

Understanding Post-9/11 Afghanistan

A Critical Insight into Huntington's Civilizational Approach
E-IR Publishing, Bristol, England 2017
ISBN: 978-1-910814-26-0

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Deepshikha Shahi work 'Understanding Post 9/11 Afghanistan' offers a critical insight into Samuel Huntington's famed thesis on the 'Clash of Civilizations'. Powerfully written, well-resourced and well-referenced, it serves as a large mainstream addition to understanding the political situation of Afghanistan post 9/11.

Huntington's civilizational thesis has become some of the most widely quoted and translated analyses of the post-Cold War international order. Shahi writes, civilization as a significant unit of analysis and locus of debate in contemporary International Relations is largely an intellectual contribution of Samuel P. Huntington. Huntington forewarned, civilizations were primeval entities that would replace ideology and geopolitics as the animating sources of cooperation and conflict in the post-Cold War world. Shahi believes Huntington's attempt to provide a new mental map for the renovated civilizational realities of post-Cold War world politics, led to the generation of two critical by-products: first, the *lofty picture of Western civilization*; second, the *tarnished image of Islam*. Huntington believed, "The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion, but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence."

In the post-9/11 world, Deepshikha opines, 'civilization' has filled the vacuum left by religion in the West's secularized environment. Western civilization has emerged as a paradigm that is to be emulated either by will or by force. The west has developed the 'axis of evil', this term was often used by former US President George W. Bush to describe governments that he accused of harboring terrorists. The 'good' embodied in Western civilization has been highlighted in contrast to the alleged 'evil' intrinsic to Islam. To a great extent, the unscientific nature of Islamic faith was held responsible for the backwardness of Muslim societies. The Author states, that a simplistic understanding of 9/11 and the subsequent US-led 'war on terror' in Afghanistan as exemplifications of a clash of civilizations which seems to be thoroughly misleading and dangerous. According to the author, It is misleading as it omits various crucial factors that refute the applicability of Huntington's thesis in the context of post-9/11 Afghanistan, it is dangerous as it reinforces the overly elevated status of the West in comparison to a maligned portrait of Islam, thereby provoking violent exchanges between the fanatic sympathizers of the two 'civilizations'.

Deepshikha deduces Huntington's clash of civilization thesis an endeavor to offer a new paradigm of world politics, which in contrast to state-centric realist theory and the system dominated neo-realist model, focused on civilizational- cultural religious factors. Huntington believed that 'inter-civilizational' issues were replacing inter- superpower ones. His

arguments revolved around what he called 'civilization identity' and the interaction among seven or eight major 'civilizations' of which the conflict between two of them, 'Islam' and 'the West', got the lion's share of his attention. Deepshikha writes, Huntington's thesis and his provocative thoughts drew massive criticism. Despite the copious criticisms targeting Huntington's epistemology, methodology and ethics – the clash of civilizations thesis flourishes throughout the globe. Deepshikha believes the purpose behind Huntington's choice to present reality in a particular way and the people's choice to accept it lies in their respective conditions of existence. Though Huntington's dangerous motive becomes quite apparent as soon as he activates his abstract idea of 'civilizational identity' by awakening a hatred for other civilizations, it is well-received by the people who find it relevant and useful in their living conditions. The cascading effect of the abstract idea of 'civilizational identity' totally obscures the complexity of human identity formation and thus weakens the effort at human emancipation. However, according to Deepshikha the humanistic-existential model is optimistic in its assertion that Huntington's thesis acquires receptivity, not because it discloses some identifiable ultimate truth about innate human nature or emits provocative stimulations to which human beings are bound to succumb. The popularity of it is largely an outcome of the personal choice of human beings who are embedded in their respective conditions of existence as free agents.

Deepshikha reflects that prior to 9/11, Afghanistan was trapped in a civil war which was essentially an 'intra-civilizational' rather than 'inter-civilizational' conflict. The author deduces though Huntington's thesis admitted the possibility of 'intra-civilizational' conflict, it clearly ruled out the probability of its global escalation. Huntington's claim that only the violence between states and groups from different 'civilizations' carried with it the potential of global escalation, is negated by the author when Huntington's assertion proved mistaken in the context of Afghanistan. Deepshikha believes that though the declarations made by Osama bin Laden possessed religious overtones, they indicated that his basic grievance was not religious/cultural/civilizational, but 'political'. A careful reading of Osama bin Laden's statements reflects his confused stance on the 'religious' motivations behind American political moves.

Deepshikha maintains her opinion that Huntington's thesis stands discredited in the light of contradictory historical evidence drawn from 9/11 and its aftermath. Nevertheless, the intellectual explosion caused by his idea continues to capture attention in both the US and Afghanistan. She writes, 'Huntington's thesis has been quite popular among the Islamic fundamentalists'. The author also mentions Asta Olesen, who has provided a theoretical and, therefore, generalized understanding of the process of 'political reception'. While discussing the determinants of the reception of a political discourse, Olesen wrote: 'What determines the reception of a political discourse cannot be determined purely based on the content of the discourse in question. Circumstantial factors have a great bearing upon the receptivity and interpretation of the discourse.'

Further Deepshikha gathers that the factors explaining the influential impact of the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse also provide clues for understanding the popularity of Huntington amongst the Afghans. In fact, the discourses generated by the Taliban/al-Qaida and Huntington reflect a striking resemblance. Like the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse, which established the West as the enemy of Islam and was intended to mobilise Muslims around the world to safeguard their pious Islamic lands from Western intervention, the Huntingtonian discourse of civilizational clash inversely matched these propositions by presenting Islam as the most intolerant and aggressive civilization that posed the greatest threat to the West.

Huntington advised the West to protect itself from Islamic demons by exploiting the differences between non-Western civilizations and by maintaining the superiority of the West. While the Taliban and al-Qaida appealed for Islamisation, Huntington called for Americanisation.

The author suggests the civilizational identity emphasized by Huntington has granted the US a profound ideological-political-diplomatic gain by enabling it to subordinate the UN and to create an 'international coalition' of states, many of which are themselves guilty of practicing terrorism. It has also allowed the US to have a military-political entry in Central Asia on a depth and scale that it never before had. Those Afghans who believe in the Taliban/al-Qaida discourse are bound to succumb to the intellectual insights of Huntington's thesis which endorses the same worldview in a reverse guise. The popularity of al-Zawahiri's text, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, that presents a worldview comparable – but in reverse – to Huntington's thesis, supports this argument. According to the Author, The Afghans are trapped in a vicious cycle generated by these two destructive discourses. The lack of an alternative theoretical/political discourse largely accounts for the absence of an alternative and peaceful way of life for Afghans.

Deepshikha further attempts to establish Critical International Theory (CIT) as a more commendable theoretical framework than Huntington's thesis. The CIT is often understood as a combination of two distinct paradigms concerning two distinct concepts and processes. These two paradigms are: the production paradigm, developed by Antonio Gramsci and applied to IR by Robert Cox, which tends to focus on the concept of work and struggles over redistribution. And the communication paradigm, developed by Frankfurt School and applied to IR by Andrew Linklater, which is concerned with the concept of interaction and identity struggles. Richard Jones argues that though both paradigms have different approach but are united, in terms of attaining the final objective of emancipation. The common emancipatory objective originates from a common broad intellectual project wherein the themes of *hegemony*, *reason* and *transcendence* play a central role. The comparative edge of CIT against the clash of civilizations thesis can be traced to its superior methodological base. The positivist methodology of Huntington mistakenly treats ontology not as a dynamic construct but as a static entity which is essentially deterministic, ahistorical and immobile. The historically and geographically determined causal mechanisms underlying the dominant ontology of civilizational clash remain undiagnosed by Huntington. It has been debated that whether the Huntington's mistake was deliberate or accidental. CIT certainly argues that Huntington's mistake was intentional as theories were always meant for serving particular purposes. CIT uncovers the hidden purposeful designs of Huntington and his supporters and argue that the acceptance of his thesis is at least partly an outcome of personal motivations.

The author also provides us an alternative perspective of understanding post 9/11 Afghanistan. Shahi believes that the combined application of both the paradigms constituting the overarching framework of CIT can reveal the linkage between hegemonic shifts and dialogic tensions in Afghan politics. The alternative understanding constructs the post-9/11 Afghan scenario not as an instance of clash of civilizations, but as a clash of hegemonic aspirations. The shifting of perspective from 'civilizational' to 'critical' not only presents a finer vision of the post-9/11 Afghan crisis but also suggests a way out of it. In its effort to find a solution to the troubling state of affairs in post-9/11 Afghanistan, author explores the possibility of organising an effective 'counter-hegemonic struggle' that in turn would require designing an 'alternative knowledge-base', organising the critical social forces along 'alternative social relations of production' (production paradigm) and creating an 'all-

inclusive speech community' (communication paradigm). Due to the dominance of the realist emphasis on international systemic constraints on the tension between power and morality, and on the dangers of idealist praxeology, the question of how states and other social actors could create new political communities and identities has never been adequately addressed. Providing an adequate answer is a central requirement for the critical theory of international relations. Critical theory analyses the effects of power and the differential ability of actors to control their own circumstances. It also goes beyond that theoretical contribution to provide impetus for practical political action in challenging, confronting, and disrupting existing relations of power. Thus, in the contemporary era, critical IR theory is relevant, among other ways, as a stimulus to resist empire in its many guises.

The work began with the objective of providing a critical insight into the civilizational approach and offering an alternative understanding of post-9/11 Afghanistan. The attempt to fulfil this objective has been carried out in four stages: (i) Designing a 'psychological critique' of the civilizational approach; (ii) Explaining the 'popular receptivity' of Huntington's civilizations thesis amongst the Afghans and demonstrating its harmful implications for post-9/11 Afghan politics; (iii) Establishing Critical International Theory (CIT) as a more meritorious theoretical framework in comparison to Huntington's civilizations thesis; and (iv) Providing an alternative and more accurate vision of post-9/11 Afghan politics from the critical-theoretical standpoint.

CIT not only provides an alternative and finer vision of the post-9/11 Afghan crisis, but also suggest a way out of it. Cox's production paradigm was activated to demonstrate the hegemonic shifts in Afghan politics. Linklater's communication paradigm was operationalised to trace the linkage of these hegemonic shifts with the dialogic tensions in Afghan society.

In conclusion, the book talks about the hegemonic shifts in Afghan politics in terms of the dialogic tensions between Islamists and the West on the one hand, and between various Afghan ethnicities on the other. The first hegemonic phase appeared when Mujahideen joined hands to fight against the Soviets. The second hegemonic phase emerged when the Pashtuns reorganised under the Taliban to fight against US led forces.