



# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

REVIEW ESSAY

## Conflict or Cooperation?

Three Visions Revisited

BY RICHARD K. BETTS

November/December 2010

*Published on October 21, 2010*

"Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slave of some defunct economist," John Maynard Keynes once wrote. Politicians and pundits view the world through instincts and assumptions rooted in some philosopher's Big Idea. Some ideas are old and taken for granted throughout society. For most Americans, it is the ideas of the liberal tradition, from John Locke to Woodrow Wilson, that shape their thinking about foreign policy. The sacred concepts of freedom, individualism, and cooperation are so ingrained in U.S. political culture that most people assume them to be the natural order of things, universal values that people everywhere would embrace if given the chance.

In times of change, people wonder more consciously about how the world works. The hiatus between the Cold War and 9/11 was such a time; conventional wisdom begged to be reinvented. Nearly a century of titanic struggle over which ideology would be the model for organizing societies around the globe -- fascism, communism, or Western liberal democracy -- had left only the last one standing. After a worldwide contest of superpowers, the only conflicts left were local, numerous but minor. What would the driving forces of world politics be after the twentieth century, the century of total war?

Among the theorists who jumped into the market for models of the future, three stood out: Francis Fukuyama, Samuel Huntington, and John Mearsheimer. Each made a splash with a controversial article, then refined the argument in a book -- Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man*, Huntington in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, and Mearsheimer in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Each presented a bold and sweeping vision that struck a chord with certain readers, and each was dismissed by others whose beliefs were offended or who jumped to conclusions about what they thought the arguments implied. (Reactions were extreme because most debate swirled around the bare-bones arguments in the initial articles rather than the full, refined versions in the later books. This essay aims to give the full versions of all three arguments their due.)

None of the three visions won out as the new conventional wisdom, although Fukuyama's rang truest when the Berlin Wall fell, Huntington's did so after 9/11, and Mearsheimer's may do so once China's power is full grown. Yet all three ideas remain beacons, because even practical policymakers who shun ivory-tower theories still tend to think roughly in terms of one of them, and no other visions have yet been offered that match their scope and depth. Each outlines a course toward peace and stability if

statesmen make the right choices -- but none offers any confidence that the wrong choices will be avoided.

## CONVERGENCE OR DIVERSITY?

Most optimistic was Fukuyama's vision of the final modern consensus on democracy and capitalism, the globalization of Western liberalism, and the "homogenization of all human societies," driven by technology and wealth. Some were put off by his presentation of a dense philosophical interpretation of Hegel and Nietzsche, but of the three visions, Fukuyama's still offered the one closest to mainstream American thinking. It resonated with other testaments to the promise of American leadership and Western norms, such as Joseph Nye's idea of soft power, G. John Ikenberry's global constitutionalism, and the democratic peace theory of Michael Doyle and others. And it went beyond the celebration of economic globalization exemplified by the works of pundits such as Thomas Friedman. Fukuyama's version was deeper, distinguished in a way that would ultimately qualify his optimism and make his forecast more compatible with Mearsheimer's and Huntington's. Fukuyama de-emphasized mainstream liberalism's focus on materialism and justice by stressing "the struggle for recognition," the spiritual quest for human dignity and equality (or sometimes for superiority), as a crucial ingredient in the transformation.

Understood properly, Fukuyama was nowhere near as naive as his critics assumed. He did not claim that history (in Hegel's sense of a progression of human relations from lordship and bondage to freedom, equality, and constitutional government) had fully ended; rather, he argued that it was in the process of ending, with the main obstacles overcome but loose ends still to be tied up. His main point

was that "liberal democracy remains the only coherent political aspiration that spans different regions and cultures across the globe," but he recognized that illiberal politics and conflict would persist for some time in the developing world, which remains "stuck in history."

Fukuyama likened the process of history to a strung-out wagon train, in which some wagons get temporarily stopped, damaged, or diverted but eventually arrive at the same destination. With no more fundamental disagreements about how societies should be organized, there would be nothing important to fight about. Fukuyama's original essay in *The National Interest* in 1989 was quite ahead of its time, written before Mikhail Gorbachev ended the Cold War. Even many who mistakenly saw the message as simplistic assumed that the collapse of communism left Western values as the wave of the future, and catastrophic war a relic of the past.

Like most red-blooded Americans, Fukuyama rejected the sour realist theory of international relations, which sees history not as a progression toward enlightenment and peace but as a cycle of conflict. Epochal threats made realism persuasive during much of the century of total war, but at bottom it is alien to American instincts and popular only among some cranky conservatives, Marxists, and academic theorists. (I have been accused of being among them.) Most people happily pronounced it passé once the communist threat imploded. "Treating a disease that no longer exists," Fukuyama claimed, "realists now find themselves proposing costly and dangerous cures to healthy patients."

Mearsheimer, however, is an unregenerate realist, and he threw cold water on the Cold War victory. Bucking the tide of optimism, he argued that international life would continue to be the brutal competition for power it had always been. He characterized the competition as tragic because

countries end in conflict not out of malevolence but despite their desire for peace. In the absence of a world government to enforce rights, they find it impossible to trust one another, and simply striving for security drives them to seek control of their environment and thus dominance. If peace is to last, it will have to be fashioned from a stable balance of power, not the spread of nice ideas. In short, there is nothing really new about the new world.

Mearsheimer was a party pooper, defying what seemed to be common sense. Many found it easy to write him off when he claimed the revival of traditional conflicts would soon make everyone nostalgic for the simplicity and stability of the Cold War. But realism can never be written off for long. This school of thought has always agitated, even angered, American liberals and neoconservatives (who are in many ways just liberals in wolves' clothing). The theory falls out of favor whenever peace breaks out, but it keeps coming back because peace never proves permanent. Mearsheimer's vision is especially telling because it is an extreme version of realism that does not see any benign actors in the system and assumes that all great powers seek hegemony: "There are no status quo powers . . . save for the occasional hegemon that wants to maintain its dominating position."

## THE WEST AND THE REST

Huntington's idea, first broached in this magazine, was the most novel and jarring. Like Fukuyama, Huntington recognized the impact of globalization, but he saw it generating conflict rather than consensus. In tune with Mearsheimer, he believed "soft power is power only when it rests on a foundation of hard power," but he saw the relevant concentrations of power as transnational cultural areas -- eight basic civilizations -- rather than particular states. What Fukuyama saw as a liberal bow

wave, Huntington saw as the crest of the wave, an ethnocentric Western model whose force had peaked. To Huntington, the world was unifying economically and technologically but not socially. "The forces of integration in the world are real and are precisely what are generating counterforces of cultural assertion," he wrote. The West would remain dominant for some time but was beginning a gradual decline relative to other civilizations, especially those in Asia. The biggest cleavage in world politics would be between the civilizations of the West and "the rest."

Huntington packed his 1996 book with data about the upsurge of non-Western cultures: the small and shrinking proportion of the world's population made up by the West and Japan (15 percent at the time); the decreasing percentage of people abroad speaking English; the "indigenization" of higher education replacing the custom of study abroad, which had given Third World elites personal experience of the West; the revival of non-Christian religions everywhere; and so on. To Huntington, there was more than one wagon train, to use Fukuyama's image, and the ones on a different route were gathering speed.

Huntington's main point was that modernization is not the same as westernization. Foreigners' participation in Western consumer culture does not mean that they accept Western values, such as social pluralism, the rule of law, the separation of church and state, representative government, or individualism. "The essence of Western civilization is the Magna Carta, not the Magna Mac," Huntington wrote. This means that "somewhere in the Middle East a half-dozen young men could well be dressed in jeans, drinking Coke, listening to rap, and between their bows to Mecca, putting together a bomb to blow up an American airliner."

The homogenization Fukuyama saw resembled what Huntington called "Davos culture," referring to the annual meeting of elites in Switzerland. This was the transnational consensus of the jet set, who, Huntington wrote, "control virtually all international institutions, many of the world's governments, and the bulk of the world's economic and military capabilities." Huntington, however, saw politics like a populist and pointed out how thin a veneer this elite was -- "less than 50 million people or 1 percent of the world's population." The masses and middle classes of other civilizations have their own agendas. The progress of democratization celebrated at the end of history does not foster universal values but opens up those agendas and empowers nativist movements. "Politicians in non-Western societies do not win elections by showing how Western they are," Huntington reminded readers. Although he did not say so, the mistaken identification of modernization with westernization comes naturally to so many U.S. analysts because they understand exotic countries through stays at Western-style hotels and meetings with cosmopolitan Davos people -- the local frontmen -- rather than through conversations in local languages with upwardly mobile citizens.

Many misread Huntington's initial article as a xenophobic call to arms for the West against "the rest." The later book made clear that his aim was quite the opposite: to prevent the growing clash of civilizations from becoming a war of civilizations. He called for humility instead of hubris, writing, "Western belief in the universality of Western culture suffers three problems: it is false; it is immoral; and it is dangerous." Spreading Western values does not promote peace but provokes resistance: "If non-Western societies are once again to be shaped by Western culture, it will happen only as a result of the expansion, deployment, and impact of Western power. Imperialism is the necessary logical

consequence of universalism." The wiser alternative, he argued, is to accept that "the security of the world requires acceptance of global multiculturalism."

So Fukuyama's solution was Huntington's problem. To avoid escalating conflict between civilizations requires rejecting universalism, respecting the legitimacy of non-Western cultures, and, most of all, refraining from intervention in the conflicts of non-Western civilizations. Staying out, Huntington wrote, "is the first requirement of peace." This would turn out to be especially difficult in dealing with the Islamic world, which, he said, has a record of being "far more involved in intergroup violence than the people of any other civilization."

## AFTER 9/11

When al Qaeda struck the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, many skeptics decided that Huntington had been prescient after all. The Middle East expert Fouad Ajami wrote in *The New York Times*, "I doubted Samuel Huntington when he predicted a struggle between Islam and the West. My mistake." Fukuyama nevertheless remained untroubled. In the afterword to a later edition of his book, he argued that Muslim countries outside the Arab world would be able to democratize and that violent Islamist doctrines are simply radical ideologies inspired by Western fascism and communism and "do not reflect any core teachings of Islam." In the original book, Fukuyama dismissed Islam as a challenge to the West because it had no appeal outside areas that were already Islamic: "It can win back lapsed adherents, but has no resonance for young people in Berlin, Tokyo, or Moscow."

Writing before 9/11, Fukuyama saw the Islamic exception as a minor distraction. Mearsheimer had nothing at all to say about it, since no Islamic state is a great power, the only political unit he considers



important. As for terrorism, the word does not even appear in the index to either of their books. Huntington, in contrast, forthrightly saw Islam as a significant challenge, believing that it is more vibrant than Fukuyama thought. For example, he explained that Islamic fundamentalists are disproportionately intellectuals and technocrats from "the more 'modern' sectors of the middle class."

Of the three, only Huntington anticipated how big a loose end in the end of history Islam would be. After *The Clash of Civilizations* was published, the Islamic world presented a multifront military challenge to Americans -- partly as the United States sought to defend itself against al Qaeda; partly because Washington backs Israel, a Western outpost in a Muslim region; and partly because President George W. Bush scorned Huntington's warning against meddling and launched the disastrous invasion of Iraq, which antagonized Muslims around the world. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Fukuyama and Mearsheimer seemed to have missed where the action would be. None of the three, however, believed that terrorism and Islamic revolution would remain the main events.

In the post-Cold War hiatus, the visions of Fukuyama, Huntington, and Mearsheimer pointed to very different forces setting the odds of conflict or cooperation. These visions seemed starkly opposed to one another, and those who found one convincing considered the others flat-out wrong. But when one peels away the top layers of the three arguments and gets down to the conditions the authors set for their forecasts, it turns out that they point in a remarkably similar -- and pessimistic -- direction.

By the end his book, Fukuyama -- the most optimistic of the three -- turns out to lack conviction. His vision is more complex and contingent than other versions of liberal theory, and less triumphant. He goes beyond the many who embrace globalization and Davos culture and worries that economic

plenty and technological comforts are not enough to keep history ended, because "man is not simply an economic animal." The real story is the moral one, the struggle for recognition. Fukuyama frets that Nietzsche's idea of the will to power -- that people will strive to be not just equal but superior -- will reignite the impulses to violence that the end of history was supposed to put to rest. He admits that this spiritual dimension gives power to the least Davos-like forces: nationalism (which Mearsheimer sees as a major engine of international conflict) and religion (which Huntington sees as the most underestimated motivating force in politics).

Converging with the other two authors, Fukuyama worries that a Western civilization that went no further than the triumph of materialism and justice "would be unable to defend itself from civilizations . . . whose citizens were ready to forsake comfort and safety and who were not afraid to risk their lives for the sake of dominion." Although confident that history is ending, he concedes that boredom with the result, or exceptions to the rule, may restart it. By the last chapter of Fukuyama's book, Nietzsche has gained on Hegel, and history seems to be at not an end but an intermission.

## WILL CHINA RESTART HISTORY?

The West's future relations with China, the one country on the way to ending the era of unipolarity, is the issue that brings the implications of the three visions closest to one another. Each author offers an option for avoiding conflict. For Fukuyama, that option is for China to join the West and accept the end of history. For Mearsheimer, it is for the West to form a potent coalition to balance and contain China's power. For Huntington, it is the reverse -- to respect China's difference and hold back from attempts to stifle its influence. (Huntington considers both confrontation and accommodation

plausible but believes the former would require actions more decisive than what U.S. policy has yet contemplated.) None of the three, however, gives any reason to believe that these courses toward peace are as likely to be taken as ones that promise a clash.

Fukuyama has little to say about China and does not claim that it will necessarily evolve along Western lines. This leaves it as an elephant-sized exception to the end of history, with no reason to expect that its "struggle for recognition" will not match those of rising powers that have come before. Both Huntington and Mearsheimer assume that China will seek hegemony in Asia. Huntington also presents data showing China as the only major power that has been more violent than Muslim states; in crises, it has used force at a rate more than four times as high as that of the United States. He also notes that Chinese culture is uncomfortable with multipolarity, balance, and equality -- potential grounds for international stability on Western terms. Instead, he argues, the Chinese find hierarchy and the historic "Sinocentric" order in East Asia most natural.

As for Mearsheimer, China is the issue on which his tragic diagnosis is, sadly, most convincing (although his prescription may not be). His early forecast that NATO would disintegrate after the Cold War has worn thinner with each passing year, whereas Fukuyama's and Huntington's belief that the unity of the West has put insecurity into permanent remission there has held up better so far. On the future of China, however, Mearsheimer has more of the historical record supporting his pessimism. As the scholar Robert Gilpin has argued, "hegemonic transitions" -- when a rising power begins to overtake the dominant one -- have rarely been peaceful. The United Kingdom's bow to the United States a century ago was, but Fukuyama and Huntington could chalk that one up to cultural and ideological affinity -- ingredients absent between China and the United States.

To Mearsheimer, the liberal policy of "engagement" offers no solution to China's rising power and will only make it worse. "The United States has a profound interest in seeing Chinese economic growth slow," he writes. "However," he continues, "the United States has pursued a strategy to have the opposite effect." But economic warfare that could work toward hobbling China would also provoke it and is not a plausible option in any case.

If one believes the rest of Mearsheimer's book, China's rise should not alarm the author so much. He argues that bipolar international systems are naturally the most stable. He denies that the current system is unipolar, but it is hard to see it as genuinely multipolar; no other power yet rivals the United States. If the Cold War system qualified as bipolar, a coming one in which China becomes a second superpower should, too.

So should Americans relax after all? No. Affection for bipolarity is wrong. It rests too much on the fortunate "long peace" of the Cold War -- which was not that stable much of the time -- and it is not clear why lessons should not be drawn from the other examples of bipolarity that produced catastrophic wars: Athens versus Sparta and Rome versus Carthage. Other realists, such as Geoffrey Blainey and Robert Gilpin, are more convincing in seeing hierarchy as the most stable order and parity as a source of miscalculation and risk taking. If stability is the only thing worth caring about, then conceding Chinese dominance in Asia could be the lesser evil. Yet Mearsheimer fears potential Chinese hegemony in the region. So either way, the realist prognosis looks grim.

Optimism depends on alternatives that all of the three theorists consider unlikely. One is the common liberal vision, but this is the simple materialist sort that Fukuyama considers too sterile to last.

Another would be a conservative prescription of restraint, such as Huntington's, but this is out of character for Americans and has been ever since they became accustomed to muscular activism after 1945. In his book *The Post-American World*, Fareed Zakaria combines something of both of these. He sees a world of reduced danger as economics trumps politics. But there is a leaden lining in his optimism, too. Zakaria views the U.S. political system as its "core weakness" because of the gap between the savvy cosmopolitan elite (the Davos people) and the myopic popular majority that drags the country down. If their cherished political system is the problem, can Americans really be hopeful?

Huntington is more of a democrat, yet he also fears that Americans will not face up to hard choices. "If the United States is not willing to fight against Chinese hegemony, it will need to foreswear its universalism," he warns -- but this would be an unlikely sharp turn away from tradition and triumph. "The greatest danger," he fears, "is that the United States will make no clear choice and stumble into a war with China without considering carefully whether this is in its national interest and without being prepared to wage such a war effectively."

## THE LIMITS OF BIG IDEAS

None of the three authors wrote of the darkest visions about the future, which go beyond politics. (For example, Martin Rees, in his book *Our Final Hour*, and Fred Iklé, in *Annihilation From Within*, reveal all too many ways in which natural disasters or scientific advances in bioengineering, artificial intelligence, and weapons of mass destruction could trigger apocalyptic results.) Nevertheless, the three most arresting visions that focused on world politics after the Cold War have turned out to be disturbing. The world in 2010 hardly seems on a more promising track than when Fukuyama,

Huntington, and Mearsheimer made their cases, and few today would bet that statesmen will make the policy choices the three recommended.

This is a reminder that simple visions, however powerful, do not hold up as reliable predictors of particular developments. Visions are vital for clarifying thinking about the forces that drive international relations, the main directions to expect events to take, and one's basic faith in matters of politics, but they cannot account for many specifics in the actual complexity of political life. The biggest ideas may also yield the least accurate estimates. The psychologist Philip Tetlock, in *Expert Political Judgment*, compiled detailed scorecards for the predictions of political experts and found that ones known for overarching grand theories ("hedgehogs," in Isaiah Berlin's classification) did worse on average than those with more complicated and contingent analyses ("foxes") -- and that the forecasting records of any sorts of experts turn out to be very weak. Readers looking for an excuse to ignore dire predictions might also take comfort from evidence that forecasting is altogether hopeless. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, the author of *The Black Swan*, argues that most world-changing developments turn out to be predicted by no one, the result of highly improbable events outside analysts' equations. The overwhelming randomness of what causes things in economic and political life is inescapable, Taleb argues; big ideas are only big illusions.

Reminders of the limits of theory ring true to practical people. But if causes and effects are hopelessly random, then there is no hope for informed policy. Terminal uncertainty, however, is not an option for statesmen. They cannot just take shots in the dark, so they cannot do without some assumptions about how the world works. This is why practical people are slaves of defunct economists or contemporary

political theorists. Policymakers need intellectual anchors if they are to make informed decisions that are any more likely to move the world in the right direction than the wrong one.

So what do the three visions offer? Despite what seemed like stark differences when they were first advanced, many of their implications wound up being on the same page. Fukuyama captured the drama of the West's final unification, a momentous consolidation of liberalism on a grand scale and a world-shaping development even if the Western model does not prove universal. A less ambitious version of Fukuyama's vision that stops short of demanding the full westernization of "the rest" is quite compatible with Huntington's, which urged the West to concentrate on keeping itself together, solving its own problems, reversing a trend of creeping decadence, and renewing its vitality. In contrast to many U.S. liberals' preference, Huntington sought universalism at home and multiculturalism abroad. Fukuyama's vision can also be surprisingly compatible with Mearsheimer's, since Fukuyama conceded that realism still applied to dealings with the part of the world still stuck in history. (Mearsheimer, however, disagreed with the notion that Western states had outgrown the possibility of war among themselves.)

Huntington, too, accepted much of realism, since in his view, civilizational struggle is still played out in large part among the "core states" in each culture. He also agreed that the China question could not be resolved by Davos-style liberalism's solution -- engagement through international institutions -- and instead required the United States to make a clearheaded choice between accepting Chinese hegemony in Asia and engineering a military coalition to block it. Huntington also believed deeply in the liberal values celebrated as the end of history and argued for strengthening them within the West; he simply believed the world has other vibrant histories, too. In the end, with a big discount for the

limitations of any grand theory, Huntington's combination of radical diagnosis and conservative prescription is the most trenchant message of the three.

The most significant similarity, and a dispiriting one, is that all three authors were out of step with the attitudes that have dominated U.S. foreign policy and made it overreach after the Cold War. First, in different ways, all three saw beyond Davos-style liberalism and recognized that noneconomic motives would remain powerful roiling forces. Mearsheimer did not focus on the importance of moral dignity and identity, as the other two did, but he argued even more forcefully than they did that trade, prosperity, and law in themselves do not guarantee peace. Second, none supported crusading neoconservatism. (Fukuyama broke with the neoconservatives over the Iraq war.) Neoconservatives share Huntington's diagnosis of the threat to peace but recoil from his prescription of U.S. restraint. And they fervently reject realists' preference for caution over idealism. The problem is that Davos-style liberalism and militant neoconservatism have both been more influential than the three more profound and sober visions of Fukuyama, Huntington, and Mearsheimer. If good sense is to shape U.S. foreign policy, there needs to be a fourth vision -- one that integrates the compatible elements of these three in a form that penetrates the American political mainstream.

---

RICHARD K. BETTS is Director of the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia University and an Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. His latest book is *Enemies of Intelligence*.

---

Copyright © 2025 by the Council on Foreign Relations, Inc.

All rights reserved. To request permission to distribute or reprint this article, please visit [ForeignAffairs.com/Permissions](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/Permissions).

**Source URL:** <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2010-10-21/conflict-or-cooperation>



