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Civilizational Perspectives in International Relations and Contemporary China-India Relations

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RAVI DUTT BAJPAI, APR 26 2018

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

The end of the Cold War is considered one of the most critical episodes in world politics that restructured the global order from a bipolar world to a multipolar order, divided along ethnic, cultural and religious lines. The concept of civilizations reappeared in the discipline of International Relations (IR) at this time, with the publication and subsequent debates centered on 'The Clash of Civilizations' by Samuel Huntington (1993) which predicted a world order based on different and antagonistic civilizations. The fundamental assumption made under the 'clash of civilizations' hypothesis is that civilizations can be differentiated, based upon the fundamental incompatibility of beliefs, values and cultural norms among different civilizations. This 'clash of civilizations' hypothesis was challenged by several leading scholars. However, the terror attacks of 11 September 2001 and subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were construed as an endorsement of the 'clash of civilizations' hypothesis (Kapustin 2009). Huntington's theory, contentious as it is, continues to occupy a prominent position in contemporary IR discourses. This is underlined by a number of commemorative publications marking different anniversaries of Huntington's thesis (Barker 2013; Rose 2013).

Huntington has been critiqued primarily for being reductionist and essentialist in his understanding of civilizational identities; most critics have focused upon deconstructing the US-Islam dyad (Adib-Moghaddam 2010; Lyons 2014). I argue that, Huntington's classification of the Chinese civilization, the Hindu civilization and the Eastern civilization as distinct categories, in particular, clearly ignores the historical as well as contemporary affinities and inter-connectedness between these civilizations. Contrary to Huntington's reductionist view, IR has had a limited engagement with the legacy of peaceful and enriching interactions between the Chinese and Indian civilizations.

This paper explores the assumptions of civilizational identities purely based on cultural, religious or geographical distinctions and their limitations. It reviews the 'civilizations' discourse in IR and discusses the concept of 'civilization-states' in the context of China and India. It analyzes the key components of civilizational overlaps and exchanges between these two countries and the invocation of their 'civilization-state' identity in their contemporary bilateral relations. Rejecting Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' hypothesis in understanding 'civilization-states' like China and India, I conclude that it is critical to understand how states perceive their civilizational heritage, which both facilitates and impedes bilateral exchanges and the conduct of international relations.

Whither Civilizations in IR?

IR's engagement with civilizations coincided with fundamental changes in the global order which ushered decolonization, globalization and the end of the Cold War. A civilization is considered the largest and highest socio-historical phenomenon, and consists of numerous, diverse and distinct cultures within itself (Dawson 1970). The emergence of the concept of civilizations in IR, goes beyond Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' and has led to the focus on how and why different civilizational identities have distinct worldviews. As Bettiza describes, 'Civilizations are socially constructed when people somewhere not only identify themselves but are also recognized by others as

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either the archetypal representatives of a civilization' (2014, 19). Martin Hall underlines the advent of civilizational identities in IR and argues that, 'civilizational analysis is important not least because the concept of civilization is being used'. It seems, 'at this historical juncture, that the notion of civilization is a significant carrier of knowledge and of thereby attendant preferences and policies' (Hall 2007, 199). Nevertheless, how do civilizations acquire political meaning and character?

As social collectives, civilizations represent 'imagined communities' similar to nation-states, however, civilizations are manifestly distinct to nation-states, both in temporal and spatial dimensions. This implies that unlike nation-states, civilizations exist at sub-national and supranational levels and therefore, civilizations may be deployed in IR to represent 'transnational, inter-human, and de-territorialized cultural communities' (Bettiza 2014, 4). This expanse of geographical and social diversity implies that civilizations encompass several distinctive constituents and are in a constant state of flux within themselves.

Civilizations undergo changes both from their internal diversity and from inter-civilizational encounters (Cox 2000, 220). Unlike the rigid territorial boundaries of nation-states, civilizations spill over national borders and defy territoriality and boundaries. The inter-civilizational interactions are ubiquitous; Europe's progress to a 'modern' civilization was assisted by such exchanges with China, India, and the Islamic world (Arnason 2006). These inter-civilizational interactions assume political significance when civilizations are deployed as discursive practices for identity construction. Civilizational identity may be used to define the boundaries of a community by differentiating between self and the other; it can also be used to locate the self at the global, regional, or individual levels and also to evaluate others.

China and India at the institutional-state and individual-citizen levels have deployed the narratives of their glorious past to progress from not-so-glorious present to potentially glorious future. The histories for both China and India are not in museums, artefacts and archaeological specimens but in their visions of the thriving magnificence of their civilizational glories. However, it is not enough merely to claim an identity; that identity must have a degree of social effectiveness and political purchase and others must acknowledge the identity itself as legitimate. China and India both claim the status of rightful inheritors of their ancient civilizations; while these claims are not completely uncontested, they have general recognition in the society of nations. So what is the political salience of their civilizational heritage?

China and India: 'State' of the Civilizations

Civilizational entitlement allows states to consider themselves as the natural and worthy inheritors of their ancient civilizational glories, and frame policies to regain the power and status befitting of 'their country's size, population, geographic position and historical heritage' (Malik 2011, 28). The civilizational legacies of China and India not only continue to define the national identities of the two states, but also set the background for the bilateral relations between them. There are remarkable similarities in the construction of Chinese and Indian national identities as modern nation-states; both frame their national identities in terms of civilizational entitlement and colonial occupation (Malik 2011).

This sense of entitlement is further entrenched in the national identity construction, as foreign occupation is held responsible for the loss of ancient civilizational grandeurs and status. The colonial control not only interrupted traditional approaches to statecraft and international interactions based upon Chinese and Indian civilizational attributes, but it also altered the Chinese and Indian perceptions about the glories of their own civilizations (Sheel 2007). These civilizational attributes in China and India were derived from a combination of history, geography and culture. The geographical perspective accorded the population in the respective areas later identified as China and India, with a sense of cultural affinity among themselves. The old maritime and caravan routes facilitated the diffusion of trade, culture and religion among the Chinese, Indians and the rest of Asia. These cultural and material exchanges led to an international order based upon mutual reciprocity rather than absolute power or control.

Tan Chung refers to this mutually beneficial interaction and the collaborative framework between China and India as 'geo-civilizational' rather than a 'geopolitical' paradigm. It is quite extraordinary that despite the geographical

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proximity, unlike other Western civilizations, the Chinese and Indian civilizations have enjoyed peaceful and mutually enriching relations for over twenty centuries until the Cold War period. Chung (2009, 211) underlines this paradox, 'it was during the Cold War that the two new republics were born and have paid heavy tuition fees to learn international politics'. A vibrant cultural, commercial and political relationship was blossoming between the two civilizations prior to the Christian era and was reflected in exchanges in diverse fields such as agriculture, science, mathematics, astronomy literature, linguistics, architecture and medicine (Sen 2004).

The postcolonial states of China and India adopted the idea of victimhood as an essential part of national identity construction, referred to as 'the century of national humiliation' in China and 'a century of rule by an alien race and culture' in India (Garver 2011, 103). China and India both claim to be victims of extractive colonialism and this sense of victimhood shapes their contemporary international relations objectives of protecting absolute sovereignty and reclaiming their international prestige. In the case of both China and India the national identity construction is sustained from the entitlement of glorious civilizational heritage.

The construction of the national and civilizational identities is a multi-layered process that involves several competing frames of political, cultural, social and ethnic affiliations. These different affiliations often overlap and some of the characteristics used in this process of identity construction are shared between China and India. This is not to claim that both societies adopt exactly the same attributes in the construction of their civilizational identity; rather to highlight the differences in the definition and deployment of these characteristics. Generally, national identity is associated with political representation while civilizational identity denotes cultural affiliations. However, in the case of China and India the national and civilizational identities are considered interchangeable, and both of these identities have acquired political connotations.

China and India share a common civilizational heritage largely through Buddhism, which may be considered as a coherent cultural complex, in a much broader sense than a civilization. In this case, Buddhism does not override the distinct civilizational identities contained within it. It is not the whole but one constituent element of the larger structure of the Chinese and Indian civilizations. The spread of Buddhism to China brought certain Indian cultural elements into China, and in due course, some of these distinctly Indian elements became part of the Chinese civilization. Sinicized Buddhism thrived alongside Confucianism and Daoism. It appears that while Buddhism as a shared inter-civilizational heritage may provide for greater convergence between China and India, it is now also portrayed as another avenue for sustaining the rivalry. The phenomenon of 'faith diplomacy' as a tool of international relations has gained prominence in recent times and both China and India have deployed Buddhism in their soft power diplomacy and cultural outreach, specifically in dealing with Central and Southeast Asian states (Scott 2016).

In contemporary times China has preferred to deploy its Buddhist legacies as a diplomatic resource rather than deploying other cultural or philosophical traditions. Juyan Zhang claims that the Chinese state considers both Confucianism and Buddhism to have inherent 'Chineseness' (2013, 85). China is keen to promote its version of Buddhism and Tibetan figures such as the Panchen Lama, to counterbalance the global appeal of the Dalai Lama. China realizes the importance of Buddhism's soft-power capabilities especially in the context of smaller Buddhist countries in Asia. As Juyan Zhang contends, 'China would have fully employed Taoism if it were an internationalized religion' (2013, 92).

Buddhism cannot be the only singular narrative of the civilizational heritage that frames China and India's national and international policies. Some useful inferences can be made from the behavioral trends of the two countries at the domestic and international levels. India projects its civilizational status as 'domestically tolerant and pluralistic, and externally non-aggressive and non-interventionist' (Ollapally 2014). India's international exchanges have been based on religious-philosophical ideas, cultures, and trade. China derives its civilizational status from humanist values, homogeneity and uniformity and externally on the idea of the 'Middle Kingdom' of cultural and material superiority over the outside world (Scott 2007, 10). Both China and India's international exchanges have been based on creating order, gaining prestige, maintaining dignity and achieving suzerainty rather than territorial occupation in the immediate neighborhood.

It is significant to highlight that at the time of their birth as new nation-states both China and India were considered

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too fragile to stand on their own; their economy, internal security and external defense were considered to be vulnerable. It is quite remarkable that despite their limitations both China and India pursued independent foreign policies instead of bandwagoning with one of the superpowers in the bipolar world. This independent approach to foreign policy in China and India was a result of their adverse experiences with colonial powers but it was also driven by their strategic cultures. This strategic culture was grounded in China and India's self-perception of being civilization-state rather than just former 'empire-states' or modern day 'nation-states' (Malik 2011, 28).

In 1954, China and India adopted 'Five Principles' (*Pancha Sila*) as the foundational framework of their bilateral interactions; it was an illustrative example of deploying the civilizational heritage to conduct international interactions. A Communist China under an atheistic Mao and a secular India under an avowed non-religious Nehru adopted *Pancha Sila*, primarily a Buddhist concept. The Chinese Communist Party's aversion to ritualistic religions has been well known while India after its partition on religious lines had proclaimed to profess secularism as its national identity. However, both China and India engaged in invoking an essentially religious system to guide their bilateral relationship. It is significant to underline Mao's interpretation of Buddhism not in religious but cultural terms; 'in Mao's eyes, Daoism and Buddhism are all cultures, even excellent cultures' (Fang 2014, 327).

China and India could have invoked other concepts such as their postcolonial status, the idea of a pan-Asian camaraderie, developing world solidarity or some other mutually inclusive construct towards a cohesive and shared world view. The heritage of two ancient civilizations allowed both China and India to venture beyond the strictly nation-state based secular boundaries and accommodate some form of the religious system in their bilateral relations. *Pancha Sila* was one such example of assimilating contradictions between the nation-state and the civilizational heritage. The official policies of both the Chinese and Indian states were firmly tied to the secular ideals but a religious philosophical idea was used to promote bilateral cooperation. It can be claimed that in this case the civilizational heritage, prevailed over state-centric thinking (Chacko 2013). The complex nature of the self-identity espoused by the Chinese and Indians is that of a 'civilization state' which is discussed in the next section.

China and India: 'Civilization-States'

The process of modern nation-state formation in the Westphalian order ignored various pre-modern and non-European models of the state and the existence of dynamic societies like China and India. A 'civilization-state' can be considered a political configuration similar to a 'nation state'; however, while civilizations may be considered 'imagined communities' they are not represented by governments and additionally they do not have formal representatives (Bettiza 2014, 14). Civilizations are made up of ethnic groups who share a common geographic locus and a common set of values with a shared history, shared culture, and shared socio-political institutions. A civilization may be seen as a conglomeration of a variety of peoples or ethnic groups, continuation from ancient periods, social and cultural practices and also vast spaces (Wei 2012). In such a formulation, civilization can be interpreted as an enlarged 'nation-state'. As a comparative example, Europe with an assortment of cultures, religions, ethnic groups, languages and vernacular diversity, can be considered one civilization, and in this context both modern India and modern China can be perceived as civilization-states (Jacques 2012).

It is important to highlight that, like civilization, the concept of 'civilization-state' also has a postcolonial context. In their quest to be considered a civilized nation, several countries in Asia strived hard to emulate the institutions, practices, social norms and legal-political lexicon of their European conquerors; Japan and Turkey may be considered as the frontrunners of this trend (Duara 2001, 101). The discourses on the right for self-rule and anti-colonial movements in the colonies were framed in such a way that it was imagined that these countries could progress from uncivilized or half-civilized to civilized societies. The self-proclamation of being inheritors to ancient civilizations was one of the fundamental arguments to promote the idea of nationalism during the anti-colonial movements. Arguably, in contemporary times nationalists are able to deploy civilization as a supplement to nationalism (Duara 2001).

The association between nationalism, state and ancient civilizational histories should be seen in the context of how the right to statehood and the right to own history were interwoven during the periods of colonization (Bowden 2009). German philosopher Hegel equated history to statehood and claimed, 'people or a nation lacked history . . . not

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because it knew no writing but because lacking as it did in statehood it had nothing to write about' (Hegel cited in Bowden 2009, 79). In this context Hegel writes about India and its lack of history by claiming that 'Hindoos have no History in the form of annals (*historia*) that they have no History in the form of transactions (*res gestæ*); that is, no growth expanding into a veritable political condition' (Hegel 2001, 181). Ranajit Guha, describes this process of inclusion and exclusion in world history and claims that the narrative of civilization shifted from 'no writing, no history, to no state, no history' (Guha 2002, 10). In such a diverse understanding of civilization and states, how do we understand the trajectory of China and India as 'civilization-states' that have mutually coexisted over centuries?

Lucian Pye designated China as a 'civilization pretending to be a nation-state' (1992, 232). Pye's assessment had negative connotations as he juxtaposed the state controlled Chinese polity against the normative Western-centric concept of the modern liberal state. The role of the 'civilization-state' in the Chinese political system was highlighted by Tu Wei-ming, who claimed that 'the civilization-state exercises both political power and moral influence' (1991, 16). However, Tu Wei-ming lamented the marginalization of China from the global order, 'It should be acknowledged, however, that for all her power and influence, China as a civilization-state is often negligible in the international discourse on global human concerns' (1991, 16). The subsequent two decades witnessed China's rapid rise to global leadership, coupled with China's renewed interest in framing its international relations discourse on its unique civilizational heritage. The advent of Xi Jinping as the Chinese president in 2012 propelled the idea of 'civilization-state' to the forefront of the political discourse; as Xi believed that 'a civilization carries on its back the soul of a country or nation' (2014).

China can be considered a civilization-state based on its long and uninterrupted history, enormous geography, massive population, diverse demography, the continuity of traditions and cultural systems, and finally the incorporation of many 'Chinas' within one core political unit. The enduring influences of Confucian and Buddhist values in China, in one or the other form over a long period of history, make the Chinese civilization unique among all the ancient civilizations. Another defining feature of the Chinese civilization is its long-running existence as a political unit, since 221 BC when the first Chinese imperial state was founded (Gernet 1996). The landmass referred to as the Chinese heartland has remained under the control of one polity (Gamer 2012). China claims to follow the 'one country, two systems' formula in dealing with Hong Kong; such an approach would be impractical for a typical nation-state. As a modern state, China has been ruled by several different political ideologies: rigid Marxism during Mao's period, soft Socialism under Deng Xiaoping and then aggressive but state controlled Capitalism in the post Deng period. China's imminent collapse has been predicted on several occasions, post-Cold War, post-Tiananmen Square massacre, and post-Global Financial Crisis. It appears that China defies all the conventional frameworks of an archetypical nation-state in the post-Westphalian system.

Although India has not been classified as a 'civilization-state' in IR discourses, the case for India to be considered a 'civilization-state' is equally strong based on the attributes such as an uninterrupted history, the size of the geographical area and population, diversity of the demographics and above all the continuity of traditional cultural systems. India was shown as a landmass of hundreds of small to medium princely states rather than one political unit at the advent of the British Empire. On the other hand, it can be claimed that despite the lack of political unity, the cultural similarities among these states made them a part of one broad civilizational collective (Desai 2009).

However, India differs from China in three aspects. Unlike the dominance of Confucianism in China's polity and society, India does not have one dominant school of thought; rather, it has inherited several diverse and often contradictory philosophical traditions. India's demographic diversity is much broader than China's and while 79% of the Indian population is classified as Hindus, there is no singular cultural-religious-ideational criteria that can amalgamate Hindus as one unit. The multiplicity of racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious identities makes India more of a subcontinent than a unified nation-state. Unlike China, post-independent India has largely followed one type of governance structure, that of parliamentary democracy through regular electoral mandates. India has adopted an approach similar to 'one country, two systems' employed in China, with the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Although India's ancient civilizational legacy originates from its Hindu-Buddhist religious beliefs, the constitutional secularism in the Indian polity makes it difficult for the state to flaunt a religious identity. While Indian political leaders have refrained from a public display of its civilizational heritage there has always been a palpable sense of this

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heritage in the Indian public and policy circles. References to India's ancient civilizational heritage are often made by the ruling elite both for national and international audiences (Michael 2013, 36). Prime Minister Modi's recent policy announcements and speeches are appropriate examples of how he often draws from ancient thinkers and traditions that define 'Indianness'. While India may be reticent to display its civilizational heritage in the international arena, India has never been taciturn about invoking its historically civilizational associations with China.

The self-perception of China and India as civilization-states has also led to greater competition to enhance their international prestige and power projections relative to each other. In their bilateral interactions, China and India emphasize Buddhism to achieve greater cooperation, while both also deploy Buddhism to gain greater influence in Central and Southeast Asia. The genesis of the 1962 border war and the ongoing territorial disputes between China and India lie with this divergent self-perception of being a civilization-state. Subsequent to the Chinese takeover of Tibet, India provided sanctuary to the Dalai Lama – a move that made India highly suspect in China's eyes. India's move to provide sanctuary to the Dalai Lama was not entirely a political decision nor was India in any viable position to contest China in Tibet. China misconstrued the depth of reverence for the Dalai Lama in India; the spiritual and religious foundations of Indian civilization considers Tibetan Buddhism as a part of their own heritage. The Indian state and particularly Prime Minister Nehru on their part misconstrued China's determination to reinstate their earlier preeminence in the emerging regional order. These contestations between India and China are a dominant feature of their different and competing claims to civilizational legacies.

Conclusion

There seems to be a consensus among various scholars that India and China, as key actors in emerging Asia, are simultaneously moving upward on relative power trajectories while sustaining a rivalry which will further magnify. The references to the 'clash of civilizations' hypothesis in the context of China and India have been framed in the familiar geopolitical perspective, rather than through their histories of civilizational exchanges. China and India are considered civilizational twins as well as eternal rivals. It is clear that the civilizational narrative is never too distanced in their exchanges, be it towards a grand harmony, international alliances, cold peace or outright war. To conclude, the discipline of International Relations has much to gain from inter-civilizational perspectives which are integral to understanding the behavior of 'civilization-states' in non-Western contexts. Any purposeful analysis of the China-India bilateral relationship and their worldviews, in particular, is not possible without studying their inter-civilizational links.

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About the author:

Ravi Dutt Bajpai holds a PhD from Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia and is a Visiting Researcher at the School of Global Studies, Gothenburg University, Sweden. He is also an adjunct lecturer at St. Xavier's College, Ranchi. He is the co-author (with Harivansh) of *Chandra Shekhar: The Last Icon of Ideological Politics* (2019) and has published several journal articles, book chapters and popular media pieces in both Hindi and English. His research interests include civilizational perspectives in international relations; non-western/postcolonial international relations; China and India in global politics; China-India relations, religion and cultural exchanges. He can be reached at ravi.dutt.bajpai@gu.se.