ARE CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS CHARACTERIZED BY THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS OR INTER-CIVILIZATIONAL DIALOGUE? THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF INDIA'S SOFT POWER AND YOUTH DIPLOMACY

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The system of international relations is developing through a combination of dialogue and conflict between civilizations. Conflicts based on cultural, religious or ideological differences still exist. Although they sometimes lead to major crises, it must be emphasized that significant and systematic efforts toward dialogue, cooperation and mutual understanding between civilizations are being gradually strengthened, particularly through diplomatic engagement, soft power instruments and youth-centered initiatives.

On the one hand, historical conflicts between civilizations, along with religious and cultural confrontations and struggles for political, economic or social dominance, may generate serious consequences. The tragic outcomes of historical, ethnic, religious and cultural divisions in the former Yugoslavia at the end of the twentieth century clearly illustrate this dynamic. 1 Samuel Huntington emphasized that during the Yugoslav conflict, external actors often supported co-civilizational parties not strictly because of ideological or economic interests, but due to perceived cultural kinship. He further argued that "the most dangerous cultural conflicts lie along the fault lines of civilizations."2

[1] International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. (n.d.). *What was the former Yugoslavia conflict*. https://www.icty.org/en/about/what-former-yugoslavia-conflict

[2] Huntington, S. P. (1993). The clash of civilizations? *Foreign Affairs*, 72(3), 22–49. Council on Foreign Relations.

Such confrontations frequently emerge where sharp differences in traditions, identities and historical narratives intersect. Since the collapse of the bipolar international system, numerous crises appear to confirm that cultural identity continues to influence global political alignment. The Israel-Palestine conflict is often presented as an example of confrontation extending beyond territorial dispute into broader civilizational narratives. Similarly, the post-9/11 environment, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the "Arab Spring" and tensions in South Asia and Eastern Europe have reinforced perceptions that civilizational divisions remain politically mobilizing forces.3

However, in many of these cases, civilizational identity serves less as the root cause and more as a legitimizing narrative. Behind visible identity-based confrontations frequently lie deeper struggles over material resources, strategic influence, power distribution and geopolitical positioning. States often act based on national interests, while public opinion may mobilize along civilizational lines. This duality demonstrates that identity and material interests coexist within modern international relations.

At the same time, contemporary global politics shows strong evidence of expanding inter-civilizational dialogue. The end of the Cold War accelerated economic globalization and deepened interdependence. States increasingly recognize that isolation is incompatible with development. The logic of the modern global economy requires cooperation, market integration and institutional participation. Consequently, states often draw closer to one another not primarily from a civilizational perspective, but from strategic and economic interests.

Dialogue manifests itself in several practical forms. First, diplomatic relations function as a primary platform for engagement between civilizations. Embassies, consulates, summits and international forums provide opportunities for negotiation,

[3] Council on Foreign Relations. (2026, February 18). *Israeli-Palestinian conflict*. Global Conflict Tracker. https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/israeli-palestinian-conflict

conflict resolution, and partnership building. Institutions such as the United Nations create a structured environment where representatives of different cultural and political systems deliberate on global peace, security and development.

Second, global trade networks encourage economic interdependence. Organizations such as the World Trade Organization facilitate cooperation among states belonging to different cultural and civilizational backgrounds. Economic integration reduces incentives for large-scale confrontation by embedding states within systems of mutual benefit.

Third, cooperation in education forms a durable foundation for civilizational dialogue. Academic mobility programs, research collaboration and international universities bring together students and scholars from diverse cultural backgrounds. The growing number of students studying abroad demonstrates that educational exchange promotes tolerance and cross-cultural understanding. In this context, institutions such as Nalanda University symbolically and practically revive traditions of intercultural scholarship that historically connected different regions of Asia and beyond.[4]

Fourth, multilateral organizations provide institutional mechanisms for structured dialogue. Frameworks aimed at sustainable development, climate action, and global governance reform demonstrate that states increasingly address shared global challenges collectively rather than through civilizational isolation.

Within this broader transformation, India occupies a strategically significant position. As one of the world's oldest civilizations and the largest democracy, India simultaneously represents deep civilizational heritage and modern global engagement. Instead of framing international relations through confrontation between identity blocs, India increasingly promotes inclusive cooperation through soft power instruments.[5]

[4] Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (n.d.). *Nalanda University: A reimagined international institution*. https://www.mea.gov.in/nalanda-university.htm

[5] Woods, K. (2025, February 20). *Understanding the Global Soft Power Index 2025*. Brand Finance. https://brandfinance.com/insights/understanding-the-global-soft-power-index-2025

Cultural diplomacy-ranging from yoga and traditional knowledge systems to cinema, digital public infrastructure and educational partnerships strengthens India's ability to project influence through attraction rather than coercion.

Moreover, India's articulation of principles such as "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" reflects a normative approach that views humanity as interconnected rather than divided into irreconcilable civilizational camps. Through multilateral leadership, climate advocacy, development partnerships and youth engagement initiatives, India contributes to reframing global politics toward dialogue-oriented governance.

In this transformation, youth diplomacy plays a crucial role. Young leaders, researchers and students operate as mediators between civilizations in an increasingly digital and interconnected world. International youth forums, academic networks and cross-border collaboration initiatives demonstrate that emerging generations are capable of redefining identity politics in favor of cooperative problem-solving. Youth-driven engagement can transform civilizational diversity from a source of conflict into a foundation for global partnership.

In conclusion, although clashes between civilizations continue to shape certain geopolitical crises, contemporary international relations cannot be understood solely through the lens of inevitable confrontation. Structural interdependence, institutional cooperation, economic integration and youth-centered diplomacy demonstrate a broader tendency toward dialogue. While civilizational narratives remain influential, they are increasingly embedded within global governance frameworks driven by shared interests. Thus, contemporary international relations are characterized not by a pure clash, nor by complete harmony, but by a strategic interaction between identity and cooperation. The future trajectory of the global order will depend on how effectively states along with young leaders are able to institutionalize dialogue, ensure equitable development and employ soft power as a stabilizing instrument in an interconnected world.

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