

Ukrainian soldiers firing a howitzer at Russian targets near Avdiivka on Feb 14. Contrary to the Huntington thesis, Russia's two reasons for invading Ukraine are territory and power. It is not a clash between two civilisations, says the writer.
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Why nations go to war: Huntington revisited

The 'clash of civilisations' thesis does not hold up when applied to present conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, and US-China tensions.



Tommy Koh

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Cold War was over. The end of the era gave birth to two famous books in America: *The End Of History* by political scientist Francis Fukuyama in 1992 and *The Clash Of Civilisations And The Remaking Of The World Order* by Professor Samuel Huntington in 1996.

In his book, Prof Huntington posited that with the end of the Cold War, conflicts would no longer be fought over territory or ideology.

Instead, he foresaw a clash of civilisations, for example, between Islam and Christianity and between the Sinic civilisation of China and the West.

With Prof Huntington's views in mind, how do we explain the

persistence of war? Is there a theory that could explain the different wars taking place in the world today?

Let's have a look at two of them and the danger of a third.

RUSSIA VERSUS UKRAINE

Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb 24, 2022. Contrary to the Huntington thesis, Russia's two reasons for invading Ukraine are territory and power. It is not a clash between two civilisations.

Russia is an expansionist state. In the year 1300, it had a territory of 20,000 sq km. Today, it's grown to 17 million sq km.

Russia has been acquiring territory by conquest. It wants to retain Crimea and the land occupied by the three so-called republics of Donetsk, Kherson and Luhansk, in eastern Ukraine.

The second reason is power. With the fall of imperial Russia to the Bolsheviks and then the break-up of the Soviet Union, Russia lost its empire.

President Vladimir Putin's interest in establishing a sphere of influence is an attempt to redress that loss.

His decision to invade Ukraine goes further, as can be gleaned from his 2021 essay on the "historical unity" of Russians and Ukrainians and the recent interview with American conservative commentator Tucker Carlson.

Ukraine, in Mr Putin's view, never had a separate existence from Russia. The attack on Ukraine was, in other words, a restoration project, reclaiming lost land and power.

US President Joe Biden has tried to frame the Ukraine war differently, as one between an autocracy and democracy.

He, too, is mistaken. The war is not about ideology but territory and power. Ukraine is not fighting for democracy, but for its independence and territorial integrity.

ISRAEL VERSUS PALESTINE

How do we explain the ongoing conflict in the Middle East that pits Israel against Hamas and, more broadly, the Palestinians.

At the heart of it, the conflict is about territory (Palestine) and about the rights of two peoples to that same territory.

The tussle over land is further complicated by the presence of religious sites sacred to both Jews and Muslims.

Palestine is sacred to the Jews also because it was their original homeland. Due to foreign

invasions, the Jews were expelled from their homeland.

For 2,000 years, they were scattered across the world. But they never gave up their dream that, one day, they would return to Jerusalem, the site of their most sacred temple.

Although both Jews and Arab Muslims date their claims to Palestine back a couple of thousand years, the roots of the current political fight are to be found in the 20th century.

At the time, Jews fleeing persecution in Europe sought to establish a national homeland in what was then Arab-majority territory in the Ottoman and, later, British Empire.

In 1917, the then British Foreign Secretary, Lord Balfour, wrote to a prominent Jewish leader, Lord Rothschild, that the British government would support the Zionist goal of establishing a homeland for Jews in Palestine.

At the time, the Arabs constituted 90 per cent of the population of Palestine and the Jews just 10 per cent.

The Holocaust in Europe added great strength and urgency to the Zionist cause.

The Western world supported the emigration of Jews to Palestine, leading to a surge in the number of Jews in Palestine. By 1947, the percentage of Jews in the population had risen to 30 per cent.

A key year in the history of the

Israeli-Palestinian conflict is 1947.

That year, the United Nations announced its plan to divide the territory of Palestine into roughly two equal halves: one (55 per cent) for the Jews and the other (45 per cent) for the Arabs.

Israel accepted the plan and became an independent state and a member of the UN in 1948.

The Arabs rejected the plan, leading to the first of a series of wars between Israel and its Arab neighbours in 1948.

Much time has passed since 1947, but there is no other solution except the solution of two states in Palestine.

The tragedy is that the two-state solution is rejected by the Prime Minister of Israel and by Hamas.

Both favour a one-state solution. The Israeli version is one state ruled by the Jews. The Hamas version is one state ruled by the Arabs, as well as the destruction of Israel.

The one-state solution should be rejected because it will lead to more bloodshed and endless conflict.

The only way for Arabs and Jews to live at peace with each other is for each of them to have a state of their own. The Jews already have the state of Israel.

It is past time for the Arabs to have the state of Palestine, within the borders prevailing in 1967 and with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Is the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians a clash of civilisations? I don't think so.

It is a clash between the claims of two peoples to a territory.

There is merit in both claims.

The decision of the UN, in 1947, to divide the territory into two halves, is the correct one.

CHINA AND THE WEST

Prof Huntington wrote that there could be a clash between the Sinic civilisation of China and the Western civilisation. Does this

explain the poor relations that exist between China and the West?

One US official, Dr Kiron Skinner, the director of policy planning at the US State Department during the Trump administration, appeared to endorse Prof Huntington's ideas when she stated in 2019 that the US was in a "fight" with a "different civilisation".

She added that it's "the first time that we will have a great power competitor that is not Caucasian".

She was sacked for making those statements.

Was Dr Skinner, a black woman, sacked because her view did not represent the view of the US government or because she was not supposed to say it publicly?

I don't know the answer, but I suspect that the growing hostility towards China by the Americans and the Europeans could be attributed in part to race, apart from ideology: China is both Asian and communist.

But I believe that the fundamental reason for the growing hostility in the West towards China is based on power and wealth.

For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US is faced with a formidable challenger.

China has the scale and potential to rival the US for world leadership.

China is the US' largest creditor country, and while its economy is currently under pressure, it is still a powerful rival.

The bottom line is that the US will do whatever it takes to preserve its position as the global hegemon.

If China seeks to dethrone the US, war between them is inevitable.

IT'S NOT ABOUT CIVILISATIONS

There is no general theory of war.

Prof Huntington's thesis that, post-Cold War, wars would no longer be fought for territory or ideology, is contradicted by the facts.

His prediction that future wars would be fought along civilisation lines, has not happened and is unlikely to happen.

There are misunderstandings between the followers of Islam and Christianity, but there will be no war between them.

The fact is that Europe has become a secular and not a Christian continent.

As for a possible war between the US and China, the fuse is not civilisational. It could be Taiwan or the South China Sea or some other geopolitical or geo-economic issue.

Let me conclude with a plea for peace.

I believe it is possible for the US and China to live at peace with each other. I believe it is possible for Israel and the Palestinians to live at peace with each other.

Let's encourage them to do so, and to turn away from policies and actions which lead them away from peace and towards war.

• Tommy Koh is the chairman of the International Advisory Panel of the Centre For International Law at the National University of Singapore. In 1996, he took part in a debate with Professor Samuel Huntington at the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland.