united and progressive nation out of the seemingly infinite diversity that makes up the fabric of Indian life. [Though] India was divided and conquered many times in history . . . always the idea of the political unity of India persisted . . . . Five to six thousand years ago the Indus Valley civilization flourished all over northern India and probably extended to the south also . . . . Since that early dawn of history innumerable peoples, conquerors and settlers, pilgrims and students, have trekked into the Indian plains from the highlands of Asia and have influenced Indian life and culture and art; but always they have been absorbed and assimilated. India was changed by these contacts and yet she remained essentially her own old self.[17]

Though not shy about referencing India's past glory, Nehru was cautious about invoking civilization; as he put it, "We are a conservative people, not over-fond of change, always trying to forget our present misery and degradation in vague fancies of our glorious past and immortal civilisation. But the past is dead and gone and our immortal civilisation does not help us greatly in solving the problems of today."[18]

Today, the government of Narendra Modi is pursuing a Hindu-nationalist agenda that relies on a vision of India as an ancient Hindu civilization, and

that his critics blame for policies such as revoking the special status of Kashmir and enacting a citizenship law that discriminates against Muslim immigrants to India. Yet he faces serious domestic opposition, from both Hindu and Muslim communities, and his hold on power is already beginning to wane after a series of losses in state elections. As will be discussed below, the emergence of the civilization state is closely tied to the regime politics of the ruling party of the day and should therefore not be taken for granted as a permanent phenomenon.

China

As Lucian W. Pye once famously put it, "China is a civilization pretending to be a state."[19] Like India, political thought and practice in ancient China was far from monolithic. Confucianism, a dominant philosophy of Chinese civilization, stresses ruling by virtue and leading by example, and that it is the ruler's responsibility to ensure people's welfare and maintain peace and order in exchange for their loyalty and obedience. But during the lead up to the creation of China's first empire under Qin Shi Huang, Confucianism, which was partly based on the idea of "mandate of heaven" developed under the earlier Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE), was rejected by "legalism." This school of thought emphasized domestic rule by law with harsh punishment; the development of a centralized, efficient, and absolutist state; and the ceaseless quest of expansion through conquest. Legalist thought dominated the political outlook of the relatively short rule of the Qin dynasty from 221–207 BCE. The next unifier of China, the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), combined Confucian ideals and the legalist emphasis on law and political centralization, which has remained important to China's political culture ever since.

The Chinese nationalist leaders who helped to eventually overthrow the country's imperial system were nevertheless not shy about invoking its civilizational past. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nationalist leader Sun Yat-sen stressed the distinctiveness and superiority of Chinese and Asian civilizations. As he put it, "While materially the Orient is far behind the Occident, morally the Orient is superior to the Occident." He contrasted the Confucian ideals of Chinese and Oriental civilization from that of the West, claiming that "Oriental civilization is the rule of Right; Occidental civilization is the rule of Might. The rule of Right respects benevolence and virtue, while the rule of Might only respects force and utilitarianism. The rule of Right always influences people with justice and reason, while the rule of Might always oppresses people with brute force

and military measures."[20] While leaders such as Mao Zedong, who drew explicitly on Marxist ideology rather than historical Chinese thought, would later disparage Confucianism, blaming it for China's backwardness, this changed with the reform era that began under Deng Xiaoping. Subsequent Chinese leaderships—especially under Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping—have made frequent references not only to Confucianism but also to the earlier tradition of *tianxia* ("all under heaven"), which also dates back to the Zhou dynasty.

Some Chinese academics have developed the *tianxia* concept as an alternative to the currently dominant Westphalian model. While the Westphalian model is founded on the nation-state and views international competition (anarchy) as natural, *tianxia* is presented as the basis of "an all-inclusive world"[21] and a more cooperative order, if not a world government under Chinese rule.

Yet, critics (both Western and Asian) of China's attempt to invoke its civilizational identity argue that it might revive the tributary system as a new form of imperialism over neighboring states. That system, which started with the Han dynasty and reached its peak with the Ming (1368–1644 CE) and Qing (1644–1911/12 CE) dynasties, was not an outright imperial order but a hierarchical system that allowed tributary states to acknowledge China's cultural superiority in exchange for the privilege of officially trading with China without surrendering their sovereignty. Despite fears about China reviving that system in a modern form, this would be dauntingly difficult given that today, unlike in the past, the country is surrounded by other major powers. Chinese leadership also remains a staunch defender of Westphalian sovereignty, especially when confronted with challenges from Western powers. In reality, then, China is more likely to balance any temptation to create a civilization state with the strategic necessity of keeping within the Westphalian nation-state model.

Turkey

Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is seemingly turning to an Islamic civilizational identity. But unlike India and China, Turkey is not a civilization in and of itself but part of a larger civilizational complex under Islam. It does not and cannot claim a uniquely Islamic past because Islam has had multiple political centers across countries and continents throughout history,[22] including the Umayyad caliphate in Syria, the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad, the Western caliphate in Córdoba, Spain, the Fāṭimid caliphate in Egypt, the Ottoman empire in Istanbul, and the Mughal dynasty in Delhi. Despite the basic unity among

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Islam's core beliefs and practices, this multipolarity has resulted in a civilizational umbrella of considerable diversity; Turkey under Ottoman rule was but one among many historical centers of Islamic civilization.

The internal diversity of Islam has affected Turkey's potential turn as a civilization state. Some Islamic concepts, such as the *umma* ("community of believers") and Islamic theology's distinction between the *dar al-harb* ("territory of war") and *dar al-Islam* ("territory of Islam"), have been cited as too exclusionary to be compatible with the idea of a nation-state. But these last two ideas were not original to Islam, and are actually interpreted and operationalized differently in various local centers of Islam, including Turkey. Western understandings of Islam overlook not only this internal diversity but also the fact that Islam is adaptable to the norms and principles of world politics,[23] including the idea of *dar al-ahd* ("realm of treaties"), which suggests peace and coexistence with the non-Muslim world.[24]

A secular streak was foundational to the modern Turkish nation. Rather than simply drawing on an Islamic past, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, who held power from 1923 to 1938, invoked Turkey's *multiple* cultural and civilizational pasts as the basis for new Turkish domestic and foreign policy. As he put it, "Culture is the foundation of the Turkish Republic," and "We shall make the expansion and rise of Turkish culture in every era the mainstay of the Republic." He presented Turkey's civilizational heritage not just as Islamic but also as comprising the ancient cultures of the Hittite, Phrygian, and Lydian peoples, among others, which inhabited the Anatolian region before the Ottoman conquest.[25] He also sought to reconcile nationalism with cosmopolitanism. This highlights that equating a civilization state with a single civilization is misguided; it may be more accurate to imagine a multicivilization state. Overall, modern Turkey under Atatürk rejected an Islamic, traditional Ottoman identity in favor of a secular, modernist one. He argued that "the Ottoman Empire began to decline the day when, proud of her success against the West, she cut the ties that bound her to the European nations. We will not repeat this mistake"[26]

While Turkey under Erdoğan has embraced a more Islamic civilizational identity, there remain strong tensions between his approach and the surviving Kemalist forces, which reject the Islamization of Turkish national identity. Hence, Turkey's civilizational turn is likely to feature a contest and coexistence between traditionalist and secular modernist forces, not unlike the coexistence of divergent traditions in China and India.

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Turkey is a reminder that non-Western countries may be turning to civilizational nationalism in response to the West's rejection and/or belittling of their countries, cultures, and leaders. A case in point is the Western European opposition to Ankara's bid to join the European Union. In 2002, former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who chaired the drafting of a constitution for the EU (which was rejected), opposed Turkey's admission to the EU because it had "a different culture, a different approach, a different way of life."[27] In 2007, Erdoğan vented his anger at French president Nicolas Sarkozy for opposing Turkey's admission to the EU: "If we are going to integrate civilizations inside the European Union, and say that the European Union is not a Christian club, Sarkozy has to look at his thoughts once more."[28] It is not difficult to find examples of bias, stereotyping, condescension, and outright hostility from Western intellectuals, media, and leaders toward the past and present cultures and civilizations of non-Western countries. This further fuels their turns toward nationalism and civilizational identity.

Russia

Compared to India and China, Russia is a much more recent political and civilizational entity. The Russian Empire was established in 1721 CE, although Russian political history started with the founding of the Rurik dynasty in 862 CE. Russia's traditional civilization has been shaped by its Slavic identity and the Russian Orthodox Church. Russia's civilizational narrative, at least in the minds of some intellectuals and religious and political leaders, includes its claim to be the "third Rome," following the fall of the second Roman Empire to the Ottomans in 1453 CE, and the fall of the first Roman Empire in 476 CE.

Like that of Turkey, Russia's current civilizational turn—indeed the rise of Putinism—came about after a period of flirting with greater integration with Western Europe. After the end of the Cold War, Russia opened up considerably to being part of the community of Europe and the West more broadly, even showing some interest in joining NATO, which, along with the European Union, represented a distinctive Western identity while incorporating Eastern and Central European states. More recently, however, political discourse in Russia has become much more historical and inward looking, taking on a distinctively civilizational bent. A confluence of factors has contributed to this, including diplomatic slights from Western Europe and the United States, the rise of domestic nationalism triggered in part by Russia's post–Cold War loss of power and prestige, and the

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ascendancy of a strong-man president, Vladimir Putin, who leveraged these other factors to consolidate his authoritarian rule. There has emerged a sense of being spurned by the West among Russian elites and citizens, partly on cultural grounds, a feeling aggravated by the geopolitical affront of NATO and the EU expansion to Russia's doorstep. Putin himself was even at the receiving end of insulting remarks from U.S. president Barack Obama, who likened him to "a bored kid in the back of a classroom."[29] The resulting discourse has stressed Russia's location and culture as a Eurasian, rather than European, nation; rejected Western values; and even revived Tsarist-era claims of being the defender and successor to the Roman Empire.[30]

Not Your Grandfather's Civilizational Discourse

Looking back at the rhetoric of nationalist leaders of newly formed and postcolonial states, such as Atatürk, Sun Yat-sen, and Nehru, one recognizes a relative moderation in their embrace of civilizational identity, which in turn reflects the historical context in which they were operating. As leaders of countries that were fighting Western dominance (direct colonial rule in the case of India), they had to unite different cultural and ethnic groups. They also simultaneously needed help from the West, which required rising above cultural parochialism. Their civilizational rhetoric was thus more open minded than that of Xi, Modi, and Erdoğan, who today rule over countries that are more powerful and self-reliant. But this does not mean the latter are inward-looking isolationists. India, China, and Turkey still pursue internationalist foreign policies while often invoking civilization as a means to gain greater respect and recognition in a Western-dominated world. A civilizational identity does not imply resistance to integration with the rest of the world.

In considering the rise of the civilization state, we must keep in mind two other factors that limit and constrain it. One is that the motivation for leaders to invoke civilizational state discourse is often closely tied to regime security. The other is the imperative of forming economic and strategic linkages with countries across civilizational divides.

Regime Maintenance

There is no denying that the present regimes of some of the countries identified as civilization states are showing increased tendencies toward religious intolerance and political repression. It is also evident that they are facing growing economic

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and political challenges. In the past decade, well before the COVID-19 pandemic, the overall economic performance of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China; the last three being identified as civilization states) have declined significantly, with Putin's Russia faring the worst. Whereas the four BRIC countries (South Africa only joined later, in 2010) had a share of 11 percent of world GDP in 1990, by 2014 (after South Africa had joined) their share increased to around 30 percent, with China leading the pack.[31] But their annual growth rate declined from an average of 9 percent in 2010 to about 4 percent in 2015.[32] From 2014 to 2017, Russia's growth rate fell precipitously, from 7.69 percent to –0.77 percent, with a 3.7 percent decline in 2015 alone.[33] Though Russia rebounded somewhat in 2018, achieving 2.3 percent growth, largely due to energy construction and hosting soccer's World Cup, its outlook for 2019–2021 is described by the World Bank as "modest."[34] As a result, Putin has faced growing popular political frustration and protest. Even China and India, despite having maintained good overall economic performance, faced a host of challenges: declining economic growth in the former and "jobless growth" in the latter. In Turkey, after a period of buoyant growth, Erdoğan has faced both economic debt and declining growth, while the political challenge to his regime has increased, as evident in the 2016 alleged "coup" attempt against him.

It is well documented that leaders facing declining economies and crises of legitimacy often turn to repression. In the above cases, it also seems no coincidence that such regimes, faced with poor, stagnating, or declining economic records and political opposition, began turning toward civilizational rhetoric. For leaders who have outlived their initial political support and legitimacy, invoking civilizational identity can be a way to shore up domestic positions and regime survival.

Hence, a civilization state may be more accurately described as a "civilization regime." Regimes, of course, are not permanent and they do not always succeed in using civilizational identity to remain in power. History and culture can be a double-edged instrument in the domestic politics of states; while an authoritarian regime may use them to bolster political control, its opponents can use the very same ideas to challenge it.

This contradiction lies at the heart of the civilization state. A regime invoking civilization to justify authoritarianism may invite countermoves by its domestic opponents, who may use similar tactics but draw on alternative historical and cultural strands to justify their opposition. After all, states and regimes do not have a monopoly on civilizational ideas. Intellectuals and civil society actors regularly

invoke them when justifying their positions and campaigns as well. For example, Indian intellectuals often invoke the religious tolerance of Ashoka to challenge Hindu nationalism. And at least some Chinese intellectuals invoke the humane authority of Confucian philosophy in ancient China as a warning not to overstep state authority through domestic repression and international ambition. Similarly, Islamic intellectuals invoke religious texts to preach tolerance and peaceful change, and often to challenge the policies of ruling regimes. Civilization state and universal humanistic norms are not mutually exclusive.

Further, it is wrong, both factually and morally, to equate a regime's political ideology with that of the civilizational values of the country. As discussed earlier, the way that pundits discuss the rise of civilization-state ideology tends to contrast Western "liberal universal values" with the parochialism of non-Western civilizations, thereby rekindling the false "West versus the rest" debate. Every civilization, Western or non-Western, is a combination of attractive and ugly traits. The civilization-state discourse not only obscures many of the universal values of non-Western civilizations—which can include openness, nonexclusion, and tolerance—but also the possibility of building common ground between their values and those of the West. Just because a regime selectively invokes its country's civilization as a way to counter Western dominance does not mean these non-Western cultures do not offer universal humanistic values that the West can learn from.[35] When one hears civilization-based concepts such as *tianxia* with a nod toward global dominance from leaders in China; the exclusionary *hindutva* philosophy from Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party in India; or the historical achievements of Islam invoked in competition with the West from the leaders of Islamic countries such as Turkey, this should not obscure the fact that there are plenty of elements in Chinese, Indian, and Islamic civilizations that uphold what are often considered universal ethical principles of justice, benevolence, openness, humane governance, and representation of people's voices. This is true in the reverse direction as well. A prime example is the Trump administration adopting policies on immigration, human rights, and equity (in health care, for example) that are a violation of the ethical principles that are viewed as foundations of Western European civilization.

Economic and Strategic Imperatives

Economic and strategic factors not only can contribute both to bringing about peace and to fomenting conflict but also can limit the role of civilization as an

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independent force in shaping the world order. Consider: despite civilizational friction, the EU is Turkey's number-one import and export partner and largest source of foreign direct investment by a long shot.[36] Similarly, the energy and labor links between India and the Islamic countries of the Gulf, such as Saudi Arabi, Iraq, Iran, and the UAE, are too substantial to be undercut by civilizational frictions. India depends on these countries for oil and is also the largest source of manpower to the Persian Gulf States, the result of the latter distrusting workers from other Arab nations whom they fear might bring in radical antimonarchist and radical-Islamic ideology.[37] These deep economic connections, along with a trade volume of over $100 billion, are likely major reasons why these Islamic countries had a very muted reaction to India's decision to end the special status in the Indian constitutional system of the Muslim-majority province of Kashmir.[38] Since pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism imply civilizational unity, one would expect the Persian Gulf States to be supporting Kashmir more vocally and to be relying on labor from other Arab states rather than India. But economic and strategic factors take precedence in both cases. Similarly, India's "multialignment" policy cuts across civilizational affinities, leading the country to develop close strategic ties with Russia, increasingly deeper military links with the United States, and economic ties with Iran and the Persian Gulf States. Bangladesh, the world's third-largest Muslim-majority state, enjoys close political ties with India.

Economic ties, including those formed through China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the attendant diplomatic and economic pressure from Beijing, have played a major role in the Islamic nations' lack of criticism of China's treatment of the Uighurs in Xinjiang. Turkey was a notable exception in expressing direct criticism of China, calling the "reeducation camps" for Uighurs in Xinjiang a "great shame for humanity," and calling on the UN to "take effective measures in order to bring to an end to this human tragedy in Xinjiang."[39] But after meeting with Xi in July 2019, Erdoğan hedged, calling for "a solution to this issue that takes into consideration the sensitivities on both sides."[40] Prime Minister Imran Khan of Pakistan, the beneficiary of the most ambitious BRI project of all, first declared disingenuously that he "didn't know much" about the Xinjiang issue,[41] but later admitted that his refusal to criticize China was due to the economic help Pakistan received from China. Meanwhile, Pakistan's foreign minister accused the media of "trying to sensationalize" the Xinjiang issue.[42] This illustrates how economic ties spill over into political/strategic alignment, which in turn

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challenges the logic of the civilization state. China-Pakistan relations combine economic investment and strategic access to Gwadar port, and help Pakistan to move away from dependence on the United States.

Economic factors may also explain why the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the most important grouping of Islamic nations, went so far as to issue a report that "commends the efforts of the People's Republic of China in providing care to its Muslim citizens; and looks forward to further cooperation between the OIC and the People's Republic of China."[43] This is in sharp contrast to its stringent criticism of Myanmar for its persecution of the Rohingya.

Finally, the logic of civilization states often conflicts with their strategic alignments. The deepened strategic partnership between Russia and China in recent years is a case in point. Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi stated that China-Russia relations "set an example 'beyond compare,'" while the world was "in chaos and disorder."[44] According to then–director of national intelligence Dan Coats, "China and Russia are more aligned than at any point since the mid-1950s."[45] But this has little to do with civilization. Not only do China and Russia belong to quite distinct civilizations, but there is less civilizational affinity between them than between China and Japan, or China and India. The current Sino-Russian alignment has more to do with economic, military, and political factors, including regime security, shared authoritarianism, and opposition to U.S. global dominance. Both countries resent the respective U.S. economic sanctions against them as well as the (real or perceived) U.S. support for forces antagonistic to their territorial interests (including Ukraine and the South China Sea). They both further bristle at the stated U.S. goal of regime change in countries such as Syria and Iran, Trump's bellicose rejection of the Iran nuclear deal, and, in China's case, the U.S. opposition to BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Hence, while the Sino-Russian "relationship is indeed growing across military, economic, and political dimensions, it is still more anchored in shared grievances than in common visions."[46]

Conclusion

The interest in and study of civilizations in world politics is welcome and can enrich the study and analysis of world politics and order, especially as the era of the dominance of Western civilization is nearing its end, and the rise and

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reemergence of civilizational powers, particularly China and India, are accelerating. In a previous essay for this journal, I characterized the emerging world order as a "multiplex."[47] A multiplex world is inherently a multicivilizational world. In this multiplex world, one can no longer understand global affairs in terms of the dominance of Western civilization. In a global multiplex, world order is ideally the product of interactions and mutual learning among different civilizations and states, rather than a clash between Western "liberal civilization" and non-Western civilization states. I do not argue that world politics would be free of conflict or that cultural differences would not figure in the conflicts that do exist. But to attribute that conflict to civilization states in the non-Western world pursuing competitive and exclusionary identities and rejecting universalism is a vast oversimplification.

The civilization state concept sets up a false binary between the East and the West. Despite, as discussed above, some use of civilizational rhetoric from Trump, much of the current Western discourse about the civilization state centers on a select group of non-Western countries: China, India, Turkey, and Russia. This discourse often implies that the values of these states are to be suspected as reactionary and toxic. Proponents of this view overlook the traditional universal values of these and other non-Western civilizations—including openness, nonexclusion, and tolerance—and foreclose the possibility of building common ground between these values and those of the West. In its current form, the civilization state discourse does more to obfuscate than illuminate. We should not allow this discourse to create an analytical straitjacket that overemphasizes the negative role of culture and demonizes the rise of non-Western nations. We need a more nuanced dialogue, one that recognizes not only differences but also common values among civilizations, Western or non-Western, and harnesses them to overcome the myriad global challenges that we face today.

NOTES

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Abstract: "Civilization" is back at the forefront of global policy debates. The leaders of rising powers such as China, India, Turkey, and Russia have stressed their civilizational identity in framing their domestic and foreign policy platforms. An emphasis on civilizational identity is also evident in U.S. president Donald Trump's domestic and foreign policy. Some analysts argue that the twenty-first century might belong to the civilization state, just as the past few centuries were dominated by the nation-state. But is the rise of civilization state inevitable? Will it further undermine the liberal international order and fuel a clash of civilizations, as predicted by the late Samuel Huntington? Or might ideas from East Asian and other non-Western civilizations contribute to greater pluralism in our thinking about world order and the study of international relations?

Keywords: civilization, civilization states, clash of civilizations thesis, liberal international order, multiplex world, rising powers, China, India, Russia, Turkey