

THE ROLE OF THE ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS IN PEACE AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION POLICIES

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The recent idea of The Alliance of Civilizations was formulated in September 2004 by José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero at the United Nations General Assembly meeting. Describing himself as “a representative of a country created and enriched by diverse cultures,” Zapatero defended “an alliance of civilizations between the Western and the Arab and Muslim worlds.” He continued, “Some years ago a wall collapsed. We must prevent hatred and incomprehension from building a new one.” This proposal invokes the human ability to resolve problems through words, and aims to construct a 21st century of justice, peace, and prosperity.

Apart from security measures and military means, the proposal of The Alliance of Civilizations aims to favor dialogue, and not confrontation, as the more useful way to combat international terrorism and the risks of a large-scale confrontation. Therefore, The Alliance proposes a series of actions and compromises to balance the world’s economic inequalities and to foster commercial and economic exchanges of mutual interest within a context of respectful cultural dialogue.

This initiative, initially criticized by some circles as an “empty proposal,” has received important support and is currently backed by more than 30 countries and several international organizations. United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan adopted the idea and created, in September 2005, a high-level group to develop and guide the initiative. On the 14th of February of the current year, Condolezza Rice posted a formal letter to Miguel Ángel Moratinos (Spanish Foreign Minister) that declared The United States’ intention to collaborate with the proposal of The Alliance of Civilizations in the hope that the initiative would help to promote “democratic reforms, peace, and stability in the Near East.”

The High-Level Group created by Koffi Annan to develop the practical aspects of The Alliance is composed of figures that have worked for peace and understanding between peoples in the past, and that come from governmental spheres, international organizations, and civil society. It is co-chaired by Federico Mayor Zaragoza (former Director-General of UNESCO) and Mehmet Aydın (Turkish Minister of State). The group also includes Mohammad Khatami (former President of Iran), Desmond Tutu (South African Archbishop and Nobel Peace Prize recipient), Hubert Vedrine (former French Foreign Minister), Enrique Iglesias (Iberoamerican Secretary General), and Pan Guang (Professor at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences), among others.

In the fall of 2006, The High-Level Group is expected to submit a report to Kofi Annan with recommendations and a specific plan of action.

1.- Background

The idea of The Alliance of Civilizations did not spring from a void. Throughout history, the Christian and Muslim worlds have struggled over borders, ideas, and influences; as they have also coexisted and cooperated. In 2006, on the 600th anniversary of the death of the great Andalusian scholar Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), we must remember his studies regarding the different cultures developing around the Mediterranean Sea. They represent a precursor landmark of Sociology as well as one of the foundations of Social History, understood by Ibn Khaldun as an authentic “Universal Science of Civilizations.” The interest shown by Ibn Khaldun in the study of the customs and cultures of different peoples, and especially his interest in the cultural contacts propiciated by migrations and exchanges, advance some of the fundamental ideas of the modern proposal of an alliance and a dialogue between civilizations.

“The history-maker,” Ibn Khaldun said, “must know the rules of politics, the nature of the existing things, the differences between nations, the places, the epochs, the human conducts, the characters, the customs, the beliefs, the doctrines, and everything that surrounds the lives of men.”

Ibn Khaldun's categorical criticisms of exclusive cultural conceptions prefigure some of the precedents of modernization that intellectually support the idea of an alliance of civilizations. In the first book of his series on the history of the world, Ibn Khaldun urges the reader to recognize “that the true purpose of history is to let us know the social condition of man in his human dimension, that is, the urbanization and civilisation of the world.”

Similar ideas of respecting cultural pluralism, dialogue, and civilization are essential to a considerable part of Enlightened and Democratic Western thought. They are also essential to Christian-Social thought. By the sixties, Pope Paul VI had already emphasized the need for a greater dialogue between different civilizations. In the Encyclical “*Populorum Progressio*,” he proposed fruitful rapprochements between civilizations as he remembered how the civilization in which Christianity was formed “undoubtedly contains elements of universal humanism, but it is neither unique nor exclusive, and it cannot be imported without an adequate adaptation” (72).

“Sincere dialogue between cultures,” he said, “as between individuals, paves the way for ties of brotherhood. Plans proposed for man's betterment will unite all nations in the joint effort to be undertaken, if every citizen—be he a government leader, a public official, or a simple workman—is motivated by brotherly love and is truly anxious to build one universal human civilization that spans the globe Is it not plain to all that closer ties of this sort will contribute immeasurably to the preservation of world peace?” (73).

2. Threats to peace and opportunities for the future.

We live in a time of both great opportunities and serious threats to peace. We must accurately identify the latter so that we can neutralize and eliminate them. Some of those threats to peace are: inequalities, social divides and lack of resources, dictatorships, political corruption and degeneration, labor and social insecurities, violence and terrorism, the will of supremacy of

the mighty, the breakdown of international law, democratic deficiencies, unlawful struggles for the control of natural resources, and the exaltation of the friend/enemy dialectics.

Against this background of problems and risks, the UN Millenium Goals Declaration was intended to raise the flag of hope, setting a line of specific tasks and targets which, despite the fact that many consider them limited or insufficient, represent undoubtedly a step forward in the necessary direction. In the September 2000 Declaration, The UN reaffirmed The Declaration of Human Rights as the essential foundation in the struggle for a more peaceful and just world. This declaration set the following eight goals: To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, to achieve universal primary education, to promote gender equality and empower women, to reduce child mortality, to improve maternal health, to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases, to ensure environmental sustainability, and to develop a global partnership for development.

Five years have gone since these goals were set (for 2015) and, from a realistic point of view, it must be acknowledged that not all the great actions intended to achieve this end have been set in motion. At the same time, several threats to peace seem far from being neutralized, while new polarizing and dividing factors arise. This proves the necessity of promoting initiatives such as the proposal for an alliance of civilizations.

3. The Need for The Alliance of Civilisations

The globalized world gives new dimensions to the scope of these differences. We need the support and involvement of the different parties if we want to advance the path of peace and opportunities and welfare for all. In principle, globalization facilitates the diffusion of knowledge and freedom, and also broadens the range for confluence of different cultures and civilizations. However, this confluence, this immediacy between cultures and civilizations, is not always followed by better mutual acceptance.

There is no justification for terrorism and the barbarism of those who try to impose their ideas by means of violence. It is a priority for our civilization that our governments fight this madness with determination and no hesitations. It has to be a priority of any civilisation deserving of its name. Today's terrorism does not only affect one country or nation, but the whole world, and nobody is free from this threat. This is why we all sympathized and lived as our own the events of September 11 in New York and Washington, of March 11 in Madrid, and of June 7 in London, among others.

We are in front of a phenomenon that has taken on new dimension and meaning. Very specific circumstances in this world, and especially a certain climate of fundamentalist global confrontation, are fueling it. When hundreds or thousands of people are ready to sacrifice themselves, it is obvious that the struggle against this scourge will not be an easy task and will require the support and commitment of many.

Why this fanatic extremism? Hatred and thirst for vengeance and vindication drive the terrorists. In view of its results and effects there is nothing justifiable about it, but we also have

to understand that much can be done in order to impede it from taking roots or finding favorable grounds in certain political and social contexts.

As emphasized by President Rodríguez Zapatero in his statement at The United Nations: “Terrorism is insanity and death and, regrettably, there will always be fanatics who are ready to kill in order to impose their insanity through force. Ready to disseminate the seed of evil. The seed of evil cannot take root when it falls on the rock of justice, well-being, freedom, and hope; but it can take root if it lands on the soil of injustice, poverty, humiliation and despair. Thus, redressing the major political and economic injustices that affect our world would deprive terrorists of their popular support. The more people there are who enjoy dignified conditions around the world, the safer we will all be.”

Wars, indiscriminate violence, hunger, rejection, exclusion, and fear, can turn into dangerous negative breeding grounds together with the self-fueling historical resentments, causing involutions in one side and the other.

The need for The Alliance of Civilizations takes on special significance as a constructive and positive alternative to Huntington's Clash of Civilizations hypothesis and his belief that contradictions between civilizations would be the primary agent of international conflict in the post-Cold War world. Huntington bases his ideas on an understanding of “civilization” as a somewhat closed culture with hermetic and almost non-modifiable traditions that is opposed to different traditional civilizations.

It is undeniable that many of the conflicts that have taken place in the world in the last few years have had components of this nature: the wars that followed the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Chechnya, the conflicts between India and Pakistan, fundamentalist terrorism, and Iraq, among others, are examples that demonstrate a confrontational character.

Against these dynamics, we must consider if participants from the West should ever enter this dangerous game of fueling global rejection, hatred, and intolerance, as they sometimes do as a pretext to achieve geostrategical control over territories and energy sources.

In view of this, we should all agree that the risks of confrontation, and particularly the risks of major conflict, have to be neutralized or minimized. This also includes confrontation with important diverse minorities installed in Western countries. Efficient choices for dialogue and cooperation have to be established in order to efficiently meet the challenges of the future and the demands of modernization and development. From this perspective, and with these goals, it is obvious that Western countries must have friends and allies. Formulations fueling global and indiscriminate confrontation can cause serious difficulties for these objectives.

The political philosophy underlying The Alliance of Civilizations must be of a lay nature. The idea of an interreligious dialogue cannot be the basis of this political philosophy, because Western Civilization is characterized by lay values such as rationality, science, and technology, and most of all, by the democratic ideal, by freedom, and reciprocal respect as fundamental criteria.

4. Key elements of The Alliance

The Alliance of Civilizations must not reduce itself to a well-intentioned expression of a series of more or less reasonable ideas and positive theoretical principles. To be considered a serious proposal, it needs to be translated into the concrete and specific. I think that, among others, the following levels and guidelines must be taken into consideration.

1. The first one involves cooperation in international politics capable of propitiating peace and a relaxed international atmosphere: Work must be done to guarantee the stability and the possibilities of progress of these peoples. We must aid the settlement and development of democracy and respect human rights in the different countries. In order to do this, intelligent and cooperative work must be done to deactivate the main sources of international violence and tension, also within the area of modernizing political development.
2. A second key aspect is cultural dialogue based on acceptance of diversity and of pluricultural realities. This implies a disposition towards tolerance and understanding that realizes that a landscape of exclusive and universal truths is not compatible with the complexities and heterogeneity of the modern world. The globalization processes show us the realities of an order of human beings similar and diverse in their beliefs, in their social modes and models, manners and ideologies, although not incompatible in their diversity.
3. A third relevant aspect is educative cooperation. We must favor agreements on education and research, promote exchanges and supporting the creation of multinational interdisciplinary teams, and encourage university departments to develop programs and projects involving different countries which would bolster and detail the very contents of the idea of an Alliance of Civilizations. In order to meet this goal, those issues must be given priority in general research programs, and the cooperation between universities must be supported. Together with these initiatives, and considering that education is one of the bases on which inter-cultural dialogue can be promoted, educative patterns that encourage a spirit of tolerance and plurality must be promoted.
4. A fourth important consideration is that positive communication policies must be generated without any reduction of the unequivocal component of freedom of the press. These policies must be able to bring an unprejudiced spirit of responsibility in the exercise of freedom of information to the media, far from xenophobic and racist stereotypes and components. At the same time, specific initiatives and programs must be supported in order to make public opinion in wealthier countries more sensitive to the new global problems and necessities by means of the support of the development of communication networks for the exchange of opinion and information from the base.
5. A fifth component is related to the necessity of fostering a symmetric commercial and economic cooperation, that is to say, a cooperation between countries based in freedom, equity, and mutual interest. This requires clearing implicit suspicion towards any

hegemonic pretension of control of the natural resources of other countries, including those that imply military means. Mutual confidence and respect of the autonomy and liberty of peoples must be restored, strengthening the will of the implementation of better and more efficient policies of cooperation for development.

6. A sixth element is the design of strategies and potential panoramas that promote the active participation of the countries that support the proposal of The Alliance of Civilizations in policies and concrete initiatives in those areas that show greater risks of violence, conflict, and national or territorial destabilization. That is, the idea of The Alliance requires reciprocal, serious, and efficient political compromises in both directions.
7. A seventh element, interconnected with the others, must be simultaneously aimed for. This is a compromise to support the role of The United Nations as arbitrator and guarantor of the world's peace. In order to improve this role, further advances in the process of reformation and updating of this organization are required. More specifically, the optimization of international cooperation resources (currently still very limited) requires a better coordination of the policies for development under an effective leadership of the international agencies of The United Nations.

5. Some conclusions

The Alliance of Civilizations must not solely concern distinguished political representatives and minority intellectual circles, but has to pervade wide social sectors. This requires the participation of influential individuals of every area, from culture to arts, sports, and communication.

In summation, the aim is to affirm the concretization of the values of tolerance, fruitful cooperation, and pacific coexistence in the globalized world we live in. Societies of our time are increasingly diverse, complex and interconnected... and this does not necessarily imply a threat to their own identities. However, new realities generate uncertainties that may induce a tempting withdrawal into our own beliefs. This leads, occasionally, to landscapes in which the risks of intolerance, exclusion, and xenophobia become explicit. In such volatile contexts it is highly irresponsible to promote discourses of hatred and the exaltation of difference.

To prevent those risks, discourses of tolerance and pacific coexistence must be reinforced, as well as those concerning the rigorous respect of the law. We must understand that diversity does not necessarily threaten progress, but can, and must, be a stimulus for the enrichment of knowledge and for a political, economic, and commercial cooperation of mutual utility. As Federico Mayor Zaragoza has underlined, in those moments "We must identify what unites us, and assess what separates us in order to channel our destiny, which is inevitably a common one."