



In The Same Boat

Publish Date:

December 2021

History shows the West would be wise to prioritise strategic interests while upholding cultural values, argues IPA Senior Fellow Sherry Sufi.

In a world that is becoming more volatile, now is a good time to reflect on the nature of political conflicts. Such an analysis is necessary because we have long been told that our conflicts are over clashing values. This may be so in the eyes of those who actually care about protecting our values and way of life. Yet values have not always been the priority for the political elite when seeking out global alliances. For them, it always has been about strategic interests.

From the end of World War II (1945) to the fall of the Soviet Union (1991), the dominant pattern of conflict was mainly seen as ideological: the Capitalist-Democratic West led by the United States versus the Communist-Authoritarian East led by the USSR. Each side formed its spheres of influence. Each fought proxy wars. Each spied on the other. Each used its media to run exaggerated narratives about the other's motivations. Each launched a series of covert and overt operations to undermine the other.

Long wars in Korea (1950–1953), Vietnam (1955–1975) and Afghanistan (1979–1989) are three prime examples. Each side engaged in an arms race and a space race to show the world who, supposedly, had the better technology. The US won.

American political scientist Francis Fukuyama called this the end of history. In his eyes, the triumph of the US signalled a triumph of the liberal democratic model of governance. He thought this was the final stage of humanity's political evolution, hence the expression 'end of history'. All societies would eventually come to be organised under this world order.

Another American political scientist, Samuel P. Huntington went a step further than Fukuyama. Huntington pointed out that this end of history did not mean the end of political conflict. Conflict was an endemic part of the human condition. The next pattern of global conflict would be a clash of civilisations. This theory went on to attract nearly as much criticism as it has praise. He does a good job in identifying fault lines between different civilisations.

But perhaps the greatest unintended consequence of his theory is that it has led some to believe the source of the conflict is itself differences in cultural identities and values. This part of his argument needs a closer look. Are political clashes usually based on competing values or competing interests?

Cultural *identity* and cultural *values* are two separate things. The first of these (identity) is how one identifies. It determines which box one ticks on the demographics section of the census form. The second of these (values) is how one lives their life. It determines the manner of weddings and funerals, what holidays to celebrate, how to raise one's children, what congregation to attend, and what to consider ethical or unethical.

Cultural similarity does not bring alliances together.

Political conflicts are not always caused by clashing values. They are usually caused by clashing strategic interests. This can happen both within and between different identity groupings. If anything, conflicts *within* are more common than *between*. During the Cold War, strategic interests were delineated by a quest for power between two already powerful countries. Each wanted to be the world's most powerful country.

That the West represented Capitalism and the East represented Communism is true. Yet this ideological difference caused the delineation, not the conflict itself. The source of the conflict was clashing ambitions and interests. This could have easily happened between two capitalist countries. Factors such as culture, language, ethnicity, sect, ideology or religion play a role in creating social boundaries. These can often become civilisational and political boundaries. They define how members from different groups tend to seek political representation. For instance, in democratic societies, those who identify as Catholic could not be blamed for wanting to see more Catholics in Parliament. More Catholics would, by definition, mean less non-Catholics. The same is true of any other social groupings. Members of different ethnic communities often prefer to see

others who identify as one of them to seek positions of power. Still, it is far too great a stretch to presume that what mainly drives conflict is difference in cultural values.

Conflicts are shaped by strategic interests, which means competition over resources, trade and security. The most common form of political conflict tends to occur within populations that share the same cultural identities and values.

We often think of Western civilisation as one happy family that has always been united under the banners of liberal values, human rights, social equality, democracy and free trade. Except, one glance at European history would stand to challenge such a presumption. The same is true of other civilisations. Europe's values have evolved gradually over centuries out of internal clashes between competing ideas, as has its sense of a shared Western identity and the various ethnic and national groupings within. These internal clashes would end with some ideas gaining prominence over others.



Court of flags, United Nations, UNO, Palais des Nations, Geneva, Switzerland.

The regions we today call England and France have consistently been at war against each other across a period of eight centuries. From the Battle of Hastings (1066) through the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) to the Battle of Waterloo (1815), the examples of the English versus the French are too many to list. Here we have two prominent Christian European powers with an eight-century history of being at each other's throats. Neither the fact that each party was European nor that each was Christian was able to align their strategic interests. The first major instance when the two did forge an alliance was during the Crimean War (1853–1856) against another Christian regime, the Russian Empire. And in doing so, the English and French ended up supporting the Muslim Ottoman Empire against the Christian Russian Empire.

Decades later in WWI, the two remained allies but went up against the Ottoman Empire which they had earlier supported against Russia. This again shows how little culture and values have to do with political alignments. Embodied in the Sykes–Picot Agreement (1916), the English and the French ended up proceeding with the proposed carve-up of the modern Middle East. The pattern is clear. Cultural similarity does not bring alliances together. Nor does it usually minimise clashes. Strategic interest does.

The American Civil War was a clash of strategic interests, not ideologies.

The entire history of the continent of Africa has been ravaged by conflicts involving Africans competing with other Africans, despite similar and in some cases identical cultures, languages and beliefs. Clashes between the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa people of Nigeria are an example, as are the tensions in South Africa between the Zulu and Xhosa people. The most notable case is the Rwandan Genocide (1994). The Hutu-led government carried out mass slaughter of one million members of its Tutsi population. These two groups had just about everything in common in terms of culture and language, broadly defined as Banyarwanda. Again, the issue was misaligned interests.

The Muslim world is no different. To the outsider, everyone worships the same deity, reads from the same scripture, and recites prayers in the same language, yet these similarities do not help minimise internal conflict. At times, Muslim regimes have fought other Muslim regimes. The initial divide between the Umayyads and the Abbasids in the early Middle Ages is a prime example. At times, Muslim regimes have forged alliances with non-Muslim regimes. The Franco–Ottoman Alliance (1536) between French King Francis I and Ottoman Sultan Suleiman I is a classic example. A more recent example is Muslim East Pakistan forging an alliance with Hindu India in its independence war against Muslim West Pakistan in 1971, and winning to emerge as the country now called Bangladesh.

It works the same way within the English-speaking West. The English Civil War (1642–1646), the Glorious Revolution (1688), and the American Civil War (1861–1865) were all driven by competing interests within. The last of these is a particularly good example. The North and the South were of the exact same cultural, ethnic and linguistic make-up. The South had plenty to gain from its agrarian economy that was profiting from slave labour. Its pioneers felt it was in their interests to continue the practice.



The Clash of Civilisations: Civilization: The Board Game.

With Britain having undergone abolition decades earlier, the North was more exposed to moral arguments against the practice. The North was also industrialising more rapidly and the Unionists saw a divided continent as unstable for taxation and defence. The end result was a clash. Again, not of ideologies or of civilisations, but of strategic interests.

The formula for conflict can be summed up plainly. Suppose two neighbours, A and B, live side-by-side. They get along fine overall, but both want to buy a vacant plot across the road. Each wanting the same thing means they now have competing interests. There are four logical options for resolving this:

1. A buys the vacant plot and B backs off.
2. B buys the vacant plot and A backs off.
3. A and B form a partnership to jointly own the vacant plot.
4. Neither A nor B get to buy the vacant plot and both back off.

Agreeing upon any one of these scenarios would be an acceptable resolution. But imagine if neither side could agree on a single option, the undesirable fifth would be conflict—an extreme form of which is war. Parties would fight it out until there was a winner. This formula can be used to make sense of *most* human conflicts across all levels, from local to global.

Let us look through this lens at the debate over the rise of China. At its core lies a power struggle over who gets to have more influence over world affairs. Trillions of dollars of raw materials and manufactured goods pass through international waters, making stopovers at key ports on the way to their final destinations. Not only does the security of commercial trade need protection from sea pirates, even more important is the question of which trading partner has greater influence over



the terms of the trade agreement.

If a cargo container is passing through waters a particular country considers to be part of its sovereign area, then it can ask to be paid to let you pass through it. In the worst case, it could just stop your container going through its waters. This has happened in the past. The wars fought over control of the Suez Canal (1956) and the Panama Canal (1990) are prime examples of the importance of influence over key trade routes.

Every smart country's goal is to have greater bargaining power than its competitors. This explains why the US maintains 800 military bases around the world. Little consideration is given to shared culture or values in this global quest for influence. The US supports democracy, but not if it results in the election of a leader misaligned to its strategic interests.

Operation Ajax is a prime example. The US overthrew Iran's democratically elected prime minister, Mohammed Mosaddegh (1953), in favour of dictatorial monarch Reza Pahlavi. Mosaddegh wanted to nationalise Iran's oil fields, with a vision to keep the proceeds local. The US wanted the proceeds to continue being channelled to the overseas shareholders of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, now BP.

The same thing happened a year later in Guatemala (1954) with Operation PBFortune. The democratically elected Prime Minister Jacobo Arbenz was overthrown by the US in favour of dictator Carlos Armas. Arbenz wanted to carry out reforms that made it difficult for the United Fruit Company to continue to do business in Guatemala.

China has a strong cultural narrative as to why it deserves to be the world leader.

There are dozens more examples. None of this has ever had much to do with culture or values, and everything to do with strategic interests. It worked the same way in the heyday of European imperialism. Across the past 500 years, private charter companies were granted permission by their ruling monarchs to seek out new markets, using whatever level of force necessary. The British East India Company and, for that matter, its Dutch counterpart helped expand the strategic interests of European regimes far beyond geographical Europe.

The pursuit of strategic interest has continued to be the defining feature of foreign policy and global conflict before and after the post-World War II rules-based world order. The US was reluctant to enter World Wars I and II. When it did, it made sure it won. In doing so, it used the full force of the most advanced weapons available at the time. This included nuclear strikes on two large civilian population centres in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Imperial Japan was defeated. The US won World War II.

The reason for entering both wars was not based on a contest of values or clashing cultures. It was in response to specific threats posed to American geopolitical and military interests, and fair enough too. In its immediate aftermath, the sole objective of the US was to minimise competition against its on-going interests. There are no surprises it found itself plunged into many different

wars in foreign lands. The Soviet Union had to be stopped from ending up at the top of the global food chain. This was a clash of competing ambitions, more so than a clash of competing ideologies, let alone civilisations.

After the US won the Cold War, China emerged as America's new rival. Despite communist origins in its 1949 Revolution, from 1978 onwards China began to undergo a series of reforms led by Deng Xiaoping. This enabled China to open up to new markets and in less than two decades emerge as an economic giant. Its capacity to produce consumer goods on a mass scale is unparalleled in human history. With economic growth comes the capacity to spend more on defence. China has made the most of this, growing bigger and more powerful, and also has one thing the West presently lacks: a strong cultural narrative as to why it deserves to be the world leader. This narrative is genuinely believed by China's academic, political and military elites, which have the capacity to channel this down to all sections of the society using the full force of state-controlled media and a strong education system.

We in the English-speaking West have neither luxury at present. The narrative says China was humiliated by Western powers during the Opium Wars (1839–1842) and Britain taking Hong Kong. Western powers had China sign a series of what it believed were unequal treaties to allow European imperial powers to gain undue advantage of Chinese sovereign territories, as well as control over trade. This narrative says it is now China's turn to alter the balance of power. It wants to militarise the South China Sea to have control over the trade routes.

The West should continue to pursue strategic interest.

Its academics frequently cite the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) as a precedent where the US did not appreciate Soviet-installed missiles in its backyard in the Gulf of Mexico. China argues that the waters and islands in the South China Sea are its backyard and it can do whatever it wants there.

So let us apply our formula. There are only four options:

1. The US maintains its position, and China backs off.
2. China rises to the top, and the US backs off.
3. The US and China reach a bilateral power-sharing arrangement with designated spheres of influence.
4. Both the US and China drop their aspirations and back off.

The fourth of these would allow for the vacuum to be filled by a third party. That could well be Russia. If none of the four options could be agreed upon, the undesirable fifth option is conflict. Taiwan, South Korea and Japan are aligned with the US against their fellow Asian neighbour, China. Russia is aligned with China against a fellow European-Christian nation, the US.

So where do cultural, ethnic, linguistic, or civilisational considerations come into play? Their role is in forming delineations, not conflicts. Just as the English and French first fought each other for eight centuries but later ended up joining forces with the Ottomans against the Russians then later



against the Ottomans, one simply never knows what may come of the US–China rivalry.

If the two had a common opponent, an alliance would emerge within a breath. The US and China are both capable of forging alliances with those who do not share their values. For instance, China does not want an Islamist regime inside its own national borders, hence its crackdown on its Uighur population. Yet China is perfectly comfortable supporting an Islamist regime around the corner in Afghanistan led by the Taliban after the 15 August 2021 takeover. This is because China and the Taliban share interests in keeping the US out of the region.

The US also does not want Islamists reaching its own borders, hence the War on Terror after 11 September 2001. Yet the US was perfectly comfortable supporting the Islamist militant Mujahideen against the Soviet Union during the Soviet–Afghan War (1979–1989).

To sum this up, political conflicts are usually based on competing strategic interests rather than competing cultural values. The English-speaking West should continue to pursue our strategic interest. Yet in doing so, those of us who believe our values to be universal must remind our political elite that, where possible, it is worth avoiding unholy alliances with those who are diametrically opposed to our way of life.

It is when we start practising what we preach that we can say we have restored confidence in our capacity to continue to lead the world for the overall good of humanity.

Dr Sherry Sufi is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Public Affairs, contributing to the work of the Centre for the Australian Way of Life. His PhD thesis was on language and nationalism.

This article from the [Spring 2021 edition](#) of the [IPA Review](#) is written by IPA Senior Fellow Sherry Sufi.