

The Alliance of Civilizations: A Spanish View

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ABSTRACT

In the foreseeable future, the international system will become one of multipolarity. This new order can be sustainable and peaceful only if it can guarantee harmony and a common purpose among nations. To that end, it must be based upon a package of ethical principles under the aegis of a more powerful, democratic and efficient United Nations system. These principles – democracy, multilateralism, full compliance with international law and respect for human rights – are the same moral rules that underpin the Alliance of Civilizations project as initiated by Spain and Turkey. It was a consequence of the awareness that something new had to be done to prevent a potential confrontation between two worlds, two mindsets. There was, and still is, a danger of a further drift between Islamic and Western societies that might threaten international peace and stability.

We are heading towards a multipolar international scenario, a “New World Order”. The unipolar state of affairs that emerged a few decades ago from the debris of the Soviet Union is wearing out. “By 2025,” said the National Intelligence Council’s *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World*¹ published last November, “although the United States is likely to remain the single most powerful actor, the relative strength of the US—even in the military realm—will decline and US leverage will become more constrained. [...] The US will find itself as one of a number of important actors on the world stage.” This unprecedented phenomenon, at least since the end of World War II when only two superpowers ruled, is the result of the irruption of a handful of new actors in the international arena: the Russian Federation of course, plus China, India and Japan, and, why not, sooner or later, Indonesia, Nigeria, South Africa, Brazil and Mexico, all of whom are already elbowing their way in to fill

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reason, specifically American, which also explains the profound changes we are witnessing: the decay of the image of the US due to the gradual and seemingly inevitable loss in prestige and of moral authority of the ethical superpower of the past. Paul Kennedy in his article “The Return of Soft Power”² gave us a hint of what happened. “By all measures of ranking world opinion, [...] the Bush Administration became the most unpopular in recent American history” precisely because of the “collective bag of prejudices” summed up by the author in these words: “military activism, ideological assertiveness, over-riding of some basic human rights, unbalanced stress upon the ‘war on terror’ and distaste for multilateralism.” Indeed, what an astonished world has learnt during the last decade is the capacity for Washington authorities to act against their declared body of principles. We have also witnessed, live, the magnitude of their power to bring havoc into international relations. This has brought universal disappointment, but also global resentment and fear. It will take a long time before these perceptions, this worldwide bewilderment and distrust, are overcome. Because, who can guarantee that, after President Barack Obama, another neocon administration will not follow in the United States?

There is also a worldwide uneasiness, especially in the Western world, regarding the fall of certain previously unquestioned paradigms summed up in Francis Fukuyama’s famous and somewhat pretentious book *The End of History and the Last Man*³ published in 1992. But Fukuyama’s prophecy was very quickly proved false and was replaced by the much more sobering *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*⁴ by Robert Kagan in 2008. And Kagan did so after having written, only five years earlier, *Of Paradise and Power—America and Europe in the New World Order*,⁵ his best-seller about the American Mars and the Old European Venus. We all know today that neither has history ended nor has Mars dominated the world. If, for some time, it appeared that these successful writers were right,

the place they believe is theirs and which are willing to bring to bear their weight, be it economic, productive, strategic or human. And the EU as well if, for once, we Europeans assume the political and military responsibilities necessary to become, in the near future, a decisive protagonist in world affairs.

The erosion of US dominance is not only the result of the emergence of new candidates to stardom. There is another

this was nothing but a fleeting mirage, not to mention the past illusion about the perpetuity of ultra-liberal capitalism.

The Alliance of Civilizations: A Spanish Ethical Initiative for a Lasting World Peace

The future multipolar world, therefore, makes it necessary to set up a new package of rules to guarantee a peaceful and cooperative global society built on means, hopefully, beyond mere coexistence. That is, a universal framework which assures harmony among nations; an international compact under which all parties can be governed. A multilateral system is inconceivable if different powers are not willing to compete peacefully among them and can be bridled by an ethical, mutually accepted, pattern of conduct. Simultaneously, this scenario can only be envisaged if it is placed under the aegis of a more democratic and efficient United Nations. The New World Order must rest necessarily upon tenets, upon patterns of conduct that are completely different from those that have been prevailing until today. Paramount among these principles is full respect for the UN system, for international legality, for real democracy, and for human rights.

To guarantee the peace in the incoming unstable world scenario—unstable due to its multipolarity—a genuine sense of fair play is needed. A state of universal affairs where all participants will feel comfortable; where all actors, strong and frail, will abide by the law; where double standards will be rejected and where actions will respond to declared principles is necessary. Recent events demonstrate that “regime change” does not work, and on the contrary it is counterproductive, that perceived or imagined threats may lead to nuclear fantasies, and that international public opinion does not permit “Big Brothers” to act freely on their own. There is therefore a need for moral restraint in politics, domestic and global, as well as in world trade and finance. A call for such an ethical environment, translated into international practices, is to be found precisely at the roots of the Alliance of Civilizations (AoC),⁶ a proposal presented by the Spanish prime minister before the UN General Assembly on September 21, 2004⁷. On this occasion, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero submitted to Secretary General Kofi Annan his idea of an AoC between the Western and Arab and Muslim worlds:

Peace and security will only spread over the world with the strength of international legality, with the strength of human rights, of democracy, of abidance by the law. (...). Some years ago a wall collapsed. We must now prevent hatred and incomprehension from building a new wall. Spain wants to submit to the Secretary General, whose work at the head of this Organization we firmly support, the possibility of establishing a High Level Group to push forward this initiative.



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But to fully understand its nature, this highly political endeavor, which is also a rebuttal of the inevitability of Samuel Huntington’s theory of a “Clash of Civilizations,”⁸ must be placed within the specific and very special domestic and foreign historical context in which it was conceived. If this is not done, the step taken by the Spanish prime minister will be misinterpreted. Therefore, we must return to the events that took place along exactly one year before the announcement: the 12 months had elapsed since the Azores summit, the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, and the terrorist attacks in Madrid followed by the general elections in Spain and the victory of the Socialist Party in March 2004. This precise background sheds light on the origins of the AoC; it clarifies why and when it was born and why it has had, since its very inception, an unavoidable security dimension. It also explains why this proposal was not the result of academic speculation or the product of a sudden impulse of simple good will or a product of angelic naïveté or much less a *coup de théâtre*. On the contrary, it was a consequence of the awareness that something new had to be done to prevent a potential confrontation between two worlds, two mindsets. There was, and still is, a danger of a further drift between Islamic and Western societies that might threaten international peace and stability. During these 12 months a different concept of combating terrorism

took shape, of fighting this threat by other means without neglecting, obviously, the most demanding security concerns.

Security, Yes Indeed, But Not at Any Price

There is, nevertheless, something else in this commitment to peace and understanding. There is also a call for a whole set of ethical principles in the way social and political relations between peoples and cultures should be ruled. If the substance upon which the AoC is built lies on the political and security reasons sustaining it, its backbone is a moral one: a clear commitment to multilateralism, which is the UN's legitimacy, the universal tool chosen to combat this global menace by other means. Its moral goals are to foster peace and security; overcome prejudice, misperceptions and polarization; strengthen mutual understanding, even within our own societies; and to promote shared values among different peoples, cultures and civilizations. The AoC has had, indeed, a *soft* security approach but, from the very beginning, also a clear idea of where the crux of the matter lies. Hearts and minds are primarily the ground where this Alliance has to fight, taking into account that today's nightmare cannot be deterred by "mutual assured destruction" or by other forms of massive or even pin-point targeted strikes, either pre-emptive or retaliatory. And this is so because those who commit these crimes are ready to die in, what is for them, the name of transcendent causes.

An article written by Tony Blair in 2008, "King Abdullah and the Skeptics,"⁹ provides us with a clear idea of the changes in his beliefs in the four years since the meeting in the Azores on March 16, 2004:

We cannot neglect the importance of security and military measures—on the contrary, they are critical. But, ultimately, this is not a struggle that can be won by military measures alone. This struggle is one of ideas, of hearts and minds as well as of weapons. We have to persuade. And we have to realize that the roots of the alternative narrative which sees Islam pitted against the West, go deep.

The security approach inherent to the AoC clearly appears in two of its founding documents: the Concept Paper (June 26, 2005) and the Terms of Reference (August 25, 2005)¹⁰ for the High Level Group. In his mandate, the UN secretary general charged the group with the task of drafting a report with the objective of providing an assessment of new and emerging threats to international peace and security, in particular the political, social and religious forces that foment extremism, and of recommending a practicable program of action for states, international organizations and civil society aimed at promoting harmony among societies. Both papers explicitly address this security dimension: that of responding effectively to

“emerging threats to world peace”; to countering the “threat to world peace and stability posed by extremism”; to promoting “awareness that security is indivisible”; and to averting “any further deterioration of relations which could threaten international stability”. And in order to achieve these goals, they also stress the need “to mobilize a concerted action”; that only a “comprehensive coalition” will be able to meet the threat”; and that we have to forge a “collective political will” to establish a paradigm of mutual respect between civilizations and cultures.

But the fight against terrorism cannot be waged at any price. Here, too, ethical limits must be in place to prevent the repetition of what hundreds of millions have witnessed coming from Guantánamo or Abu Ghraib. Once again, Rodríguez Zapatero’s address in New York reminded the representatives of the international community that in this common endeavor there are red moral lines, and these are not thin ones:

For thirty years of terrorism we have learnt that the risk of a terrorist victory rises sharply when, in order to fight terror, democracy betrays its fundamental nature, governments curtail civil liberties, put judicial guarantees at risk or carry out pre-emptive military operations. This is what our people have learned: that it is legality, democracy and political means and ways what makes us stronger and them weaker.

Is there any substantive difference between this moral statement and the pronouncement, on this fundamental matter, by President Obama in his inaugural speech four and a half years later?¹¹

As for our common defense, we reject as false the choice between safety and our ideals. [...] Our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint.

To reach these ends, not only are the member states of the UN summoned, but also international organizations and international civil society. And because the threat is worldwide, the appeal of this initiative is also a global one, as reflected in the universal framework of the UN within which it operates as a tool in the hands of its secretary general. Therefore, another feature of the universal character of the AoC is the progressively enlarged Group of Friends¹² supporting it. Today, a body of already 105 partners, 88 governments and 17 international organizations, belong to it. Notoriously absent, only Libya and Israel among the riparian countries of the Mediterranean. The US is also not a member and is the odd man out among the permanent members of the UN Security Council. The EU, in contrast, unanimously backs the AoC; as a matter of fact, all European countries do so. On September 23, 2008, the commissioner for external relations of

the European Commission, and the high representative, and secretary general of the European Council, addressed a joint letter to the high representative for the AoC with an attached Action Plan 2008-2010.¹³ Besides the political support expressed in this letter (“All the member states of the European Union as well as the European Commission support the Alliance”), the Anna Lindh Foundation and the AoC have agreed areas of cooperation in the framework of the Union for the Mediterranean. The common initiative, *Restore Trust, Rebuild Bridges*¹⁴, which has the goal “to face the consequences of the deterioration of the situation in the Euro-Mediterranean Region, particularly in the Middle East”, is a relevant token of this partnership.

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Together with its political nature, its security dimension and its global focus, the Alliance presents another trait of its own: that of being action-oriented. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish prime minister, who along with the Spanish prime minister is a co-sponsor of the AoC, put it straight at the first meeting of the High Level Group in Palma de Majorca on November 27, 2005:¹⁵

I would like to say a few words on what exactly is expected of the HLG. Indeed, in light of the widening of the gap of understanding between different cultures and religions and the growing threat this posed to humanity, many initiatives were launched in order to promote dialogue among religions and cultures. [...] However, to be frank, one can see that a great deal of these initiatives only highlight the need of dialogue by merely describing the current situation but fail to offer a strategic and pragmatic approach on what needs to be done in concrete terms. [...] What is expected of us is not merely describing the problem we face today. We need to come up with an analytical evaluation of the underlying factors and identify practical measures that will urge societies to work together for a common future. I believe that the added value of the AoC initiative will indeed be the Action Plan that you will prepare in this direction.

Besides the recommendations included in the High Level Group Report¹⁶ regarding youth, education, media and migration, other examples of this practical approach are the first Implementation Plan 2007-2009¹⁷, which was presented on June 4, 2007 by the High Representative of the UN Secretary General for the AoC Jorge Sampaio, and at the first and second forums of the Alliance,¹⁸ held in Madrid and Istanbul in January 2008 and last April respectively, as well as the concrete proposals adopted there. A second Implementation Plan was presented by Sampaio in New York on June 22, 2009. The third forum will be held in Rio

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de Janeiro next year, and Qatar will host the fourth in 2011 and Austria the fifth in 2012. But to fully work out all these measures, which, inevitably, are mostly recommendations to be implemented by governments, international organizations and the multifarious membership of the civil society, Sampaio has invited the countries of the Group of Friends to

develop “National Strategies”¹⁹ and the international organizations to subscribe to “Partnership Agreements” with the Alliance. The former ones in particular, the national plans or strategies, are crucial tools to translate the global principles and goals of the AoC into governmental politics. In Sampaio’s own words, the purpose to be achieved is “to de-globalize the Alliance converting it into a domestic affair”. Up to now, 23 members of the Group of Friends, headed by Spain and New Zealand—the two first countries to adopt their own strategies in January 2008—have already followed the high representative’s invitation and have either adopted their own plans or are still working on them: namely Albania, Argentina, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Greece, Hungary, Qatar, Malaysia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Portugal, Rumania, Russia, Serbia, Turkey and the United Kingdom. Almost twenty international organizations have also joined in this common endeavor and have established cooperation agreements with the Alliance. Among them are ALESCO (The Arab League Educational, Cultural & Scientific Organization), the Anna Lindh Foundation, the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries, the Council of Europe, the Francophonie, the Iberoamerican General Secretariat, the International Organization of Migrations, ISESCO (The Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), the League of Arab States, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, UNESCO, UCLG (United Cities and Local Governments) and the Union Latine.

Another step taken by the high representative has been the promotion of “Regional Strategies” for intercultural dialogue among governments to advance the AoC objectives in their regions. Especially relevant among them is the Strategy of the Eastern European Region. It is important to note that all the countries of this critical part of Europe have already approved their national plans, or will do so in a very near future, and that all of them will participate in the drafting and in the implementation of this regional strategy. An international conference will be held in Sarajevo, for that purpose, at the end of this year. Two other regional plans, one for the Euro-Mediterranean region and the other for the Ibero-American region,

have been also announced. Preparatory meetings in Egypt and in Brazil will take place to prepare these two initiatives.

The Spanish Plan 2008-2009,²⁰ adopted on January 11, 2008, intends to translate, on a national scale, the specific goals of the AoC and to include them in Spain's foreign and cooperation policy, as well as in its domestic policies. With this plan, the Spanish government also expects Spain to play its rightful role as an example and to inspire discourse with its ethical example. The 57 actions listed in this first National Plan—to be followed by a second one for the period 2010-2011—aim at the achievement of four main general objectives: mutual understanding and appreciation of diversity; promotion of civic values and a culture of peace; integration of immigrants, with particular regard to youth; and dissemination of the AoC initiative.

Turkey's Co-sponsorship of the Alliance of Civilizations: Risks and Opportunities

May I now address a polemic issue, at least here in Europe? This is the demand, which Spain strongly supports, for Turkey to join the EU. I raise this matter here because I am convinced that this important question is closely linked to the AoC. And this is so not only because, since June 2005, Prime Minister Erdogan is one of the two co-sponsors of the initiative. Above all, because the credibility and therefore the future of the AoC are linked to the result of the tortuous negotiations on which both Ankara and Brussels are embarked. When the Turkish prime minister formally accepted to co-sponsor this initiative, a strong political signal was sent by Madrid and Ankara to the international community. It was a message full of symbolism: that two Mediterranean countries, with a long history behind them, both at the crossroads of peoples, creeds and cultures, restricted today to their national boundaries, are looking for a common future of cooperation as partners within the EU. Two countries, century-long enemies in their hegemonic adventures, and whose armies fought each other by sea and in the plains of North Africa and Central Europe, two powerful empires inspired by strong religious convictions but also by a hard-fought and stubborn geo-strategic rivalry, are today promoting a message of common understanding and togetherness. Thus, it is not fortuitous that the first and the last meeting of the High Level Group took place on Spanish and Turkish soil, as the first and the second AoC forums took place in Madrid and Istanbul.

But the relevance of Turkey's entry into the EU goes far beyond this Turkish-Spanish love affair. The successful outcome of Turkey's EU accession process affects the Alliance in various ways. First because it legitimates the narrative that sustains

it and strengthens the credibility of both their discourse and that of the EU. Secondly because it contributes to narrowing the gap between different mindsets in the Turkish society whilst backing at the same time those women and men who fight peacefully there for modernization. And finally because the entry of Turkey in the EU will send a strong and credible message from Brussels of tolerance, moderation, rejection of extremism and radical nationalism, respect for human rights and gender equality. And this message will be directed not only to the Turkish society—and to the European ones as well—but, especially, to the surrounding Arab world, whose citizens closely follow the ups and downs of this negotiation process.

If, on the contrary, the negotiation fails—especially if this failure is perceived by Muslim societies as the result of a deliberate filibustering by certain EU members—an indelible stain will tarnish Europe’s reputation. We, Europeans, will be seen, contrary to our reiterated discourse of openness and integration, as entrenched behind the walls of a closed and selfish Christian fortress unwilling because of fear to overcome the divide between Islam and the West. And, at the same time, what will be the impact of this historic setback upon the AoC, upon its credibility, its image, taking into account that the European members of the Group of Friends belong without exception, as I mentioned before, to the EU? Will the Spanish-Turkish co-sponsorship survive? Is it, per chance, inconceivable, that after a flat no from the EU to imagine a domestic scenario in a Turkey ruled by an anti-European and anti-Western leadership brought to power by a frustrated, resentful and radicalized society wounded in their national pride—like that of Khomeini’s Iran? What will be the reaction of those Muslims who in Turkey—but also elsewhere in the Arab and in the Islamic world at large and within the member states of the Union—who are striving precisely for the principles we are preaching to the world?

There are indeed many other questions that can be asked this issue. One, in particular, deserves also attention because the rejection of the Turkish demarche will have important political and strategic consequences not only on the destiny of the EU, on Turkey and on the future of the AoC. Such a decision will also affect the New Global Order which is already looming before us. Because if, on the contrary, Turkey joins in an enlarged EU it will be the turn for this expanded Europe, both Old and Young, from Helsinki to Lisbon and from Dublin to Ankara, to play a relevant role in a, by then, already multipolar scenario. When EU borders touch Armenia and Georgia and reach as far as Iran, Iraq and Syria, Brussels will be able to play an unprecedented role in world affairs as a decisive stabilizing actor in one of the most critical regions of the world. It will be also the opportunity for Ankara to recover its historic role as the renewed interpreter between the Islamic and the Western worlds, the very same two worlds that already live together within the Turkish society.

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