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Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and the Return of Civilisational Politics: An American and French Tale

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CHIA-YU LIANG AND FERRAN PEREZ MENA, APR 27 2022

In an article published in the *New Statesman*, Jeremy Cliffe (2022) claimed that Russia's invasion of Ukraine had changed everything. Indeed, the Ukrainian conflict might be signalling the long-awaited new multipolar world that IR experts have been heralding since the Iraq war and the geopolitical rise of the BRICS. Despite the new geopolitical transformations and the human tragedy that this conflict has triggered, it has also paved the way for the intensification of 'civilisational politics' (Bettiza and Petito 2018; Bettiza 2014) in the West. In this respect, Bettiza and Petito (2018) claim that 'civilisational politics is primarily about the crucial relationship between culture and power synthesised by coalitions of cultural and political elites.' Put differently, 'civilisational politics' is about 'how social actors subjectively and intersubjectively make sense of world politics in civilisational terms' (Bettiza 2014, 13). Bettiza and Petito (2018) suggest that this type of politics is becoming more prominent in contemporary global politics because they represent a 'novel form of identity politics that draw upon culture, religion and tradition' and 'provide a novel frame of reference at a time when globalisation contributes to the deterritorialisation of national identities, borders and actor-hood'. In this short article, we briefly attempt to interrogate how Russia's invasion of Ukraine has intensified the mobilisation of 'civilisational politics' in the United States and France and how it has triggered internal 'civilisational' tensions within the West.

Beyond the racist discourses fostered by the political elites to justify the exclusion of certain refugees in the West and the hierarchisation of international conflicts in global politics, where some conflicts matter more than others, and some population "deserve" humanitarian intervention and protection more than others, we argue that the intensification of 'civilisational politics' in the context of the Russia's invasion of Ukraine has to do with the fact the United States is seeking to unify its political and military allies in Western Europe around cultural values and shared governing norms in a geopolitical context of deglobalisation, which is undermining American structural power within a global political economy that used to be structured around the dying US-led neoliberal globalisation. The United States' willingness to create a totalising cultural and ideological sphere to cement its military and political alliances and legitimise its military goals has created some tensions in Western Europe. In France, the far-right leader Marine Le Pen has begun to discuss the idea of a 'global France' that directly challenges US' 'civilisational politics' on what constitutes the West, evidencing a 'civilisational schism' within Western great powers.

The argument is set out in two steps. Firstly, we will briefly discuss how Russia's invasion of Ukraine has intensified 'civilisational politics' in the United States. Secondly, we will examine how the 'civilisational politics' fostered by the far-right politician Marine Le Pen represent an alternative civilisational discourse where a global France wishes to recover its imperial pulses and international centrality in global affairs, which is perceived to have been undermined by liberal politicians such as Emmanuel Macron and their globalist tendencies. Not let's turn to examine the emergence of 'civilisational politics' and the decline of U.S hegemony.

'Civilisational politics' and the decline of US hegemony

'Civilisational politics' are not something new in the United States. In 1996, the political scientist Samuel Huntington published a seminal work titled *The Clash of Civilisations and the remaking of world order* where he argued that culture and religious identities would be the chief source of conflict in global politics after the collapse of the Soviet

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Union. After the 9/11 attacks, President Bush announced that the war against terrorism was a “struggle for civilisation”. According to Collet (2009), Bush’s ‘civilisational politics’ not only assumed Huntington’s framework of the ‘Clash of Civilisations’ but also was mobilised to foster the ‘New World Order’(NWO) project articulated around US power. Furthermore, the US new foreign policy towards the Muslim world began to be informed by ‘religious-cultural civilisational strategic frames of reference’ (Bettiza 2015, 575) that legitimised the US invasion of Iraq and Libya. Such a civilisational approach was embraced by the subsequent US administrations after Bush. It is important to note that emergence of this specific ‘civilisational politics’ in the US new foreign policy coincided with the apex of the unipolar moment and the golden years of the US-led neoliberal globalisation, where the European Union (EU) seemed to uncritically rally behind the US global hegemony and US system of alliances in the EU seemed relatively stable.

In 2014, after the outbreak of the protests in the Maidan square in Kiev, the idea of an ‘Atlantic civilisation’ made up by the United States and EU emerged as a civilisational pole against the ‘Euroasian Heartland’ (Kuhnhardt 2014). However, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine that tragically began in February 2022 transformed the course of ‘civilisational politics’ in the United States. As Burnett (2022) argues, the Ukrainian conflict has revamped the idea of a ‘Western Civilisation’ around the notion of modern liberal democracy and not religion or ethnicity. Yet, the importance of the transformation of the ‘civilisational discourse’ in the US does not dwell in the way it has materialised discursively, but in the way it has been instrumentalised by the US policymakers to achieve its geopolitical goals in a moment of US’ hegemonic decline and the emergence of a multipolar world that the Ukrainian conflict has manifested.

Against the backdrop of a gradual deglobalisation process that has been undermining US’ structural power within the global political economy, which has affected the US system of alliances in Western Europe, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has paved the way for the intensification of ‘civilisational politics’ that have been mobilised by the American political elites to cement the precarious state in which the transatlantic alliance with European powers was left after the departure of President Trump and the intensification of China’s diplomacy in the EU. Already in 2021, Kimmage (2021) wondered whether President Biden could ‘revive the transatlantic relationship’ through a ‘cultural revival’ that had been broken by the legacy of the Trump administration. In this respect, the ‘civilisational discourse’ in the US has been intensified to cement a precarious system of alliances in the EU and revamp a moribund NATO. In this respect, as Biden (in Meaney 2022) declared, ‘we see a more unified Europe, a more unified West’.

Furthermore, the new civilisational discourse fostered in the US after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has been mobilised to unify alliances with Western powers that were splintered by material forces such as a fractured global political economy and a new geopolitical race for limited resources that pushes great powers such as Germany and France to find relative autonomous development paths to that imposed by US preferences, which have created geopolitical contradictions within the West. Especially regarding how to deal with China’s rise. Put differently, US’ ‘civilisational politics’ have become a substitute for its broken economic neoliberal globalisation, marking thus a ‘symbolic re-territorialisation’ that reinforces US hegemony via cultural and shared imaginaries in a fractured global political economy that seems to be in a state of transition and profound transformation. Yet the question is whether this idealist form of hegemony will suffice to harness the fracturing effects of the new global political economy that is emerging. Meaney (2022) already pointed out that the cruel paradox of this is that ‘European cohesion appears achievable only by further binding itself to the mast of American power and prerogatives’. In France, not all the politicians concur with the civilisational discourse offered by the US elites. This became clear in the last presidential elections of April 2022.

❓‘Civilisational politics’ and the French Far-right: the return of a Global and imperial France

The French 2022 Presidential Election provided timely materials for identifying the mobilisation of ‘civilisational politics’ in France. From the perspective of the voters’ decision-making, based on the ups-and-downs of the support each candidate attracted since 2021, it is safe to say that the strategic voting centred around French identity. Before the first-round (10 April 2022), the crucial questions were, first, the split of the far-right votes caused by the emergence of Eric Zemmour, and second, the effect of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, due to Zemmour and Le Pen expressed positive opinions on Vladimir Putin before the launch of the invasion. The rise of the French far-right and the strategic voting was evidenced by the fact that since the invasion until the first-round voting, between the two far-

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right candidates, only Zemmour suffered a decrease of support, but not Le Pen. Instead, Le Pen's support rose to be only around 3 percent behind Macron, regardless of her positive opinion about Putin before the invasion, and her alleged financial dependency on Russian sources. Macron eventually won the election with over 58% of the vote.

Although the supporters of Le Pen and the 41% who voted for her in the final round of the election might have made such a choice based on various reasons, Le Pen evidently included a civilisational identity in her discourse and based her policy preferences on such an identity. Her mobilisation of 'civilisational politics' was clearly observable in her speech delivered at her first press conference on her diplomatic and foreign policies after the first-round voting. Right at the opening of the speech, she characterised her plan for France's foreign relations as 'inscribed in a historical and intellectual vision', because 'France is a nation different from all others (*une nation à part*)'. She backed this up by invoking Charles de Gaulle's wartime phrase that 'between the grandeur of France and the liberty of the world, there is...a long-lasting pact', as well as Pope John Paul II's phrase that France is 'the first-born of the Church, the educator of peoples, faithful to the interests of humanity, in alliance with the eternal wisdom'. She therefore invited the audience to think: 'why is our civilisation shining in five continents?' because 'France is the inheritor of all these composing elements: Christianity, Humanism, and Enlightenment' (Le Pen 2022a). In all these utterances, Le Pen was not hesitant in underscoring the value of France as the representative state of a civilisation, if not a civilisation entirely by its own right.

With this characterisation of France, Le Pen showed greater interest in protecting France's national sovereignty in regard to its relationship with the EU and NATO and its location within the global structure of power. In the televised debate with Macron for the 2022 Presidential Election, she directly refuted Macron's idea of France's sovereignty as both 'national and European' on the basis that sovereignty should only be attributed to nations and stressed the importance of a 'profound modification of the EU' so it could become a 'union of European nations' (Le Pen 2022b). She explained her rejection of Macron's view on France-EU relations by underscoring that France was not a European power but a global one. In this respect, her proposition of withdrawing France from the Integrated Command of NATO was in line with her strong advocacy of a multipolar world order and a France liberated from US hegemony.

Le Pen's mobilisation of 'civilisational politics' is not new. As she invoked de Gaulle, her policy regarding NATO partakes in the policies of Gaullism: de Gaulle withdrew France from the integrated command of NATO in 1966 and drove out NATO troops in France once. What motivated such actions? One could find clues in the famous document de Gaulle received from Alexandre Kojève in 1945, entitled *Outline of a Doctrine of French Policy*. In this policy suggestion, Kojève advocated to de Gaulle that it was imperative for France to lead the formation of a Latin Empire, if France wanted to avoid being downgraded to a second-tier power in Europe under the peaceful economic rise of Germany, and to evade the tragic decimation in the Third World War between the US-UK Empire and the Soviet Empire (Kojève 1945). By examining the argument of Kojève, one could further dissect the 'civilisational politics' at play in contemporary France.

Kojève's argument follows a realist logic, based on his assessment of modern warfare. In his view, a nation as a form of political organisation could not shoulder the weight of modern warfare; only empires could. Considering how the maritime empire of Anglo-Saxon US and the land empire of the USSR were in sharp opposition, France alone could not survive the conflict to come. Second, culture for Kojève was not just discursive, but a social substance that could influence alliance formation. He suggested that Germany could be less resistant to side with the Anglo-Saxon empire. For the same reason, he suggested that linguistically Latin nations, with shared Catholic tradition, could form a bloc that could find themselves in equal standing with the USSR and the US empires, and play a mediating role between the two super-powers. Such a Latin Empire, Kojève argued, would not be imperialist, but crucial for conflict management (Kojève 1945).

Kojève's advocacy for a Latin Empire is echoed in Le Pen's proposal regarding France's foreign policy and had real effect in this year's Presidential election. Her argument for France as a global power started by shifting the focus from the EU to the French overseas territories and the Maghreb region, both of which have been shaped by the imperial legacies of France. In her press conference, she asked: should the Mediterranean Sea be a frontier between Europe and Africa, or a lake surrounded by a civilisation that takes unity as her vocation? (Le Pen 2022a). In this proposal,

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the shared linguistic and traditional traits of a Latin Empire Kojève envisioned is replaced by the legacy of the imperialist past of France.

Conclusion

In this article we have argued that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has intensified 'civilisational politics' in the United States and France. Adding to Petito and Bettiza's argument that suggested that the emergence of 'civilisational politics' was a result of the deterritorialising effects of globalisation, we have claimed that the intensification of a new wave of 'civilisational politics' in the West after Russia's invasion of Ukraine has emerged in a broader historical context of deglobalisation and a fractured global economy, which are compelling great powers to reconfigure its system of alliances and search for autonomous developmental paths. In this respect, we claim that the ongoing 'civilisational politics' that we are witnessing in the United States and France as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine represent a 'symbolic re-territorialisation', where new imperial imaginaries are being reconstructed on the pillars of a fragmented global economy and emerging multipolar system.

In the United States, 'civilisational politics' is fostered to unify a Western Europe, including the EU, under US hegemony, which had been fragmented by the legacy of the Trump administration, the fracturing dynamics a global economy in transformation, and the intensification of China's diplomacy in Western Europe. In contrast, an alternative 'civilisational' discourse to that put forward by the United States has been promoted by the French far-right led by Marine Le Pen. Her expression of civilisational values and the historical grandeur of France, her emphasis on the French overseas territory and the Maghreb region, and her advocacy for a stronger military autonomy of France both regionally and globally, all suggest the potential 'civilisational' schism in the West. This schism does not mean that support for Le Pen demonstrated across multiple election cycles will lead France to 'switch side' to Russia, but rather that France might be more assertive in its position in the EU and the world, and more insistent in the political and even military approaches when they do not comply with those of the US. In other words, within the West, the united front may be weaker, although not likely to collapse.

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