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Culture and Interstate Dispute

The debate on the impact of culture on the conduct of international affairs, in particular on conflict proneness, continues. Yet, the question of whether markers of identity influence conflicts between states is still subject to disputes, and the empirical evidence on Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis is ambiguous. This policy brief summarizes a recent study where we employ an array of measures of cultural distance between states, including time-varying and continuous variables, and run a battery of alternative empirical models. Regardless of how we operationalize cultural distance and the empirical specification, our models consistently show that conflict is more likely between culturally distant countries.

In his controversial "The Clash of Civilizations" thesis, Samuel Huntington argues that cultural identity is to become the principal focus of individual allegiance and could ultimately lead to an increasing number of clashes between states, regardless of political incentives and constraints. In the post-Cold War world in particular, Huntington (1993) argues that the main source of conflict will not be ideological, political or economic differences but rather cultural. In other words, fundamental differences between the largest blocks of cultural groups - the so-called "civilizations" - will increase the likelihood of conflict along the cultural fault lines separating these groups.

According to Huntington (1996, p.41), a civilization is "the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have." Huntington argues that the world could be divided into discrete macro-cultural areas: the Western, Latin American, Confucian (Sinic), Islamic, Slavic-Orthodox, Hindu, Japanese, Buddhist, and a "possible African" civilizations. As the list makes clear, the central defining characteristic of a civilization is religion, and in fact, conflicts between civilizations are mostly between peoples of different religions, while language is a secondary distinguishing factor (Huntington, 1996).

This brief summarizes the findings of our paper (Bove and Gokmen, forthcoming), which offers an empirical analysis of the relationship between identity and interstate disputes by including measures of cultural distance in the benchmark empirical models of the likelihood of militarized interstate disputes. By moving beyond simple indicators of common religion or similar language, our findings suggest that conflict is more likely between culturally distant countries. For example, the average marginal effect of international language barrier on the probability of conflict relative to the average probability of conflict is around 65%. Overall, we find that the average marginal impact of cultural distance on the likelihood of conflict relative to the average probability of conflict is in the range of 10% to 129%.

Measuring cultural distance

To effectively capture cross-cultural variations between states, we employ five different indexes along linguistic and cultural distances. First, to capture the linguistic distance between two countries, we use the language barrier index (Lohmann, 2011). It ranges between 0 and 1 where 0 means no language barrier, i.e. the two languages are basically identical, and 1 means that the two languages have no features in common (e.g., Tonga-Bangladesh). Since more than one language is spoken in some countries, we employ two alternative indexes: the basic language barrier, which uses the main official languages, and the international language barrier, which uses the most widely spoken world languages.

Second, we adopt Kogut and Singh's (1988) standardized measure of cultural differences, as well as an improved version provided by Kandogan (2012). Although the degree of cultural differences is notably difficult to conceptualize, Kogut and Singh (1988) offer a simple and standardized measure of cultural distance, which is based on Hofstede's (1980) dimensions of national culture. In particular, Kogut & Singh (1988) develop a measure of "cultural distance" (CD) as a composite index based on the deviation from each of Hofstede's (1980) four national culture scales: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, and individualism.

These dimensions of culture are rooted in people's values, where values are "broad preferences for one state of affairs over others [...]; they are opinions on how things are and they also affect our behavior" (Hofstede, 1985). As such, by explicitly taking into account the values held by the majority of the population in each of the surveyed countries, these dimensions can effectively capture differences in countries' norms, perceptions, and ways to deal with conflicting situations. Higher cultural distance pertains to higher divergence in opinions, norms, or values.

Third, to cross-validate our empirical findings on cultural distance and to duly take into account societal dynamics and changes in the composition of societies, we use another popular quantitative measure of cultural distance based on The World Values Surveys (WVS). From 1998 to 2006, we use the composite value of two dimensions of values, traditional vs. secular-rational values and survival vs. self-expression values, which account for more than 70% of the cross- cultural variance (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). The traditional vs. secular-rational values dimension captures the difference between societies in which religion is very important or not. The second dimension is linked to the transition from industrial society to post-industrial societies. Societies near the self-expression pole tend to prioritize wellbeing and the quality of life issues, such as women's emancipation and equal status for racial and sexual minorities, over economic and physical security. Broadly speaking, members of the societies in which individuals focus more on survival find foreigners and outsiders, ethnic diversity, and cultural change to be threatening.

Impact of culture on militarized interstate dispute

We estimate the benchmark model of Martin et al. (2008), which uses a large data set of military conflicts in 1950-2000. We choose this model over other alternatives as it possibly has the most exhaustive list of controls that can potentially affect the probability of militarized interstate disputes (MIDs). We assess the impact of our cultural distance measures on conflict. All five measures of cultural distance have a positive effect on conflict involvement. In other words, culturally more distant states fight more on average. In column (i) of Table 1, we see that Language Barrier positively affects conflict, although insignificant. When we take into account International Language Barrier in column (ii), however, it has a positive and significant effect on conflict involvement. This should not come as a surprise as the part of the culture of a country that is reflected in a language

should be more related to the spoken languages rather than the official ones.

To assess the magnitude of the effects, we calculate for each model the standardized marginal effect as the average marginal effect of a cultural distance variable on the probability of conflict relative to the average probability of conflict, which is about 0.0066. This effect is sizeable for International Language Barrier and is around 65%. When we use the Cultural Distance (Kogut) measure, instead, the results are qualitatively similar. The standardized marginal effect, however, is reduced and is now about 14%. The standardized marginal effect of Cultural Distance (Kandogan) on conflict probability is similar at 11. The effect of Cultural Distance (WVS) is also positive and significant. However, the large standardized marginal effect should be interpreted with caution, as the number of countries that are in the WVS is limited due to data availability. All the results from our cultural distance measures considered together, evidence suggests that cultural distance increases the likelihood of interstate militarized conflict.

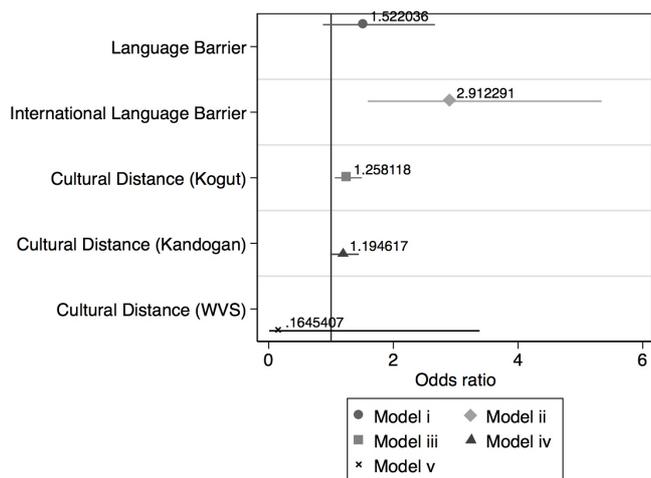*Table 1. Cultural distance and International conflict*

Dependent Variable: MID	i	ii	iii	iv	v
Language Barrier	0.420				
	(0.286)				
International Language Barrier		1.69***			
		(0.309)			
Cultural Distance (Kogut)			0.230**		
			(0.088)		
Cultural Distance (Kandogan)				0.178*	
				(0.097)	
Cultural Distance (WVS)					2.801*
					(1.543)
Standardized Marginal Effect	25.37	64.96	13.63	10.56	129.36
N	197422	203166	83409	83409	4568

*p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01. Robust standard errors are given in parentheses clustered by dyad. Controls: LogDistance, Contiguity, Sum Areas, Colonial Link, Number of Peaceful Years, Alliance, UN Vote Correlation, Sum of Democracy Indexes, Number of Other Wars, Log Distance to Nearest War, Log Bilateral Openness, Log Multilateral Openness, Zero Trade Dummy, Common Official Language, Free Trade Areas, Number of GATT members in the Dyad, time fixed-effects and past conflict dummies (last 20 years.)

Additionally, in Figure 1, holding all other variables constant, we see a 25% and 19% increase in the odds of conflict for a one-unit increase in Cultural Distance (Kogut) and Cultural Distance (Kandogan) variables, respectively; while the same increase in Language Barrier raises the odds of conflict by 52%.

Figure 1. Odds ratio of coefficients in Table 1

Note: Cultural distance (WVS) is scaled down by 100 for the sake of readability.

Discussion and conclusion

Samuel Huntington's thesis on the "Clash of Civilizations" is one of the most fascinating and debated issues in the field of international relations, and has sparked a long-lasting debate about its validity among academics, practitioners and policy-makers. The scholarly literature on international studies has long grappled with how to define, characterize, and analyze his thesis. Although some of the seminal works provided little support to Huntington's thesis, later studies seemed to partially confirm it. While most of these studies use Huntington's measure of the concept of civilizations, his classification was tentative, imprecise and difficult to operationalize. Moreover, previous studies rely on a "dichotomization" of civilizations, which is a continuous concept, and treat it as an immutable object, while it is certainly subject to variation over time.

Political events in recent years, such as the NATO-Russia confrontation over Ukraine, Russia's attempts to resurrect its cultural and political dominance in the former Soviet sphere, the unprecedented rise of Islamic extremism in the Middle East, the foundation of an organization like ISIS with a declared aim to build a Muslim caliphate and wage war on Western civilization, or the rise of independence and anti-EU movements in Europe, have been attributed by many political observers to cultural clashes. We argue that whether and how identity impacts the likelihood of MID hinges crucially on the definition and operationalization of "civilizations" or cultural similarity.

We therefore introduce a number of ad-hoc measures of cultural distance in the benchmark empirical models on the likelihood of MIDs. Regardless of how we deal with the definition of cultural distance, the empirical evidence points consistently towards the importance of cultural distance in explaining the odds of interstate conflict. Although the extent of evidence for an effect of cultural distance on conflict clearly depends on model specification and data considerations, in particular the size of the effect, our results suggest that conflict is more likely between culturally distant countries.

Our study highlights the importance of the awareness of the impact of culture in international relations. Culture can be an important determinant of foreign policy as pronounced differences in social norms and behaviors of collective groups might create frictions between states and shape the way they interact. Thus, educating people in cross-cultural sensitivity should be a policy priority. That is to say that the knowledge and acceptance of other cultures are important to avoid tensions and potential conflicts.

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