Timo Alexander Graf

The Clash of Perceptions

Testing the “Clash of Civilizations” with Global Survey Data
# Table of Contents

**Foreword** 17

## I  General Introduction

1. The “Clash of Civilizations” 19
2. Previous Empirical Tests of the “Clash of Civilizations” 20
3. The Need for a Re-Examination of the “Clash of Civilizations” 21
4. The Need for an Alternative Outcome Measure 23
5. The “Clash of Perceptions” 26
6. Research Questions 27
7. Methodology 30
   7.1 Proposed Macro-Level Analysis 32
   7.2 Proposed Micro-Level Analysis 32
   7.3 Experiment vs. Survey: Advantages and Disadvantages 33
8. Goals of the Study 34
9. Overview of the Study 35

## II  The “Clash of Civilizations:”

**A Review of Theory and Evidence**

1. Introduction 37
2. What are “Civilizations”? 38
   2.1 Civilizations vs. Civilization: A Clarification 39
   2.2 Civilizations: Cultures Writ Large and Imagined Communities 39
   2.3 The Nature of Civilizational Identities 40
   2.4 The Meaning of Civilizational Identification 41
   2.5 Identifying Civilizations 42
   2.6 The Structure of Civilizations 45
   2.7 Driving Factors: Culture vs. Power 46
   2.8 Section Summary 48
3. What Does Huntington Mean by “Clash”? 48
4. The Central Hypotheses of the “Clash of Civilizations” 50
   4.1 The Predicted Pattern of Intercivilizational Relations 50
   4.2 What Drives the “Clash of Civilizations” at the Macro Level? 53
   4.3 The West versus “the Rest”? 55
### Table of Contents

5. Why Should Intercivilizational Relations be Prone to Conflict? 57
6. Previous Empirical Tests of the “Clash of Civilizations” 60
   6.1 Clash of Civilizations? 63
   6.2 The West versus “the Rest”? 64
   6.3 The West versus the Islamic Civilization? 65
   6.4 The West versus the Sinic Civilization? 66
   6.5 Critical Summary of Previous Empirical Tests of the CoC 67

### III Theoretical Framework:
From “Clash of Civilizations” to “Clash of Perceptions”

1. Introduction 69
2. Why Should We Test the CoC with Perceptions as the Outcome Measure? 70
   2.1 The “Clash of Perceptions” from Huntington’s Point of View 71
   2.2 The Limitations of Violence as an Outcome Measure 72
   2.3 The Global Public Sphere and the Changing Nature of Public Diplomacy 74
   2.4 The Effect of Public Opinion on (Foreign) Policy-Making 76
   2.5 The Contextual Need for Cognitive Heuristics 77
   2.6 Individual-Level Consequences of Out-Group Perceptions 78
   2.7 The CoC as a Frame and Self-Fulfilling Prophecy 81
3. Conceptualizing the Dependent Variable: Out-Group Perceptions 83
   3.1 Stereotype Content Model 83
   3.2 Image Theory 86
   3.3 Comparing the Structure of Images and Stereotypes 90
   3.4 Synthesis 91
4. Theoretical Framework of the Macro-Level Analysis 92
   4.1 Huntington: The “Cultural” Factor 95
   4.2 The “Realist” Factor: Power 101
   4.3 The “Liberal” Factor: Joint Democracy 105
   4.4 The “Geographical” Factor: Direct Contiguity 108
   4.5 The “Historical” Factor: Cold War Legacy? 109
   4.6 Integrative Model Proposed for Empirical Testing 110
5. Theoretical Framework of the Micro-Level Analysis 111
   5.1 Integrated Threat Theory: Point of Departure 113
   5.2 In-Group Identification 117
     5.2.1 Huntington 117
     5.2.2 Social Identity Theory 118
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.2.3 Social Categorization Theory</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.4 Uncertainty Identity Theory</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.5 A Word on the Salience of Civilizational Identities</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 The Intergroup Context</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.1 Stereotype Content Model</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.2 Image Theory</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.3 A Brief Comment on Image Theory and SCM</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Direct Intergroup Contact</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5 The Effect of the Mass Media</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5.1 The Role of the Mass Media in the Sociocultural Approach</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to Studying Stereotypes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5.2 Mass Mediated Representations of Intergroup Contact as Vicarious</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5.3 The Attribute Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6 Integrative Model Proposed for Empirical Testing</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### IV Macro-Level Analysis: “Clash of Perceptions” at the Macro Level?

1. Introduction                                                      | 145  |
2. The PEW Global Attitudes Project 2007                              | 146  |
3. Measuring Perceptions of Foreign Countries with the GAP 2007       | 149  |
4. Proposed Analyses                                                 | 152  |
   4.1 Descriptive Analysis                                           | 152  |
   4.2 Multivariate Analysis                                          | 153  |
   4.3 Differences between the Descriptive and the Multivariate Analyses | 153  |
5. Constructing the Dependent Variables                               | 155  |
   5.1 Descriptive Analysis                                           | 155  |
   5.2 Dyadic Regression Analysis                                     | 157  |
6. Descriptive Analysis: The Nature of Intercivilizational Perceptions | 159  |
   6.1 The Observed Pattern of Intercivilizational Public Perceptions | 160  |
   6.2 “Clash of Perceptions” Without Core States?                    | 165  |
   6.3 To What Extent Was Huntington Right?                           | 168  |
   6.4 Focusing on the “Big Players”                                   | 169  |
7. Multivariate Analysis: Testing the Key Hypotheses of the CoC       | 171  |
   7.1 Variables in the Analysis                                      | 171  |
      7.1.1 Dependent Variable                                         | 172  |
      7.1.2 Control Variables                                          | 172  |
7.1.2.1 Superpower Involvement 172
7.1.2.2 Joint Democracy 173
7.1.2.3 Cold War Opposition 173
7.1.2.4 Direct Contiguity 176
7.2 Testing Hypothesis 1: Clash of Civilizations? 176
   7.2.1 Descriptive Analysis 176
   7.2.2 Multivariate Analysis 178
7.3 Testing Hypothesis 2: West vs. Rest? 180
   7.3.1 Descriptive Analysis 181
   7.3.2 Multivariate Analysis 181
7.4 Testing Hypothesis 3: West vs. Islam and West vs. Sinic? 183
   7.4.1 Descriptive Analysis 183
   7.4.2 Multivariate Analysis 184
8. Discussion of Findings 185
   8.1 Is There a “Clash of Perceptions” Along the Lines of Huntington’s CoC? 185
   8.2 What Drives the Conflict Potential of International Public Perceptions? 187
   8.3 Is the West the “Focal Point” of Intercivilizational Conflict? 190
   8.4 Are Western-Islamic and Western-Sinic Perceptions Particularly Conflict-Prone? 192

V Micro-Level Analysis: Individual-Level Determinants of Civilizational Out-Group Images

1. Introduction 195
2. The Survey 196
   2.1 Why Use Amazon MTurk? 197
   2.2 Who Are the “Workers”? 198
   2.3 Payment and Data Quality 199
   2.4 Ensuring Data Quality 201
   2.5 Structure of the Survey 201
3. The Sample 203
4. Measures 205
   4.1 Out-Group Images 205
      4.1.1 Operationalization 205
      4.1.2 Model Fit and Scale Reliabilities 209
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1.3 Convergent Validity</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 In-Group Identification</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1 Operationalization</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.2 Model Fit and Scale Reliability</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.3 Convergent Validity</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Direct Intergroup Contact</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Perceived Cultural Distance</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Perceived Relative Power</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6 Perceived Current Intergroup Relations</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7 Perceived Mass Mediated Image</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Descriptive Analysis</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Group Images</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Identification with the Civilizational In-Group</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Direct Intergroup Contact</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Perceived Current Intergroup Relations</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5 Perceived Cultural Distance</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6 Perceived Relative Power</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7 Perceived Mass Mediated Image</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Multivariate Analysis</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Model Fit</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 The Effect of In-Group Identification on Out-Group Images</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 The Effect of Direct Intergroup Contact on Out-Group Images</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4 The Perceived Intergroup Context and Its Effects on Out-Group Images</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5 The Effects of Mass Mediated Images</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6 Explained Variance</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Discussion of Findings</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1 Out-Group Images Roughly Conform to Huntington’s Expectations</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2 In-Group Identification Matters But Its Effect is More Complicated than Expected</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3 Perceived Intergroup Relations Emerge as the Strongest Predictor</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4 Perceived Cultural Distance as an Additional Threat Assessment</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5 Perceived Relative Power Only Affects the Images of “Poor” Out-Groups</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6 The Effect of Intergroup Contact Matters, Most of the Time</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7 Media Representations Matter, Especially When Direct Intergroup Contact is Lacking</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
VI General Discussion and Conclusion

1. Introduction 239
2. Is there a “Clash of Perceptions” at the Macro Level? (Hypothesis 1) 241
3. Is the West the “Focal Point” of Clashing Perceptions? (Hypothesis 2) 242
4. Are Western-Sinic and Western-Islamic Public Perceptions Particularly Conflict-Prone? (Hypothesis 3) 244
5. What Determines the Conflict Potential of International Public Perceptions? 245
   5.1 Superpower Involvement 245
   5.2 Direct Contiguity 246
   5.3 Joint Democracy 247
   5.4 Cold War Legacy? 247
6. “Clash of Superpowers”? 249
7. Exploring the Social-Psychological Underpinnings of the CoC 250
   7.1 Civilizational In-Group Identification 251
   7.2 Perceived Intergroup Relations 253
   7.3 Direct Intergroup Contact 254
   7.4 Mass Mediated Images 255
8. Is the “Clash of Civilizations” a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy? 256
9. Practical Implications 258
   9.1 Practical Implications for Public Diplomacy 259
      9.1.1 US-Muslim Public Perceptions 259
      9.1.2 China-US Public Perceptions 261
      9.1.3 Western European Public Perceptions of China 262
      9.1.4 Sino-Japanese Public Perceptions 262
   9.2 Improving Images 263
      9.2.1 Direct Intergroup Contact 263
      9.2.2 Mass Media 264
10. Methodological Reflections 266
   10.1 Using Crowdsourcing for Survey Research 266
   10.2 The Universal Image Scale 266
11. Shortcomings and Suggestions for Future Research 267
   11.1 The Time Factor 267
   11.2 The MTürk Sample 268
   11.3 Need for Multilevel Analyses? 268
   11.4 Greater Complexity at the Individual Level 269
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11.5 More Fine-Grained Analyses of Perceptions of Intergroup Conflict</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.6 More Conflict Out There?</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.7 When Intergroup Contact is Lacking: The Power of the Mass Media</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>References</strong></td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Foreword

One of the most popular, influential, and controversial paradigms for explaining international and intergroup conflict in the post-Cold War era has been the “Clash of Civilizations” by Samuel P. Huntington, which emphasizes the importance of cultural identification as a determinant of conflict. The post-Cold War era has indeed been rife with international conflicts, many of which – from the Kosovo war, through the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, to the war in Ukraine – have been interpreted as evidence in support of Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations.” Since its first publication in 1993, Huntington’s work has been cited almost 35,000 times and has been translated into no less than 39 languages. What is more, there is empirical evidence to suggest that the global mass media have promoted the “Clash of Civilizations” as a popular frame for interpreting global conflict phenomena, thus establishing its salience outside academia. Precisely because of its popularity, however, it is feared that the “Clash of Civilizations” could one day become a self-fulfilling prophecy by shaping people’s perceptions, which may translate into actions.

But do people really think along the lines of Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations”? Are the mutual public perceptions of Muslims and Westerners truly antagonistic? Is the Western civilization the focal point of perceived conflict? What role does cultural identification play in shaping the stereotypes of cultural out-groups and foreign countries? By answering these questions, the “Clash of Perceptions” offers not only a new perspective on our understanding of the “Clash of Civilizations” and its potential impact around the world, but it also provides new insights into the very causes of international and intergroup conflict. Significantly, researching people’s perceptions helps to find ways for intervention and perhaps even conflict prevention.

The historical and social scientific analysis of international conflict has traditionally been one of the primary research foci of the Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr (ZMSBw, Bundeswehr Center of Military History and Social Sciences). However, with international relations becoming increasingly tense and fragile in recent years, the ZMSBw recognizes the need to intensify its research on current issues of international conflict and security even further. The social scientists at the ZMSBw conduct important research in this regard as they generate implications for policymakers and scholars alike. Bearing these thoughts in mind, it becomes evident that the “Clash of Perceptions” fits the research agenda of the ZMSBw perfectly.

With its interdisciplinary and holistic research approach, the “Clash of Perceptions” exemplifies the social scientific competence of the ZMSBw in the best way possible. Hence, I would like to congratulate the author on his work,
which demonstrates methodological excellence and sophistication across various disciplines, develops a truly integrative theory, and provides a rare empirical test at the global level. Moreover, the findings are highly relevant to many of today’s discourses about international conflict. Finally, I would like to thank the publications department at the ZMSBw for the outstanding job in copy-editing, designing the tables and illustrations, and for realizing this publication in the book series “Social Science Studies.”

I hope that the “Clash of Perceptions” will be well received within the academic and policy communities.

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I  General Introduction

1. The “Clash of Civilizations”

The Cold War with its inherent logic of bipolarity and power politics had dominated both academic research and practical thinking about international relations for four decades when it came to an end in 1989. At the time, one of the most prominent visions of what the post-Cold War era in international politics could look like was formulated by Francis Fukuyama who predicted the absolute and global victory of economic and political liberalism, which was expected to herald a less conflict-prone era in international relations (Fukuyama, 1989 & 1992). However, Samuel P. Huntington challenged this very notion as early as 1993 with an article entitled “The Clash of Civilizations?” (Huntington, 1993), which was welcomed at first as a “useful corrective to ‘the end of history’ optimism” (Rosecrance, 1998: 980). Huntington proposed the original idea that in the post-Cold War era culture in general and cultural identification in particular would replace ideology as the primary determinant of intergroup relations in general and international relations in particular to the effect that the relations between groups and states belonging to different cultural spheres or “civilizations” would be more conflict-prone than the relations between groups and states that belong to the same civilization. So, contrary to Fukuyama’s optimism, Huntington predicted a future far more conflictual. For him, the end of the Cold War meant neither the end of history nor conflict but a new era of intergroup and interstate conflict shaped by cultural identities. States and groups would continue to fight over territory, material resources, and political influence but the alliances and antagonisms in this new era would be primarily determined by cultural identities.

Huntington’s proposition of a “Clash of Civilizations” (CoC) was received with considerable attention by academics, policymakers, and the mass media alike. Some even went as far as saying that it “sent shockwaves around the world” (Hassner, 1997: 63). Only three years after the article, Huntington published the book “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order” (Huntington, 1996), which provided a more detailed account of the envisioned CoC. To date, the article and the book together have been cited more than 37,000 times, contributing to Huntington’s status as one of the most cited political scientists of all times. As well, the book has been translated into no less than 39 languages.

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1 Citation count according to Google Scholar as of February 1, 2019.
In recent years, both academics and the mass media alike have drawn on Huntington’s ideas in an effort to explain (or frame) events such as: the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Abrahamian, 2003; Kibble, 2002; Kim, 2009; Powell, 2011); the so called Muhammad Cartoon Controversy of 2005/2006 (Eide et al., 2008; Hussain, 2007; Powers, 2008); the terror inflicted upon European nations by the so called “Islamic State” (Poulus, 2016; Rachman, 2015); and the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia that began with Russia’s invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Eran, 2015; Hirsh, 2014; Johnson, 2014; Merry, 2014). Some even argue that the CoC presents a particularly powerful political myth, perhaps “the most powerful of our epoch” (Bottici & Challand, 2006: 322; see also Bottici & Challand, 2010). And while its visibility in the mass media has diminished since 2004 and especially after the death of its author in 2008, the CoC “remains a significant mediated construct, providing a dominant interpreting mechanism of global conflict phenomena” (Bantimaroudis, 2015: 83). More than 20 years have passed since the CoC was first published and yet “it remains a theory with which serious engagement ought to be made” (Barker, 2013: 5).

2. Previous Empirical Tests of the “Clash of Civilizations”

Notwithstanding its intellectual impact and enduring popularity, however, most empirical analyses to date have produced evidence that appears to contradict Huntington’s most central hypothesis: intercivilizational conflict is not more likely than intracivilizational conflict. In fact, some empirical studies show that countries belonging to the same civilization are in fact more likely to be involved in interstate conflict with each other than countries belonging to different civilizations.²

Albeit the empirical evidence against the CoC appears, on the whole, to be rather conclusive, it is actually very constricted in its perspective. This is so because “scholarly work that has tested Huntington’s theoretical predictions has focused exclusively on patterns of militarized interstate dispute, interstate and civil war” (Neumayer & Plümper, 2009: 712). Although intergroup and interstate conflict may also find expression in countless non-violent manifestations, previous empirical tests of the CoC have focused on the most extreme and the rarest manifestation of intergroup conflict: violence.

While it is true that Huntington writes about violent conflict between civilizations, especially between the West and Islam, he does not restrict his discussion (and conception) of the “clash” to violent behavior alone. In fact, Huntington does

² See also Senghaas (2002) and Bilgrami (2003) on the idea of a “clash within civilizations.”