

## Article

### How China's Rise as a 'Civilization State' Spurs European States to Challenge US Political Dominance

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#### *Abstract*

*This article explores how China's rise as a 'civilization state' encourages some European states to challenge US political dominance. While countries like Russia and Turkey have also employed civilizational populist rhetoric in domestic and foreign policy issues, this article focuses on Xi Jinping's recent visits to France, Hungary, and Serbia and examines how European leaders like Emmanuel Macron, Viktor Orbán, and Aleksandar Vučić find inspiration in China's civilizational model. Further research is needed on the growing civilizational competition between these states and the West, particularly in Africa, where China, Russia, and Turkey project all variants (soft, smart, sharp and hard) of power to assert influence and challenge Western dominance in international relations and global politics.*

## Xi Jinping's Trip to France, Hungary, and Serbia

The Chinese President Xi Jinping's trip to Europe sees him visit three "unlikely" – to quote the New York Times – countries: France, Hungary, and Serbia (Cohen & Buckley, 2024; Hawkins & O'Carroll, 2024).). While it is no surprise that Xi should visit France, Europe's second-largest economy and one of the dominant powers within the European Union (EU), his decision to visit Hungary and Serbia, both comparatively smaller and economically less significant nations, raises important questions about China's strategic interests in Europe. France, with its historical influence, advanced economy, and status as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, is a logical destination for a leader looking to engage with the political and economic powerhouses of Europe. However, Hungary and Serbia, despite their more modest economic profiles, have become increasingly important players in Europe, particularly in relation to China's broader geopolitical and civilizational goals (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022, 2023a; Yilmaz, 2023).

We argue that the rationale for Xi's visits to Hungary and Serbia lies not solely in economic opportunities, though both nations have benefitted from Chinese investment in recent years, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Rather, the visits are reflective of a deeper shift in the political landscape of these nations, which are characterized by an increasingly anti-American posture and skepticism toward the traditional liberal democratic order (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2024a). Both Hungary, under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and Serbia, under President Aleksandar Vučić, have expressed dissatisfaction with the dominance of the US and the EU in international and regional politics. This is where China's appeal as a rising power offering a multi-polar global order becomes particularly significant. The governments of these countries see China as a potential ally in their efforts to challenge US hegemony and reshape the international system (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2024a).

The political leadership of France, Hungary, and Serbia increasingly align themselves with a worldview that emphasizes the decline of US dominance, and the rise of a multipolar order dominated by 'civilization states' (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022; Yilmaz, 2023). This notion, which China has skillfully promoted, posits that the world is not merely divided by economic or political blocs, but by civilizations that possess distinct values, histories, and trajectories. China, under Xi Jinping, has positioned itself as the archetypal civilization state, drawing on thousands of years of history to assert its leadership on the global stage and present itself as an alternative to the Western liberal order. In this model, China seeks not only economic and political influence but also cultural and ideological legitimacy as a civilizational power.

For France, under President Emmanuel Macron, China's rise presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Macron, while wary of China's authoritarian tendencies, sees in China's civilizational narrative a model for Europe's own reawakening. The Chinese emphasis on unity, heritage, and the assertion of national and cultural identity resonates with Macron's broader vision for Europe. Macron, like Xi, sees the dangers of the "false universalism" of the Anglo-American liberal order and is increasingly advocating for a European identity that stands apart from American influence. In this sense, China's rise is

not merely an economic partner for France but also a philosophical model for reclaiming European civilizational values (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2023b).

In Hungary, Viktor Orbán has long positioned himself as a critic of Western liberalism and American cultural hegemony. Orbán's vision of Hungary as a bastion of traditional Christian civilization aligns well with China's civilizational discourse. Orbán's government has openly embraced the notion of a multipolar world where civilization states—rather than liberal democracies—are the dominant actors. The rise of China, along with Russia and Turkey, serves Orbán's populist narrative that Hungary must resist the pressures of conforming to Western norms and, instead, forge its own path, drawing strength from its civilizational heritage (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2023b; Yilmaz, 2023).

Similarly, Serbia's Aleksandar Vučić has distanced his nation from the Western liberal democratic order, positioning Serbia as a state that is culturally and politically distinct from the EU and the US. Vučić does not explicitly frame Serbia's political trajectory in terms of a clash of civilizations, but his rejection of Western interference and his embrace of Chinese investment and political support suggest that he sees in China an alternative model of governance—one that allows for authoritarian control without the need to submit to Western-style liberalism. The Chinese concept of a civilization state provides Vučić with the ideological justification to resist Western pressures, strengthen his own rule, and maintain Serbian autonomy in a world increasingly defined by civilizational competition (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2024b).

This civilizational approach is not limited to China. Both Russia and Turkey have embraced the notion of a civilization state to justify their geopolitical ambitions and internal governance models (Yilmaz, 2023; Yilmaz & Morieson, 2024a). Russia, under Vladimir Putin, has adopted a civilizational discourse that emphasizes the uniqueness of Russian Orthodoxy, culture, and history. Putin's Russia positions itself as a bulwark against Western liberalism, framing its foreign and domestic policies in terms of defending its civilizational values against a Western world it views as morally and politically degenerate. This framing allows Putin to justify both his authoritarian rule at home and Russia's aggressive foreign policy, including its interventions in Ukraine and Syria.

Turkey, under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has similarly embraced a civilizational discourse, one that draws on Turkey's Ottoman past and its Islamic heritage. Erdogan's vision of a neo-Ottoman Turkey asserts independence from the West and emphasizes Turkey's role as a leader in the Muslim world. Turkey's turn toward Islamist populist authoritarianism, justified by Erdogan as a defense of Turkish and Islamic values against Western liberalism, mirrors the civilizational narratives employed by both China and Russia (Yilmaz, 2021; Yilmaz & Morieson, 2023c).

While Russia and Turkey's adoption of civilizational rhetoric has certainly influenced their foreign policies and global politics, particularly in their respective regions, this article focuses specifically on China and its impact on Europe. We examine how Macron, Orbán, and Vučić find inspiration in China's civilizational narrative and explore how China's rise as a civilization state is reshaping the political and civilizational

self-perception of these European nations. The emergence of a civilization-based framework in international relations is significant, not only for understanding China's role in Europe but also for assessing the future of US-European relations (Yilmaz and Morieson 2024b).

Thus, we will take a closer look at Xi's visits to France, Hungary, and Serbia and explore how the leaders of these countries are engaging with China's civilizational narrative. We will examine how this engagement influences their domestic policies, foreign relations, and how this emerging partnership may affect the broader geopolitical landscape in Europe and beyond.

### **France: Drawing Inspiration from China's Rise to Rejuvenate 'European Civilization'**

Xi's visit to France is ostensibly to discuss trade issues with the populist French president, specifically those affecting China's ability to sell electric vehicles in the European Union. Macron, for his part, also has economic issues to address with China, particularly regarding China's restrictions on French agricultural goods. He has used this opportunity to urge Xi to stop supporting Russia and to pressure Putin into negotiating an end to the war in Ukraine. However, Xi's decision to visit Serbia and Hungary – the European nations most sympathetic towards Moscow – suggests that Putin can expect continued support from China in their efforts to annex Ukraine.

These issues aside, there is a deeper purpose behind Xi's visit and Macron's enthusiastic reception, one that increasingly aligns with Macron's views on the future of Europe and global politics. Indeed, Xi's statement about France-China relations being a "model" for the world to follow suggests that something far more significant is taking place (Cohen & Buckley, 2024). Moreover, according to Xi, China "will work with France to deepen China-Europe mutually beneficial cooperation," and the two are "major forces in building a multipolar world, two big markets that promote globalization, and two great civilizations that advocate cultural diversity" (Xi, 2024), a remark that underscores his civilizational perspective on global politics.

The leaders of both China and France, despite their differences, are drawn together by a shared antipathy towards the US and a shared civilizational perspective on global affairs, a perspective intrinsically connected with their anti-American politics. Naturally, China and France do not share the same opinion of the US. China views America as a rival; France views America, perhaps, as a perfidious ally, forcing 'Anglo-Saxon' culture upon an unwilling French people. However, both would prefer a world in which American culture was less pervasive, Western universalism abandoned, and American power reduced. Both believe that soon, the rise of civilization-states will drastically diminish American power and prestige globally.

Xi has dedicated himself to the rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation (sometimes understood as the Chinese 'race'), which includes not only citizens of the People's Republic of China but also Han Chinese globally (Carrai, 2021). At the same time, Xi portrays China not merely as a nation-state but as a continuation of Ancient Chinese

culture merged with Marxism (Brown & Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2018). Unlike Putin, he does not use the term “civilization state” to describe his country (Putin, 2023). However, much like Putin, Xi is adamant that China must draw on its civilizational heritage and reject the values of Western civilization, which he argues are not universal but particular to the West and thus unsuitable for China (Blackburn, 2021; Passeri, 2020). Civilizationism is thus a tool of liberation, through which Xi intends to free China of non-indigenous values and ideas, allowing it to overcome the US and establish the Chinese nation as Asia’s dominant power.

China’s increasing assertiveness in Asia is justified by Xi Jinping, if not motivated, as part of the necessary rise of Chinese civilization and its return to its rightful place as Asia’s hegemon, including the reclamation of traditional Chinese territories, such as Taiwan. Simultaneously, his regime’s repression of non-Han peoples, including the Muslim Uyghurs—a Turkic people—in Xinjiang, and the people of Tibet, is justified on the grounds that these regions have always been part of Chinese civilization. Therefore, the peoples of these regions are considered part of Chinese civilization, whether they accept it or not. In fact, those who resist must be coerced into this civilization, as evidenced by the ‘re-education’ camps in Xinjiang.

Moreover, Chinese leaders evidently believe that Western-style nation-states, particularly the small states of Europe, whatever their utility in the past, today prevent the West from gathering its true strength. In contrast, the large civilization-states of China, Russia, and India gain strength from their large populations and the ability to unite peoples who speak different languages under a single identity. In other words, Europe – despite its 300 million people – is weak because it is made up of many small nations, which would be far more powerful if they were to unite into a single polity.

French leader Macron appears to agree with this assessment. Writer Aris Roussinos (2020), who seems somewhat sympathetic to Macron’s project, is among the few who have remarked on the importance Macron places on rejuvenating what he calls European Civilization. Indeed, while right-wing populist Marine Le Pen calls for the protection of France’s Judeo-Christian yet secular civilization (Morieson, 2021; 2022), Macron is moving beyond the nation-state paradigm, advocating for centralizing power within the EU to protect an otherwise moribund European civilization. Macron is perhaps best understood as a technocratic populist, but this label may not fully explain his complex and shifting political positions and may give the impression that he lacks core beliefs or policies (Perottino & Guasti, 2020). However, a close reading of his speeches reveals that Macron is deeply concerned about the future of European civilization and believes it represents the best of humanity, thus must protect its ‘humanist’ values.

One might ask from whom Macron proposes to protect European civilization. For Macron, European civilization has many enemies, but perhaps the key adversary is the US, which he views as an enemy precisely because it is an anti-civilizational power that defends the nation-state paradigm, insists that its values are universal, and desires a relatively weak Europe. Macron does not believe that American values are universal. He does not even believe that the US and other ‘Anglo-Saxon’ nations, such as Great Britain, can be included within European civilization. In this way, Macron reveals that he does not

believe in Western civilization per se, but rather that continental Europeans possess their own civilization, which is quite different from the traditions of the Anglos, particularly in that continental Europeans do not embrace the market economy and the nation-state paradigm as wholeheartedly.

Roussinos (2020) observes that in 2019, Macron gave a speech to France's ambassadors in which he argued that "China, Russia, and India were not merely economic rivals but genuine civilization states... which have not just disrupted our international order, assumed a key role in the economic order, but have also very forcefully reshaped the political order and the political thinking that goes with it, with a great deal more inspiration than we have" (Roussinos, 2020). Warning his ambassadors that 'civilizations,' including European civilization, are 'disappearing,' Macron declined to condemn states that draw on their cultural heritage and proclaim themselves heirs to great civilizations. Instead, he suggested that Europeans should take inspiration from the 'civilizational projects' of Russia and Hungary, praising what he referred to as their 'inspiring' 'cultural and civilizational vitality' (Roussinos, 2020). According to Macron, such nations "take a logical approach to the world, they have a genuine philosophy, a resourcefulness that we have, to a certain extent, lost" (Roussinos, 2020). Furthermore, France has a mission to construct a "collective narrative and a collective imagination" among Europeans, meaning that his national project of rejuvenating France "must be undertaken as a project of European civilization" (Roussinos, 2020).

Later, in April 2024, Macron told an audience at Sorbonne University that "the European spirit" was essentially tired and "left to those who attacked it." Macron admits that Europe has "lost its self-esteem," which he regards as "strange" given its achievements (Macron, 2024). However, he says a defining aspect of European civilization is this self-doubt and "culture of confession," worsened by the continent's "demographic decline" – an obvious existential threat (Macron, 2024). His solution to Europe's problems is to build "a more united, more sovereign, and more democratic Europe" in order to "assert ourselves among the other powers and in light of the century's transitions" (i.e., the transition of power from Western nation-states to the civilization-states of the East) (Macron, 2024). Equally, Macron says European civilization is "humanist," and to survive, it must reject the "Anglo-American model," which permits the private sector to gain enormous power over human life, but also reject the Chinese model, in which the government is given total control over human life (Macron, 2024). Macron promises to challenge the Anglo-American model by taking control of cyberspace and enforcing European norms by banning hate speech and inappropriate content of various kinds, something he calls "a cultural and civilizational combat" (Macron, 2024).

Macron's meeting with Xi thus brings together two men with civilizational perspectives on global affairs, both of whom believe that the age of Anglo-American universalism is coming to an end and that the nation-state paradigm must give way to something more vibrant, something that binds together past and present: the civilization-state, or in the case of Europe, a kind of supercharged, centralized EU. Despite the vast differences between the two men and their respective 'civilizations,' and the fact that Macron ultimately views China as a civilization Europe must challenge in the emerging

multipolar world, they share a common belief in civilizationism that unites them in opposition to the US.

### **Fighting Liberal ‘Elites’ and Defending Judeo-Christianity by Drawing Hungary Closer to China**

When Xi visits Hungary, he will encounter a nation and a prime minister, Viktor Orbán, eager for Chinese investment, particularly in the form of an electric car plant that the Hungarian leader hopes the Chinese will build in partnership with his country. However, for Xi, this visit and whatever trade deals result from it are partly a reward for Orbán’s pro-China policies, his ambivalent attitude toward Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and his increasing anti-Western rhetoric, as well as his praise for China’s civilizational rejuvenation project. Equally, the visit demonstrates to Washington that Hungary cannot be relied upon to defend Western interests against Chinese aggression, and that Washington is growing increasingly isolated in its opposition to China’s rise.

Orbán is drawn to Xi in much the same way as Macron: both believe the rise of civilization-states like China is ineluctable, and both see China’s rise as an opportunity for their respective states – if not civilizations – to free themselves from Anglo-American norms. However, Orbán differs widely from Macron, and indeed the two might be understood as political enemies. While Macron calls for power to be centralized in Brussels, Orbán is a nationalist who rejects any notion that Hungary should comply with EU norms (Toomey, 2020). And although Orbán possesses a civilizational rejuvenation project, it is of an entirely different nature from Macron’s ‘humanist’ plan for Europe. Rather, Orbán calls for the re-Christianization of Europe, the strengthening of the nation-state and its borders, and he speaks not so much of European civilization but of Judeo-Christian civilization, a term that encompasses a different group of nations, possibly including Russia and the ‘Anglosphere’ nations. Where Macron sees the rejuvenation of European civilization as a way to defy growing autocracy in the East and the domination of the market in the West, Orbán is increasingly enamored with authoritarians abroad and authoritarian rule at home. Both believe that Europe’s demographic problem is existential, and that action is required to repopulate the continent. However, where Macron rejects ‘blood and soil’ ethno-religious nationalism, Orbán considers it a prerequisite for any successful plan to save Europe.

Furthermore, Morieson and Yilmaz (2024) observe that Orbán argues that “the EU and, particularly, the United States [are] so bent on forcing liberal culture on the world that they were inextricably moving all nations toward civilizational conflict: a conflict between the liberal West and ‘civilization-states’ that refused to liberalize, such as China and Russia” (Orbán, 2023). According to Orbán, the future of the world will be decided by this conflict, and therefore “the US ought to permit illiberal states – such as Hungary – to determine their own futures rather than impose ‘universal values’ upon them in an effort to prevent war” (Morieson & Yilmaz, 2024; Orbán, 2023).

Orbán is known for his opposition to allowing Muslims to enter Hungary, either to stay or settle in Western Europe (Ádám & Bozóki, 2016). According to Orbán, Muslims belong to a religion and civilization incompatible with Judeo-Christian values and,



therefore, should not be allowed to live in Europe – especially considering Europeans’ rapid demographic decline – in great numbers (Ádám & Bozókí, 2016). However, Muslims are not really Orbán’s core enemy. Rather, it is Western political and cultural elites that he blames for Europe’s problems, especially its fertility problem. Orbán claims that elites have caused the West’s decline in power and loss of self-esteem by embracing liberalism. Liberalism is corrosive, according to Orbán, because it creates societies that do not produce citizens willing to have children and reject their societies’ traditional values – the values that made their societies superior in the past. Liberalism, because it teaches the equality of all peoples, encourages cosmopolitanism and individualism, robbing people of their unique national and religious identities (Morieson, 2022). As a result of this cosmopolitanism and the declining birth rates, Western societies have opened themselves to foreigners who not only do not share their liberal values but also have larger families. Consequently, Europe has paved the way for its own downfall by abandoning Judeo-Christian values in favor of liberalism and failing to assimilate Muslim migrants into a secular, liberal society (Morieson, 2022).

Orbán’s civilizational rejuvenation project is inextricably linked to his admittedly illiberal, authoritarian style of governance. Indeed, Orbán’s solution to the problems allegedly brought about by liberalism is to marginalize his liberal and Marxist opponents, centralize power, dominate Hungarian media, and replace, wherever possible, the liberal cultural and bureaucratic elite with his own supporters, a populist plan Orbán speaks of openly and with pride. To combat corrosive liberalism, Orbán claims that authentic Europeans must combat the influence of Washington and Brussels – the two great liberal powers, in Orbán’s estimation – and re-orient Western civilization towards post-liberal Judeo-Christian values, which he argues are still compatible with democracy and freedom (Morieson, 2022). In Orbán’s Hungary, women are thus encouraged with cash payments to have more children (a project that has met with only modest success), and post-Marxist investigations that critically examine Western culture are defunded in the nation’s universities. LGBTQ people are tolerated, but increasingly marginalized. All in all, ‘wokeness’ is not welcome in Orbán’s Hungary and is understood as the ultimate product of liberalism (Morieson, 2022).

It is easy to understand Orbán’s enthusiasm for China. China’s rise comes at the expense of Orbán’s liberal democratic foes (i.e., Washington and Brussels), decreasing their ability to pressure Hungary to return to liberal democratic norms. Similarly, because China is both an authoritarian state led by the populist Xi Jinping and approaches international relations from a civilizational perspective, its rise legitimizes Orbán’s own authoritarianism and his project of civilizational rejuvenation. Indeed, for Orbán, China’s rise proves that authoritarianism and civilizational rejuvenation projects help create strong nations that can stand against American cultural hegemony and prevent corrosive liberalism from eroding traditional identities and values. As a result, although Hungary will remain within the EU, we might expect Orbán to draw the country closer to China in the future. This means that China will have a friendly nation within the EU in Hungary, sowing disharmony and forming alliances with other nationalist states to prevent the centralization of power in Brussels and thwart Macron’s plans for the civilizational rejuvenation of Europe as a liberal-humanist power.



## **Serbia: Defying International Liberal Order by Embracing Chinese Civilization State**

It should come as no surprise that the date Xi Jinping has chosen to visit Serbia coincides with the 25th anniversary of the American-led NATO bombings of Belgrade's Chinese embassy. This apparent mistake by Western forces has long been viewed in China as a deliberate attack and part of the West's – particularly the US' – attempts to prevent the rise of China. Equally, Xi is no doubt aware of the prevalence of pro-Russian, anti-American attitudes in Serbia, largely the result of the belief that NATO and the US treated Serbs unfairly during the 1999 conflict, but also due to the conservative values held by many Serbs, which sometimes conflict with American liberal values, particularly on issues related to LGBTQ rights and religious freedom.

It is not merely shared resentment toward NATO and the US' conduct during the Kosovo War that has brought Serbia and China closer. The two nations have become increasingly close since the 2012 election victory of the governing populist Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which sees China as both a source of economic growth and technological development, but also as a partner less likely to criticize Serbia's refusal to sanction Russia following its attempted annexation of Ukraine and its often socially conservative politics. The SNS has welcomed Chinese investment in mining operations and key infrastructure projects such as the construction of roads and bridges, making Serbia increasingly indebted to China as a result. At the same time, Western states' criticism of Serbia, and a widespread belief among many Serbs that the US and NATO – representing the liberal order – are inherently hostile to Serbia, has driven the nation closer to China. Indeed, the SNS and its leader, Aleksandar Vučić, have positioned Serbia between the West and China, using its close relationship with China to improve its bargaining position with Brussels.

Although Serbia has sought EU membership, its democratic backsliding under populist rule has made this increasingly unlikely, and Vučić himself has campaigned against joining the EU. Moreover, EU states are increasingly critical of the so-called electoral autocracy that characterizes SNS rule (Seebass, 2024). For example, the German Federal Foreign Office considers the 2023 national elections in Serbia to have been fraudulent and “unacceptable for a country with EU candidate status” (X, 2023). According to the German Council on Foreign Relations, under SNS rule “the erosion of institutions that were only just democratizing has picked up pace.” The SNS now controls “Serbia's media landscape... personal ties link the president to organized crime groups and well-coordinated hooligans prone to violence,” and “public discourse is marked by vicious rhetoric that has an especially detrimental effect on young people” (Seebass, 2024).

These trends have led to increasing criticism of Serbia by Western powers and NGOs, prompting the SNS to defy the West by maintaining good relations with Russia and deepening ties with China. Xi's visit to Belgrade, and the extraordinary welcome provided by the SNS government, demonstrates Vučić's desire to draw his nation closer to autocratic regimes that do not criticize his anti-democratic actions. Vučić received Xi in Belgrade with a ceremony during which he promised the Chinese leader that he would

receive in Serbia a degree of “reverence and love” not “found anywhere else” and vowed that his government would only increase cooperation with Beijing, saying “the sky is the limit” (Hajdari, 2024).

Vučić is alleged to have instructed employees of state-owned companies to join the crowds welcoming the Chinese president, employing around 50 buses to increase crowd numbers and create the impression that the vast majority of Serbs love and revere Xi. Moreover, Xi authored an article in Serbia’s *Politika* (2024) news outlet describing China-Serbia relations as “ironclad” and noting that “China and Serbia have similar positions on many important international and regional issues” and that “facing the international situation intertwined with changes and turbulence,” the two nations “should continuously strengthen coordination... and stand together for an equal and orderly multipolar world” (*Politika*, 2024).

It is not difficult to read between the lines and recognize that Xi is calling for Serbia to assist China in challenging US and Western dominance in the international sphere. As Vedran Dihic (Cvetkovic & Heil, 2024) put it, *“aside from any trade and economic benefits, there is a political message underlying Serbia’s hosting of Xi that is connected to broader efforts – notably by Moscow and Beijing – to challenge US influence and potentially reshape the international order. ...Serbia is striving to deepen relations with actors outside the West and, in that sense, is a kind of autonomous player in the new geopolitical constellation.”*

Serbia and China thus find themselves drawn together for similar reasons: both wish to challenge Western liberal dominance in the international sphere and to legitimize authoritarianism at home. China’s civilizational rejuvenation project is useful to Serbia, insofar as China’s insistence that Western values are anything but universal helps to legitimize the SNS’s turn against liberal democracy, the separation of powers, and the rule of law by portraying these principles as mere Western liberal constructs that have no place beyond Western Europe, and may even hold back the development of states like Serbia that exist beyond the West and East, or at their crossroads.

## Conclusions

Xi Jinping’s tour of France, Hungary, and Serbia demonstrates the growing influence of China in Europe. But it also tells us much about how Europeans are responding to China’s rise as a self-styled civilizational power, especially insofar as the rise of China is inspiring some European leaders to challenge US dominance in international politics and embrace the core values of “European civilization.”

For Xi, this civilizational turn is a means to legitimize China’s rise as a global superpower, positioning China not only as an economic force but as a civilization that challenges the universalism of Western values. His outreach to countries like Hungary and Serbia, where populist leaders see benefits in aligning with China’s vision, strengthens this narrative. Serbia, in particular, exemplifies a country striving to balance its ambitions of EU integration with a deepening relationship with China, fueled by shared anti-Western sentiments and authoritarian tendencies.

The convergence of leaders like Macron, Orbán, and Vučić with Xi Jinping highlights the emerging trend of civilizational politics in global affairs. Despite their distinct national interests and ideological differences, these leaders share a skepticism towards the liberal international order championed by the US and NATO, and see the rise of China as a pivotal moment in redefining the global balance of power. Macron, with his vision of a centralized European civilization, and Orbán, with his push for a Judeo-Christian resurgence, both view the nation-state paradigm as inadequate for addressing contemporary challenges. In their own ways, they envision a future in which civilizational identity shapes the global political landscape.

For Macron, the rise of authoritarian China might not be entirely desirable, but it does provide France with an opportunity not just to grow its largely stagnant economy—finding in China a new market for its agricultural goods—but also to reflect on China’s civilizational assertiveness. Macron believes that China’s success, grounded in its ancient heritage and values, suggests that Europe must become more like China: united, assertive, and willing to stand up for its particular values against the false universalism of the Anglo-American world.

For Orbán, civilizationism is primarily a tool of populist discourse, used to distinguish between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ with the ‘self’ represented as the traditional Christian Hungarian identity, and the ‘other’ as the Muslim or liberal West. However, like Macron, Orbán views the rise of civilization states as both inevitable and welcome. He believes this shift will create a multipolar world that weakens US and EU power, liberating Hungary from the burden of conforming to Western ‘universal’ norms.

Aleksandar Vučić may not explicitly frame his nation’s conflicts with the EU and the US as a clash of civilizations, but like Orbán, he rejects Western political interference in Serbian affairs. He appears to see in the rise of the Chinese self-proclaimed civilization state a way to challenge the US-dominated liberal international order and solidify his own authoritarian rule.

This civilizational approach is not confined to China alone. Russia, under Vladimir Putin, has embraced a similar narrative, framing itself as a protector of Orthodox Christian civilization, distinct from the West and immune to its liberal values. Turkey, under Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is another example, promoting a neo-Ottoman vision that emphasizes Turkey’s Islamic and Turkic heritage in contrast to the West. Both Russia and Turkey have strategically positioned themselves as civilization states seeking to challenge US and Western dominance, much like China.

While China’s civilizational model seems to inspire many of Europe’s populist and authoritarian leaders, it also reveals how the notion of a civilization state is being used to reject Western (particularly Anglo-American) norms. Whether these leaders seek to emulate China or simply leverage its rise to challenge US hegemony, China’s growing influence seems to validate the belief that nations must turn to their own traditional values and culture to overcome American imperialism and cultural dominance.

Ultimately, the alliance between these diverse leaders reflects a growing resistance to the

liberal democratic norms that have dominated the global order since the end of the Cold War. By positioning themselves against American cultural and political hegemony, these leaders are contributing to the emergence of a new multipolar world, where civilizational states challenge the legitimacy of Western universalism and aim to reshape global governance according to their own values and interests. As this trend continues to unfold, the dynamics of international relations are likely to shift in significant and unpredictable ways, with far-reaching implications for the future of global order.

Yet, despite the clear allure of civilization-state rhetoric, whether rejecting liberal democratic and Western/Anglo-American norms and embracing 'our' civilizational values can increase fertility, provide peoples with a shared purpose, or inspire reindustrialization remains an open question. The rise of civilization states has certainly helped leaders like Macron, Orbán, and Vučić resist US-led globalization and liberalism, but the long-term consequences of these shifts are still uncertain.

One final point that deserves attention is the way the discourse of the civilization state is particularly useful to populist and authoritarian leaders. It allows them to legitimize authoritarian rule by rejecting liberal democracy on the grounds that it is not part of 'our' traditional values. Moreover, this discourse legitimizes bellicose foreign policies by justifying the annexation or control of territories that were once part of 'our' civilization. In this way, civilizationism creates a populist narrative of the 'people' vs. the 'elites,' often transnationalized to portray American or Western elites as the enemies preventing 'our' rise.

Furthermore, beyond Europe, China, Russia, and Turkey are increasingly extending their civilizational influence into Africa. All three are active in Africa through various soft, smart, sharp and hard power initiatives and projections, from China's Belt and Road infrastructure projects, Russia's security alliances, and Turkey's cultural and religious diplomacy in addition to their Strategic Digital Information Operations (SDIOs) all over the world (Yilmaz et al, 2023). These activities reflect not only their economic and political ambitions but also an ongoing civilizational competition with the West for influence on the continent.

China, for instance, promotes its model of development without political liberalization, offering African nations an alternative to Western aid conditionality. Russia has focused on military and energy cooperation, while Turkey emphasizes religious and educational connections, seeking to revive its historical ties to Africa. Each of these actors brings a distinct civilizational narrative to Africa, challenging Western norms and promoting alternatives to the liberal international order.

As these three powers expand their influence, the competition between civilization states and the West will likely intensify, not only in Europe but across the Global South. Further research is needed to better understand how these powers are positioning themselves in Africa and how their civilizational frameworks interact with local political, economic, and cultural dynamics. Understanding this evolving landscape is crucial for comprehending the broader implications of the civilizational turn in global politics.

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