
Iran and China: The Civilized States

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Overview

The concept of the "civilized state" is gaining increasing recognition, representing not just a particular situation and era but also an identity, a self-definition, and a means of understanding one's role on the global stage. Like all concepts, it has its own history and evolving application. This article explores the notion of the "civilized state" through the lens of the strategic agreement between Iran and China. It also examines its broader implications at both regional and global levels.

Introduction

Iran and China have entered into a 25-year agreement encompassing a wide range of areas, including economic, political, military, strategic, and cultural cooperation. Each of these domains could serve as a distinct area of study. This article, however, will focus on one key phrase from the leaked text of the agreement, allegedly signed by both nations, which begins with the words: "Two ancient Asian civilizations. [\[i\]](#)" (دو تمدن کهن آسیایی) Through this lens, we will examine the various dimensions of these self-descriptions, and through sparking some key questions will try to discuss all sides of this self-description and self-identification argument.

Meaning and Implications

"Iran and China are two ancient Asian civilizations." This statement indicates that both China and Iran view themselves as two civilized states. To fully grasp this, we need to interpret several key concepts:

1. **Civilization:** Represents a complex society with advanced cultural, political, and social development.
2. **Asian Civilization:** This signifies that these civilizations are rooted in Asia's historical and cultural context.
3. **The Civilized State:** Suggests that the state embodies advanced cultural and historical characteristics and contributes to defining what constitutes civilization on a broader scale.

Let's start with the number. the number **two** here signifies more than just a numerical value. It highlights the plurality of civilizations and an acknowledgment of both countries (Iran and China) of the existence and recognition of each other's civilizations. This counters the notion of a singular, universal civilization promoted by Western liberalism. In other words, it challenges the idea, proposed by Fukuyama [\[ii\]](#), that history has reached its end term and that the world has converged into one civilization.

This also signifies the existence of numerous other civilizations across the globe, particularly outside the West. The concept of "two" implies plurality, serving as a direct rejection of Western universalism.

Furthermore, the emphasis on **two** underscores that global institutions like the World Bank, IMF, UNESCO, and human rights organizations are all part of one civilization, so may not be accepted by other civilizations. These organizations may not be universally accepted, especially by other civilizations outside the Western context.

The Concept of Civilization

The concept of civilization is intricate and has different connotations in different eras and stages. Historically, as the West expanded beyond its own boundaries, the term "civilization" was often employed to describe this expansion. The idea of a

civilizing mission^[iii] imbued the term with a colonial connotation, positioning it in opposition to what was deemed "barbarism."

After the Cold War, the concept gained renewed prominence through the work of American scholar Samuel Huntington. Huntington accurately predicted the global power struggles that would arise as Western civilization pursued its goal of becoming a dominant, universal force. His influential ideas were a counterpoint to Francis Fukuyama's optimistic view that history had reached its endpoint. Huntington, who had been Fukuyama's mentor, introduced his views in the well-regarded journal *Foreign Affairs*^[iv].

He argued that the quest for Western liberal civilization to dominate would provoke reactions from other civilizations, leading to what he termed a "clash of civilizations." This notion has been criticized for implying inevitable conflict and failing to account for the potential for coexistence among civilizations. Huntington's concept was not entirely novel. Earlier English thinkers such as historian Arnold Joseph Toynbee and Islamologist Bernard Lewis had explored similar ideas. Toynbee's use of the concept damaged its reputation, leading to the concept being largely forgotten. In contrast, Lewis's work did not have as significant an impact.

The association of civilization with colonialism, particularly from a leftist perspective made this concept disgusting and bad, and this led to its marginalization in recent decades due to the dominance of liberal thought. However, as China's influence grows and the United States' relative power wanes, the concept of civilization is resurfacing within a new context, which can be described as a "post-unipolar" situation.

From this brief overview, it is evident that the concept of civilization is deeply complex, with a history marked by varying interpretations and issues. Research in this field employs a specialized methodology and is particularly prominent in Nordic countries. In German, this field of study is referred to as "Gryfgschicht."^[v]

In this renewed discourse, civilization is no longer defined by imperial dominance or a superior culture but by state-driven narratives. Countries such as China, Iran, Russia, Turkey, and India are key players in this discourse, each maintaining a unique relationship with Western civilization. This article will specifically examine China and Iran, although Turkey and Russia also hold varying degrees of significance for the Kurds.

The Politicization of Asia

In the nineteenth century, the world was European. The twentieth century was American. Now, the twenty-first century is increasingly becoming the era of Asia. This perspective aligns with Henry Kissinger's views in his book *Diplomacy*, where he suggests that this shift represents a form of natural law.^[vi]

Asia as a concept and phenomenon is particularly intriguing. It has rapidly ascended to global prominence, despite historically lacking a unified political or civilizational identity. As Kissinger notes in *World Order*^[vii], the notion of Asia as a concept is completely recent. Before Western colonialism, the nearly fifty countries that now identify as Asian did not consider themselves part of the unified continent or call themselves Asian. Unlike Europe, which was unified by entities like the Roman Empire or religious institutions, Asia lacked such a unified entity. Today, Asia is emerging as a significant political concept. It encompasses not only the two ancient civilizations of China and Iran but also other major players such as Russia, Japan, and India. Asia is thus becoming both a connecting and a differentiating force in global politics. Asia has emerged as a major pole in today's global politics, a position it did not hold just a few centuries ago. The label "two ancient Asian civilizations" underscores their deep historical roots while also highlighting Asia's evolving role on the world stage.

However, the concept of Asia is not without its complexities. It is often portrayed by Asians as a continent distinct from the issues faced by Europe, such as religious conflict or the acceptance of religious differences, as discussed by Parag Khanna

in *The Future is Asia*. This portrayal tends to be more optimistic than realistic. A closer look at religious conflicts across Asia reveals that interfaith relations are often marked by significant tension and mutual intolerance, rather than acceptance.

These depictions are political and geopolitical considerations, not just a truth and geographical reality. However, this separation is not merely for the sake of distinction, as two ancient Asian civilizations, but to establish a new principle: the interconnection between state and civilization. Both China and Iran operate as states within the state-based international system, yet they frequently invoke the idea of civilization. This brings us to a new concept in the modern international order: the "civilized state."

The Purpose of a Civilized State

The civil state is, above all, a departure from the dominant global model of the nation-state. This separation can be broadly categorized into two key factors: territory and culture. A nation-state is defined by its governance over a specific, limited territory, commonly referred to in state literature as its "territory." In contrast, a civilized state distinguishes itself through its emphasis on culture. This cultural centrality implies that its relationship with borders differs significantly from that of the nation-state, where territorial boundaries are paramount. Swedish sociologist Göran Therborn [\[viii\]](#) explains this in great detail.

When culture becomes the primary basis for defining the scope and territory of a state, it is easy to envision that states identifying as "civilized states" possess a cultural reach that extends beyond their legal borders. This is partly due to their imperial and colonial histories, which now serve as a cultural foundation that transcends modern territorial limits.

On this basis, these states justify extending their influence beyond their borders, using their power and resources to establish hegemony, access markets, and compete with regional and global rivals.

These states use this cultural orientation to justify intervention in other countries, particularly neighboring ones. For instance, in Turkey, this notion is articulated by Rabbi al-Hafeed, who suggests that the civilized state has a doctrine or grafted, hybrid belief that operates with an internal nationalist ideology and an external cultural identity [\[ix\]](#).

It represents the merging of two distinct worldviews within a single state: Leninism internally, Confucianism externally; Kemalism and Ottomanism. This blend of boundaries and boundlessness, culture and ideology, manifests in a state whose surrounding sphere interacts with it on a different basis. Consequently, we are confronted with an alternative approach to organizing the international system.

In this world order, the globe is portrayed much like in the past, where each region is dominated by a civilization that claims its own civilizational space. This represents a deliberate effort to establish regional systems in opposition to a global system. In each region, a distinct culture and civilization prevails, with unique characteristics that differentiate it from others. This framework enables civilized spaces to justify their separation, prioritizing group rights over individual rights. The dominance of group rights imposes civil values that individuals are compelled to follow. This type of world order operates on multiple levels and dimensions.

The civilized state thus introduces a hierarchical structure among countries, where not all states can claim the status of a civilized state. This hierarchy impacts many states' sovereignty, independence, and global presence. Liberal values such as individualism, rights, sovereignty, borders, and citizenship are redefined and subjected to pressure. In this framework, Western philosophies and ideas may face censorship and marginalization. In a national system, the individual acts as an agent—responsible, autonomous, and capable of making decisions. However, within civil organizations, the individual is not active but is expected to adhere to established civil values and codes.

Why and How Did the Civilized State Emerge?

In realistic and historical terms, the emergence of the civilized state can be understood as a response to the decline or crisis of liberal hegemony on the global stage. As the dominance of liberalism wanes, some nations that once felt constrained by this framework are now seeking to broaden their influence and redefine their roles. The civilized state thus represents one of the new political imaginations in a post-liberal world. This political imagination involves a return to the past while not abandoning the present. The expression of socialism with Chinese characteristics (中国特色社会主义) exemplifies this complexity. Arif Dirlik, a prominent scholar on China, has examined this slogan in detail, which was first introduced by Deng Xiaoping at the 12th Congress of the Communist Party of China [\[x\]](#).

As the words of the slogan show, socialism is separated from world socialism and given Chinese characteristics. This is another expression of accepting and bringing capitalism into the realm of socialism and keeping socialism as a set of special principles, especially in the field of party, discourse, and some other fields. At the same time, it is capitalizing all other areas. This method is similarly reflected in the concept of the civil state.

In geopolitical terms, a civilized state system aspiring to organize the world after the decline of Western hegemony envisions dividing the globe into regions controlled by states with ancient civilizations, using their cultural heritage to legitimize their authority. Here, the concept of civilization takes on an opposite meaning, where the fusion of state and civilization once again implies domination, self-granted rights, and the occupation of other territories and nations.

The Effect of the Convergence of Two Civilized States

When two civilized states come together, they often emphasize each other's visions and distinct characteristics. This is particularly evident when both countries in opposition to the United States are in a unique geopolitical situation. As the content suggests, the question arises: can their shared notion of civilization create a bridge between them? Through this concept, both countries seek to convey that the world is pluralistic, with alternative powers and regimes beyond the United States and the West. However, what do countries like Iran and China truly share, aside from their opposition to the U.S.? According to their constitutions, they are fundamentally different: China is a secular state, while Iran is a religious one. After the Cultural Revolution, China recognized that its survival hinged on opening up to the West, whereas Iran could not afford such openness. Despite these contrasts, they share key similarities: a lack of political freedom, centralization of power, and the repression of minorities. These commonalities make rapprochement feasible, though the instability in the Middle East complicates any prospect of long-term stability.

The convergence of civilized states in the Middle East carries significant implications for the Kurds. While such self-portrayal may foster understanding, this is only possible when countries do not face civilizational or geopolitical conflicts. For instance, Iran and Turkey, both positioning themselves as civilized states, are drawn into confrontation. The tensions in Sinjar and around Mosul exemplify the competition between these two states' ambitions. Iraq has long been a battleground for imperial conflict throughout modern history. If a global system based on the concept of civilized states emerges, these conflicts are likely to intensify.

Civilized states often perceive other nations as inferior and view them as part of their own cultural domain. This hierarchical perspective redefines sovereignty.

The rise of the civil state will have a direct impact on the Kurdish issue. As Kurdistan lies at the intersection of multiple civilizations in the region, its territory becomes a focal point for these forces, with more than one civilization viewing it as part of their civilizational domain. If the civil state positions itself as an alternative to the nation-state, civilized nations may

feel entitled to subjugate others, which directly opposes the right to self-determination. Meanwhile, Kurdistan has significantly benefited from changing the nature of Western sovereignty over recent decades, in other words, the erosion of the principle of non-intervention, made the international intervention in the region one of the changes that the Kurdistan region has directly benefited from. However, with the shift toward the civil state model, these states not only assert their sovereignty but also claim the right to act freely within their own territories.

The Consequences

The concept of the civil state is a new idea that has emerged as a consequence of a shifting global era and order. In Kurdish public discourse, the civil state is often viewed as a fusion of statehood and civilization, resulting in what is perceived as a "civilized" state. This interpretation paints the civil state as a modern, humane entity, rather than a nationalistic or discriminatory one. This optimistic perspective stems from a lack of literature and understanding about the meaning and historical development of the concept of civilization in Kurdish. This gap in knowledge leaves the Kurds vulnerable to the propaganda of such states.

This article provides a contemporary interpretation of the concept of the civil state and explores its complexities. The civil state is often discussed as an alternative to the liberal international system, particularly in the current post-unipolar era. This period is difficult to define, leading to various concepts and attempts to comprehend its nature. The civil state is one such concept. Amitabh Acharya even refers to it as a myth [xi].

However, Acharya is among the critics of the American system. Seeing this concept as a possibility is worrying for many small identities. While identities are becoming increasingly emphasized, detailed, and multiplied in the world, the development of civilized identity is the opposite. While the civil state is an expression of the desire for pluralism at the global level, it is also an attempt to suppress pluralism within the civilized space. As we have explained in this article, the self-description of both Iran and China as civilized states is based on a number of reactionary principles, myths, and desires, rather than realistic principles. But what is real is the emergence of other forces in the world outside the West. This is the first time such a phenomenon has occurred in the past five centuries. Multipower is the natural state of human history. Monopole is unique. A return to multipower would be a step backward.

Kurdistan finds itself at the crossroads of this struggle for civilizational dominance. The tensions between Iran and Turkey illustrate the immediate impact on the region, and similar dynamics could emerge if regional countries increasingly align with China. Kurdistan's future could involve various scenarios: facilitating cooperation among civilizations, becoming a battleground for their conflicts, or serving as a contested space for these emerging powers.

Endnote:

[i] <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/990054/>

[ii] Fukuyama, Francis (1989) The End of History? The National Interest, Summer 1989, No. 16, pp. 3-18

[iii] Watt, Carey A. Mann, Michael 2011 Civilizing Missions in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia: From Improvement to Development, Anthem Press.

[iv] Samuel P. Huntington 1993 The Clash of Civilizations? Foreign Affairs, Vol. 72, No. 3 (Summer), pp. 22-49

[v] KAI VOGELSANG 2012 CONCEPTUAL HISTORY: A SHORT INTRODUCTION. Oriens Extremus. Vol. 51 pp. 9-24

[vi] Kissinger, H. 1994 Diplomacy, Simon & Schuster

[vii] Henry Kissinger 2015 "World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History." Simon & Schuster

[viii] Therborn. Göran 2021 States, Nations, and Civilizations, Fudan journal of the humanities and social sciences, volume, 14,225_242

[ix] <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/rise-of-the-civilizational-state-in-post-nation-state-middle-east>

[x] Arif Dirlik (1989) Postsocialism? Reflections on "socialism with Chinese characteristics", Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars, 21:1,

[xi] Acharya, Amitav (2020) The Myth of the "Civilization State": Rising Powers and the Cultural Challenge to World Order, Ethnic & International Affairs, Vol.34. Issue 2.