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Beyond the West: Civilizational Narratives and the Struggle for a New Global Order

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AHMET ERDI ÖZTÜRK AND UMUT CAN ADISONMEZ, MAY 27 2025

In September 2022, during a theatrical address at the Kremlin, Russian President Vladimir Putin exclaimed: “And all we hear is, the West is insisting on a rules-based order. Where did that come from anyway? Who agreed to these rules?” In front of a carefully selected audience and in the context of the illegal annexation of Ukrainian territories, Putin did more than challenge Western foreign policy—he rejected the normative legitimacy of the liberal international order altogether. He described Russia not merely as a nation-state but as “a thousand-year-old civilization”.

Putin’s words are not unique in today’s multipolar world. Leaders like Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Xi Jinping, and even Narendra Modi have revived and reformulated civilizational narratives to justify global ambition and domestic legitimacy. These appeals to ancient identity and moral exceptionalism are not merely rhetorical flourishes; they represent a systematic shift in how key non-Western powers engage with the world. Through what we might call “civilizational revisionism”, these actors reject the universality of Western values and institutions, instead proposing alternative normative frameworks grounded in their own cultural and historical legacies.

The resurgence of civilization as a unit of analysis in international relations theory recalls Samuel Huntington’s controversial “clash of civilizations” thesis. While Huntington’s essentialism rightly drew criticism, his anticipation that culture and identity would shape geopolitical conflict has found renewed relevance. Today, however, it is not a “clash” but a “recasting” of international order that is underway. Rather than viewing civilizations as passive, immovable blocs, revisionist leaders now “actively mobilize civilizational discourse” to challenge the liberal order.

This civilizational turn performs both external and internal functions. Externally, it serves as a diplomatic counter-narrative to Western hegemony. Internally, it shores up regime legitimacy by appealing to populist nationalism and the romanticization of cultural roots. This strategic duality is most evident in the rhetoric of leaders like Putin and Erdoğan, who use civilization as both sword and shield—to confront perceived external threats and to consolidate domestic authority.

Russia under Putin positions itself as the guardian of a unique Eurasian civilization. The Kremlin’s vision of a multipolar world order is tied closely to its identity as a sovereign civilizational state. This narrative not only rejects NATO expansion but also casts Western liberalism as morally bankrupt and in decline. Think tanks close to the Kremlin, such as the Valdai Discussion Club, frequently refer to Russia as a “security supplier” in Central Asia and the Middle East—not as part of a bloc, but as a sovereign pole. The invasion of Ukraine exemplifies this logic. Beyond its military goals, Russia’s aggression has been framed in civilizational terms: reclaiming historic lands, protecting the Russian-speaking world, and resisting the alleged moral decadence of the West. In this worldview, the war is not only geopolitical, but ontological.

China’s embrace of civilizational rhetoric is more subtle but no less strategic. Xi Jinping’s doctrine of a “Harmonious World” leans on Confucian ideals of coexistence, order, and moral governance. Unlike Russia or Turkey, China is less confrontational in its language but equally revisionist in its ambition. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is emblematic: it is sold not just as infrastructure investment but as a civilizational offering rooted in mutual respect and peaceful development.

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Importantly, China invokes its civilizational identity to counter accusations of neo-imperialism in Africa and Asia. Beijing positions itself not as a hegemon but as a benevolent elder civilization, offering partnership rather than dominance. As Acharya notes, China balances these claims with a staunch defense of Westphalian sovereignty, reflecting a pragmatic approach that avoids revolutionary disruption but still seeks normative realignment.

Turkey's turn toward civilizational discourse is perhaps even more dramatic. From the late Ottoman era through the early Republic, Turkey was defined by its Westernizing impulse, going together with the homogenous national identity-building project. But under Erdoğan, this trajectory has reversed. In his frequent refrains that "the world is bigger than five" and in his 2021 book *A Fairer World is Possible*, Erdoğan articulates an alternative moral and political order. Diverging from China and Russia, Turkey's civilizational turn does not build on a standadone civilisational reading.

Instead, it is presented as part of a broader Islamic civilizational ethos, rooted in the idea of "Pax Ottomana" – a revivalist narrative blending Islamic identity with regional ambition. On a closer look, it underwrites a narrative that advocates for relatively peaceful coexistence of Muslims and non-Muslims during the times of Ottomans. This civilizational transition, however, is not mere nostalgia. Ankara's involvement in Africa, the Balkans, and Central Asia often comes cloaked in civilizational language, seeking to position Turkey as the rightful heir to a forgotten but "fairer" imperial legacy. Domestically, this discourse also provides a bulwark against criticism of democratic backsliding, reframing authoritarian consolidation as cultural sovereignty.

What unites these diverse actors is not geography or ideology but leadership style. The recent turn to civilizational state is most potent when coupled with strongman politics. Erdoğan, Putin, and Xi share an affinity for centralized power, populist communication, and existential rhetoric. Their foreign policies are not merely interest-driven but identity-infused, constructed around a civilizational "us" versus a decadent or hostile "them." This framework allows them to rally domestic support during crises, whether military (Ukraine), economic (Turkey), or public health-related (COVID-19 in China). It also enables them to sidestep liberal critiques—democracy, human rights, press freedom—by reframing these values as culturally contingent rather than universal.

Yet civilizational rhetoric is not without limits. While it serves domestic politics and global posturing, it also constrains diplomatic flexibility. Russia's isolation post-Ukraine, Turkey's friction with the EU, and China's reputational challenges in the Global South all suggest that invoking ancient glory is no substitute for coherent foreign policy. Moreover, as Acharya warns, the civilizational binary between "East and West" creates a false dichotomy that can mask mutual dependencies. Turkey trades extensively with Europe; Russia depends on Chinese markets; China invests in Western supply chains. Even as they question the liberal order, these states are embedded within it.

The rise of civilizational narratives in global politics reflects a broader crisis of liberal modernity. As Western institutions falter and global power diffuses, non-Western actors are seizing the opportunity to redefine norms on their own terms. But whether this leads to civilizational multipolarity or simply a more managed divergence within the existing system remains to be seen. What is clear, however, is that civilizational discourse has moved from the margins to the mainstream of international relations. It is now a key language through which power is claimed, legitimacy is performed, and futures are imagined. Recognizing this is not to endorse the narratives themselves but to understand their profound implications for the global order ahead.

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