

In what direction is the geopolitical world headed and what place does Taiwan have in it? What conflicts might be on the horizon? To understand this and related issues one has to step back a couple of decades and look at paradigmatic framing and development.

When political scientist Samuel Huntington published *The Clash of Civilizations* — as an article in 1992 and book in 1996 — he was responding to changes economic and otherwise. The Berlin Wall had fallen; the Cold War was over; and political scientist Francis Fukuyama was talking of the end of “ideological history.”

According to Huntington, with the victory of capitalism over socialistic communism, ideological conflicts could be over.

However, a new source of conflict was on the horizon: cultures and religions.

Post-colonial author Edward Said challenged this thesis in his 2001 essay “The Clash of Ignorance.”

Said said Huntington oversimplified matters, particularly in his broad-stroke claims of Islam versus the West. Religion and culture are dynamic and multifaceted; they should not be cast as static structures that present a guaranteed future conflict.

He was right. Huntington certainly was straining by trying to frame the world’s future divisions in conflicts that would be religious and cultural. Yet both missed two points.

First was the difference between the disciplines of physics and metaphysics, and the paradigms that each builds and relies upon.

Second, there is the increasing role and effect of “true believers” in a globalized society as

defined by Eric Hoffer in his work *The True Believer*.

Certainly, the economic and ideological dialectic did not end with the Cold War. Instead a new one was being formed. Conflict remained, but it now was within the capitalistic framework of a globalized world. A new struggle was gaining precedence.

In this new capitalistic paradigm, the future struggle would be between the haves and the have-nots, that is, between the oligarchs of capitalism and those remaining. The dialectic would go on and therefore pit the general 98 percent of the globalized world against the 2 percent that control the majority of wealth.

Huntington had been correct in positing that globalization had by no means eliminated sectarian and tribalistic conflict, but he erred in trying to simply transfer this conflict over to religion and culture. The economic dialectic was not dead, nor was the ideological.

Said had been correct in saying that Huntington's version of conflicting beliefs should not be framed with a narrow interpretation of culture and religion, but he missed the effect and role of the true believer in matters of culture and religion in a globalized world, especially as the availability of weapons of destruction and automatic weapons increased.

Conflict will always be found in ideology, culture and religion if for no other reason than that these are metaphysical fields of study. As metaphysical, the basic premises and proof of these disciplines are faith-based unlike those of physics and science.

With a teleological goal and end in mind, these metaphysical disciplines ultimately focus on defining ways that people should live in meaningful community; the danger comes when any side tries to dictate onto others its position on what is meaningful.

Thus, even though the world has shrunk to a global village, the metaphysical paradigms of desired and imagined communities remain in conflict. Unlike the paradigms of physics, these faith-based positions remain unable to reach definitive answers on what is the nature of humans and what is best for people.

This takes us to the second factor, the role of the true believer in today's world. In the modern age, it is all the more important to understand the nature of such people and their relationship to mass movements as defined in Hoffer's book.

True believers are people who are incomplete and insecure in their personal lives; they have a need to join a larger collective to find both a meaningful community and identity. Some come from the "new poor" who have a feeling of being dispossessed of a lost past glory that they wish to be restored. Others simply find that they live empty lives with no purpose. They need a cause.

Along with finding a cause, true believers need a "devil" upon which to focus their wrath and find meaning.

"Passionate hatred can give meaning and purpose to an empty life," Hoffer said. "Faith in a holy cause is to a considerable extent a substitute for the lost faith in ourselves."

Having such hatred, true believers can easily renounce identity to take on that found in a cause. This is the mentality of suicide bombers whose lives find meaning if they have the promise of immortality.

The actions of the true believer are extreme and it is that extremity along with the availability of greater weaponry power that garners media headlines.

Conflict in a changing globalized world comes not so much from a clash of civilizations, religions and cultures, but from the way in which true believers and their leaders seek to legitimize their identity.

Those that manipulate true believers understand this and can always fan the flames of their core group. The Islamic State group is not Islam, although it finds recruits among true believers there. Even in the world of Islam, true believers who are Sunni clash with true believers who

World conflict, peace and Taiwan

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Thursday, 18 January 2018 08:04

are Shiite, just as Protestants and Catholics fought in Europe in past centuries.

Future conflicts are not the West against Islam or Islam against the West, but often how the true believers from any cause seek out the “devil in the others” and the extremes to which they will go to attack it.

Tolerance is a key factor needed in holding of any metaphysical paradigms as well as the systems that foster such.

The rise of populism that aided in Brexit or the election of US President Donald Trump suggests there are core groups of fearful true believers in those nations. They fortunately have a democratic system, which allows a non-violent expression.

What has this to do with Taiwan, a strong mid-sized nation that ranks high among the upper percentiles of nations whether it be in economics, population or GDP?

Taiwan, unlike China, is democratic and religiously tolerant; it does not seek to control religious appointments whether they be of successors to the Dalai Lama or Catholic bishops. Falun Gong can gather freely in Taiwan.

Taiwan also has a media freedom, an element vital to reducing the isolationist fears of true believers. Booksellers are not jailed here and Taiwan has no pressing disputes with its neighboring nations.

Taiwan has obvious competition in trade and economy with other nations, but that competition does not of itself create enemies.

Taiwan's real and primary enemy is found not in religion or culture, but in ideology. That enemy is the one-party state of China, which threatens Taiwan with war for being what it is, an independent, democratic nation.

Taiwanese need to be fully aware of this distinction and how true believers are regularly fostered in China by the brainwashing of schooling in a one-party state. Taiwan has experienced breaking free of brainwashing by its past one-party Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) state.

A danger that looms for Taiwan is the economy in China which is leveling off and its leadership cannot as easily satisfy the masses as it once did. China's leaders might soon need an "outside devil" and Taiwanese can easily be cast in that role.

Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) is already calling for complete party loyalty in the ranks of the Chinese Communist Party. And even among academics in China there are many true believers who feel the anguish of the 19th "century of humiliation," but remain ignorant of the humiliation China has imposed on Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia.

Although China has received millions of dollars of investment from Taiwan, the response will not be one of thanks, but rather of fear it might lose a cash cow and a strategic piece of territory.

Whatever the rhetoric, this is where the real future clash will be for Taiwan. It is ideological and territorial. Taiwanese must face it with eyes wide open and defenses always ready.

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Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2018/01/18](#)