

Keynote Address

The Alliance of Civilisations: Possible Pathways for Asia Pacific

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Dialogue across cultural and religious boundaries is not a new idea. Immensely rich and creative interactions have occurred at various times in places as far apart as the Hellenic world and South Asia, the Levant and North Africa, Italy and China.

Notwithstanding their periodic rivalries and tensions, the three Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) have produced some of the most extraordinary encounters, of which perhaps Muslim Spain represents one of the noblest peaks of human achievement. Encounters between Islam on the one hand and Buddhism and Confucianism on the other have similarly enriched humanity's civilisational heritage.

What these continuing interactions demonstrate is that no culture, no religious tradition, no civilisation holds a monopoly on ethical discourse. This is what makes dialogue both possible and desirable.

In dialogue commonality and difference come together

Dialogue is possible because the world's major ethical traditions have much in common. They share a deep sense of the dignity of human life, a commitment to human fulfilment, and a concern for standards of 'rightness' in human conduct. Here we include not only Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity and other religious faiths but also Confucianism, western secular humanism, and the traditions of Indigenous peoples. There is enough common ground between these ethical worldviews to make possible an on-going conversation about human ethics in general and social ethics in particular.

Dialogue is desirable precisely because of the many differences that separate cultures, religions and civilisations. In dialogue these differences are acknowledged,

respected, and managed so as to limit, if not altogether eliminate, tensions and violent conflicts. More importantly, these differences can contribute to mutually enriching exchanges in art, philosophy, science, religion, education, trade and much else. Each tradition has its own distinctive ethos and symbolism, its own languages and customs, its own artistic and intellectual achievements, its own perspectives on ethical conduct, its own understanding of personal and social relationships—its own unique gifts to contribute to the dialogue.

There are, in any case, significant differences within as well as between major cultures and civilisations. This is not hard to explain. Societies experience over time the impact of diverse intellectual, cultural and religious currents, some of which are internal to the society, some external to it (most commonly through trade, war and migration as well as intellectual and artistic encounters). More often than not, these currents furiously interact with each other and in the process contribute to the slow but steady transformation of values, customs and practices. Cultures and civilisations are living entities. They change and diversify over time.

Differences, however, offer no cause for alarm. They need not stand in the way of effective dialogue either within or between the major civilisational traditions. As already noted, the emerging dialogue stands to gain at least as much from diversity as from as from commonality.

Cultural diversity is, indeed, an integral part of the human inheritance. All of us, though we belong to different religious, ethical and cultural formations, share the same civilisational inheritance. Each person, regardless of ethnic, national or religious background or philosophical viewpoint, shares something of the priceless gifts offered by other cultures and civilisations. As the world's libraries, museums and concert halls attest, humankind is the custodian of a single inheritance—rich, diverse, yet deeply interconnected.

Dialogue: an idea whose time has come

Dialogue is a recurring theme of human history. As Daisaku Ikeda remarked in his 2008 Peace Proposal:

The key to waging a successful struggle for the ideals of humanism lies in dialogue, a challenge as old (and as new) as humanity itself. It is part of the essential nature of human beings to be dialogical; to abandon dialogue is in effect to abandon our humanity. Without dialogue, society is wrapped in the silence of the grave.

Yet, as a philosophical current conscious of the global implications of both commonality and difference, as a movement with its own dedicated institutions and

full-time professionals, its networks of activists, the dialogue of religions and cultures is very much a recent development. Two world wars, the Holocaust, the advent of the nuclear age, and more recently such tragedies as those in the Middle East and the former Yugoslavia, have provided renewed impetus for the discourse and practice of dialogue.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), founded in November 1945 as a specialised UN agency, was set the task of fostering dialogue on the basis of respect for shared values and the dignity of each civilisation and culture. It is, however, only since the end of the Cold War that the dialogical agenda has gained the necessary momentum. One important sign of this trend has been the establishment of national and international centres and initiatives, each in its own way making civilisational dialogue a focal point of research, education and advocacy. These include the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions (CPWR), the International Interfaith Centre (Oxford), the Global Dialogue Institute, the International Centre for Dialogue among Civilisations (Tehran), the Toda Institute for Global Policy and Peace Research (Honolulu and Tokyo), and our own humble Centre for Dialogue at La Trobe University (Melbourne).

There, is however, a deeper intellectual and ethical current of which these organisational developments are but the outward manifestation. In a famous address delivered on 4 July 1994 in Philadelphia, then Czech President Vaclav Havel powerfully articulated the drift of that current:

The artificial world order of the past decades has collapsed, and a new more-just order has not yet emerged. The central political task of the final years of this century, then, is the creation of a new model of coexistence among the various cultures, peoples, races, and religious spheres within a single interconnected civilisation.

Another voice that has powerfully resonated on the world stage is that of Hojjatoleslam Seyed Mohammad Khatami. A scholar in his own right, he has written and spoken incisively and eloquently on the theme of dialogue. Soon after assuming office as the fifth president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Khatami successfully proposed the idea of 'dialogue among civilisations' first to the Organisation of Islamic conference in 1997, and a year later to the UN General Assembly. In November 1998 the General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming 2001 as the *Year of Dialogue among Civilisations*, a symbolic landmark of the current period of transition. It also adopted the *Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilisations*, which has since provided the impetus and legitimacy for a great many governmental and non-governmental initiatives.

The 'dialogue of civilisations', especially in its present context, is designed

specifically to address the fault line that separates the Western and non-Western worlds, the Occident and the Orient. This is a fault line with a long history, of which the present tensions between Islam and the West are but the most recent and perhaps most troublesome manifestation.

A window of opportunity for Asia Pacific

In response to the immense challenges that lie ahead, the international community is attempting for the first time to engage in a dialogue of global proportions. How can we address the global recession, the financial crisis, climate change, international terrorism, global epidemics, or nuclear proliferation, except through dialogue? We stand little chance of resolving these problems unless we call on the combined wisdom of the world's great cultures and civilizations.

The Asia-Pacific region is well placed to contribute to this global dialogue, for in its midst are represented many of the world's religious and cultural traditions. By virtue of history and geography, Asia Pacific has a unique opportunity to weave together the wisdom of diverse civilisational strands—evident in the multifaceted and sustained encounter between Orient and Occident, and between the major religious and ethical traditions, notably Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam and Christianity, not forgetting the indigenous cultures to be found in different parts of Asia and Oceania.

In his Peace Proposals and other writings, Daisaku Ikeda has consistently drawn attention to the potential for dialogue in the Asia-Pacific region. In January 1986, he proposed the establishment of an 'Asia-Pacific Organization for Peace and Culture' (APOPAC), which would promote cooperation between the countries of the region on the basis of equality and mutual benefit. He rightly warned:

Any plan that places disproportionate emphasis on politics (security or on economics, will easily break down, as it tends to produce friction and resistance.

He placed the stress instead on 'peace', 'disarmament', 'development' and 'culture'. In his 2005 Peace Proposal he returned yet again to the theme of Asian integration, highlighting the environment, development and disaster relief as particularly well suited to intra-regional cooperation. He also proposed the creation of an Asia-Pacific UN office that would promote human security in a regional context.

Several closely related questions arise: How can the peoples of Asia Pacific grasp the opportunities that exist to make intercultural dialogue an integral part of everyday life? How can the dialogical outlook infuse the programmes of our schools and universities, our media, our legal, political and religious institutions? How can

such dialogue inform and strengthen moves to develop an Asia-Pacific community? A recent and highly innovative international initiative may hold part of the answer.

The 'Alliance of Civilisations'

On 21 September 2004, Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero called for the creation of the 'Alliance of Civilisations' during the 59th Session of the UN General Assembly. Following consultations between Zapatero and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the two governments agreed to co-sponsor the initiative, and invited UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to announce it to the Member States of the United Nations.

On 14 July 2005, Kofi Annan formally launched the Alliance of Civilisations (AoC). On 2 September 2005, he announced the establishment of a High-level Group of experts, which was asked to explore the roots of polarization between societies and cultures. The Group had as its Co-Chair Prof. Federico Mayor (Spain), former Director-General of UNESCO. Its other members included: Mohammad Khatami, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Hubert Védrine (former French foreign Minister), Karen Armstrong (UK historian of religion), John Esposito (founding Director, of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, and Ali Alatas (former Indonesian Foreign Minister).

Its first report was presented at its fifth meeting in Istanbul in November 2006. The report's recommendations encompassed strategies for developing better cooperation frameworks and partnerships in line with the Alliance's objectives. It recommended practical steps to strengthen constructive voices and to engage mass media to shape public debates in productive ways. It proposed educational approaches and methods to facilitate the mobilization of young people in promoting the values of mutual respect, cooperation, and the appreciation of diversity.

In the meantime the Alliance of civilisations established the 'Group of Friends' made up of governments and multilateral organisations that support its objectives. Its first ministerial meeting took place in November 2006. To give the initiative still greater visibility and legitimacy, in June 2007, Kofi Annan appointed Jorge Sampaio, former President of Portugal, as High Representative for the Alliance.

Working in partnership with governments, international and regional organisations, civil society groups, foundations, and the private sector, the Alliance is supporting a range of projects and initiatives aimed healing divisions between cultures, religions and civilisations. Its brief is to perform a number of key functions (in collaboration with governmental and non-governmental bodies working in this domain):

Bridge building: connecting people and organisations devoted to promoting trust and understanding between diverse communities, particularly – but not exclusively – between Muslim and Western societies;

Facilitation: helping to give impetus to innovative projects aimed at reducing polarization between nations and cultures through joint initiatives and mutually beneficial partnerships;

Advocacy: building respect and understanding among cultures and amplifying voices calling for mutual respect and reconciliation which help calm cultural and religious tensions between states and peoples;

Promotion: giving greater visibility to initiatives devoted to building bridges between cultures; and

Resourcing: providing access to information and materials drawn from successful cooperative initiatives – in the expectation that these will be used by member states, institutions, organisations, or individuals seeking to initiate similar processes or projects.

On the occasion of the Alliance's second ministerial meeting held in September 2007 in New York, Jorge Sampaio presented the Alliance of Civilisations Implementation Plan to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

The Group of Friends convened its first Annual Forum in Spain in January 2008. In his keynote address, Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero, offered an unusually explicit statement of the anticipated role of inter-civilisational dialogue in the emerging system of governance:

. . . the Alliance of Civilisations . . . has come to fill up a void, a void that identifies a real problem: the management of diversity in a globalised world. This is a problem that has become more serious due to historical, deeply-rooted conflicts. . . In order to face the new challenges of the 21st century we must provide ourselves with new instruments.

The question is: Can the Alliance and the projects which it facilitates become such an instrument?

The brief history we have just sketched of the Alliance suggests that it offers intriguing though as yet little explored possibilities for fostering understanding and collaboration among cultures, religions and civilisations. Nowhere is the Alliance's

potential greater than in Asia Pacific, both within and between countries. If we define Asia Pacific narrowly to include only the countries of East Asia (ASEAN+3) and Australasia, 'Friends of the Alliance' in this region already include: China, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand. If we define it more broadly to include South Asia, we find that Bangladesh, India and Pakistan have also joined. This is a good beginning. On the other hand, few Asian multilateral organisations have as yet become Friends of the Alliance. ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asian Summit and the Asia-Europe Meeting are notable absentees. In any case, notional endorsement by governments has been followed by relatively little action.

To date the AoC has identified four priority areas of work: youth, media, education, and migration. These have been strategically selected because of their potential to influence public sentiment and shape public perceptions, but also to address key tensions that inevitably arise in multiethnic, multifaith societies around a range of complex and at times potentially divisive questions: the role of religion in the public sphere; the treatment of religion in public educational institutions; the recognition of the rights of indigenous and ethnic minorities, especially in relation to language; the rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers; and the role of media in the dissemination of information and the canvassing of opinion and analysis on some of the most contentious issues of the day.

To give effect to AoC objectives in these key areas, governments (as well as multilateral organisations) have been invited to formulate action plans. So far only a handful of governments have formally lodged their plans: Bulgaria, New Zealand, Spain, Turkey and the UK. The UK contribution is the least interesting, entailing little more than an outline of their counterterrorism programmes.

The Spanish Plan sets out a list of broadly stated actions designed to promote appreciation of diversity, civic values and a culture of peace, more effective integration of immigrants, and dissemination of AoC initiatives. More specific actions include promotion and financial support of the UNESCO–approved International Network on Religions and Mediation, and development of training programmes for police forces, healthcare personnel, prison workers and business managers.

The Turkish programme lists 76 projects operating under the auspices of several government ministries, including the Ministry of State, the Ministry of Interior Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry Education. The projects include a wide range of national and international conferences, publications, student projects and scholarships, media training programmes, youth and student exchange programmes, training programmes for educators and religious officers. It is not clear from these national plans how much of the activity outlined is directly the result of

the AoC's agenda, and how much is simply a redirection or reorganisation of existing projects and activities, bringing them more closely into line with AoC objectives.

Of the four Action Plans, the New Zealand effort is perhaps the most systematic to date, reflecting the strong leadership of Prime Minister Helen Clark in this area. She convened a major AoC Asia-Pacific Conference in May 2007. The National Action Plan, developed under the oversight of the Prime Minister's Office, sets out:

- a 'structural framework' (including relationship to the UN-based AoC secretariat, and oversight of and responsibility for the programme)
- a programme of action that runs from December 2007 to June 2009)
- a list of activities
- New Zealand's contribution to the Asia-Pacific region and internationally.

New Zealand has developed two key regional projects. One is a region-wide media programme that will bring journalists from the Asia-Pacific together to discuss reporting and commentary on critical issues, especially those where politics and religion intersect. The second project involves the development—with regional partners—of an educational resource for high school level students in the Asia-Pacific region that sets out common values held by people of differing religions and cultures. It is not yet clear how much attention or enthusiasm the newly elected Key government will devote to the AoC.

Developing the Asia-Pacific connection

Against this backdrop of international initiatives, statements of principle and purpose, reports and plans already under way, a great many possibilities suggest themselves for Asia Pacific. Notwithstanding the current economic recession which has abruptly dampened expectations, at least for the next two or three years, Asia Pacific remains a region of remarkable dynamism. Indeed, its cultural and political vitality may over time outshine its economic performance.

Here, the Alliance of Civilisations may have greater relevance to Asia Pacific than is generally understood. Three considerations point to this conclusion. First, most of the societies that make up the Asia-Pacific region are themselves extraordinarily diverse—culturally, linguistically religiously and politically. We need only think of Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand. In all these societies tensions abound. In China, the relationship between central authority and key ethnic minorities remains a sensitive and largely unresolved problem. The Alliance provides all multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies with a useful policy compass for managing that diversity, especially in conditions of internal conflict.

Secondly, as we have already observed, national diversity is reflected and multiplied many times over when we transpose it to the regional level. In Asia Pacific, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist and secular societies have to negotiate difference across a wide range of issues. In recent years the powerful emotions generated by international events, including September 11, the Israel-Palestine conflict, the US invasion of Iraq, the war in Afghanistan and tensions in South Asia have greatly taxed the capacities of governments to respond coherently, let alone cooperatively, not just to these conflicts, but to such related issues as terrorism, refugee flows and the role of great powers in the region.

A third consideration involves the slow but persistent attempts of Asia-Pacific countries to develop an adequately functioning regional architecture. The last twenty years have witnessed the creation of APEC, ASEAN Regional Forum, Europe-Asia Meeting, ASEAN+3, the East Asian Summit, and now the Australian Prime Minister Rudd's proposal for a new Asia-Pacific Community. Individually and collectively, these institutional arrangements have suffered from one common defect. As Daisaku Ikeda insightfully observed more than twenty years ago, regional arrangements that single-mindedly focus on the so-called 'hard' issues of economy and security at the expense of the 'soft' issues of culture, religion, education, 'people's diplomacy' and humanitarian intervention do so at their own peril. In the absence of institutionalised interaction across the cultural, religious and civilisational divide, the peoples of Asia Pacific will not be able to develop the levels of mutual trust and understanding needed to sustain an economic or security community.

What, then, might be a constructive first step? May I be so bold as to propose on this auspicious occasion a regional consultation that would bring together principally the 'Friends' of the Alliance in Asia Pacific. Invitations could also be extended to other countries as well as to regional organisations considered important to the success of the initiative. Although not an official inter-governmental conference, participants would include members of parliament and government officials from key ministries. Other participants would be scholars and experts in various fields, as well as representatives drawn from industry, philanthropy, media, education and religious and cultural organisations.

The purpose of the consultation would be to:

- a) develop an active AoC presence in the Asia-Pacific region, perhaps a permanent regional arm of the Alliance of Civilisations with the active support and involvement of national governments, multilateral organisations and civil society;
- b) encourage the formulation and implementation of national strategies and action plans, with periodic exchanges of information and joint projects;

- c) establish a new and critically important pillar in the construction of an Asia-Pacific Community.

The lead-up and the follow-up to such a consultation would be at least as important as the event itself. This would be an opportunity to generate a multi-dimensional region-wide dialogue across religious, cultural and political boundaries—a dialogue that encompasses states, markets, civil society as well as existing and emerging multilateral institutions.

Institutes and research centres, universities and other educational institutions have a crucial part to play, researching, crystallizing, publicising this idea, and gathering the necessary support of governments, philanthropic bodies and religious and community organisations.

Ours is a unique, transitional moment in history, when unprecedented dangers coincide with unparalleled opportunities. Our common purpose must be to proclaim an Asia-Pacific community that nurtures a new and transforming dialogue of cultures, religions, civilisations, and political systems. In this task our two countries, Japan and Australia, systems are uniquely placed. We are both modern societies closely linked to the United States and the West, but we are also inextricably linked by history and geography to Asia's future.

Our respective institutions, by philosophical outlook and humanistic commitment, can make a unique collaborative contribution to the Alliance of Civilizations in the Asia-Pacific region. Our shared responsibility is to seize this moment and widen the field of shared action.