

BRIDGING CIVILIZATIONS: THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS IN A FRACTURED WORLD

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In a world marked by deepening divisions, rising extremism, and the resurgence of identity politics, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) has emerged as a vital platform for fostering dialogue, mutual understanding, and cooperation across cultures and faiths. Founded in 2005 as a joint initiative between Spain and Türkiye under the auspices of the United Nations, UNAOC was established to counter the growing tensions between the Western and Muslim worlds in the wake of global conflicts and the rise of radical ideologies.

However, nearly two decades later, its mission has evolved beyond just fostering interfaith dialogue. It has become a key player in addressing the root causes of division, from hate speech and xenophobia to youth radicalization and migration crises. As the international order faces profound shifts, UNAOC's relevance is only increasing, particularly in regions like Eurasia, where historical and contemporary challenges require urgent attention.

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has expressed concerns about the effectiveness of global governance structures, including the Security Council. In his remarks at the Doha Forum on December 10, 2023, he stated: “The United Nations Security Council is paralysed by divisions. Global governance is failing in the face of the climate crisis, in the face of the lawless development of new technologies, and in the face of the multiplication of conflicts.” This acknowledgment underscores the challenges within the UN system and highlights the need for alternative platforms like the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations to foster dialogue and cooperation among member states.

A Platform for Peace and Dialogue

“Dialogue must go beyond mere talking. It must lead to mutual understanding, respect, and ultimately, peaceful coexistence.” Miguel Ángel Moratinos, High Representative for UNAOC, has often reiterated. At its core, UNAOC serves as a bridge between cultures, religions, and civilizations, focusing on four key pillars: education, youth, media, and migration. These areas are essential to addressing misunderstandings and stereotypes that fuel conflict and discrimination. The Alliance’s work extends from grassroots initiatives to high-level diplomatic engagements, ensuring that policies promoting tolerance and coexistence are implemented across diverse societies.

In an era where geopolitical tensions are resurging across Eurasia, UNAOC’s role in preventing conflicts before they arise is more crucial than ever. The region, spanning from Eastern Europe to Central Asia, is home to a mosaic of ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities. While this diversity is a strength, it also presents challenges, particularly when external actors manipulate identity politics for political gains.

Hate Speech and the Challenge of Misinformation

One of the most pressing issues UNAOC addresses today is hate speech and the weaponization of digital platforms. With the explosion of social media, disinformation and inflammatory rhetoric have become powerful tools in exacerbating divisions. Eurasia is no exception. From ethnic tensions in the Caucasus to rising Islamophobia in parts of Europe, digital platforms often amplify prejudices rather than counter them.

In response, UNAOC has launched initiatives like the #SpreadNoHate campaign, which works with journalists and social media influencers to combat misinformation

and promote narratives of inclusion. The campaign aims to challenge the narratives that frame immigrants, religious minorities, or marginalized communities as threats, a trend that has intensified in many Eurasian nations.

In an interconnected world, the battle for peace is also a battle for truth. We must ensure that our digital spaces are not hijacked by those who seek to divide us.

Youth as Agents of Change

A major aspect of UNAOC’s work is empowering young leaders. The organization recognizes that sustainable peace cannot be achieved without the active participation of the next generation. In a “Youth Meet-Up” organized by the European Union and the African Union focusing on the role of youth in peacebuilding and the prevention of conflict and radicalization, Moratinos stated: “One of today’s main challenges is uncertainty, but young people have to remain hopeful and work to have their voices heard.” Through programs such as the Youth Solidarity Fund and the Intercultural Innovation Hub, UNAOC supports young activists and social entrepreneurs who are creating community-based solutions to counter division and foster coexistence. Many of these initiatives take place in Eurasia, where youth engagement is crucial in bridging historical animosities.

Similarly, in the Balkans, UNAOC’s youth programs have facilitated dialogue between Serbian, Bosniak, and Croatian communities, promoting shared historical narratives rather than divisive interpretations of the past.

International Center Alliance of Civilizations and Ivanov School for Young Leaders: Advancing Intercultural Partnerships for Global Peace

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Civilizations (ICAC) based in Skopje, Macedonia. In November 2023, during the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, ICAC and UNAOC formalized their collaboration by signing a partnership agreement. This agreement focuses on promoting

intercultural and interreligious dialogue, fostering social inclusion, combating xenophobia, hatred, and religious intolerance, implementing the United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites, sharing best practices and knowledge, and empowering young individuals from diverse backgrounds to become advocates for intercultural understanding and cooperation.

The Balkans hold a pivotal position in promoting alliances due to their rich tapestry of cultures, religions, and histories. The region has experienced periods of conflict rooted in ethnic and religious divisions. Therefore, fostering intercultural dialogue and understanding in the Balkans is essential for reconciliation and peacebuilding. By supporting initiatives that bridge divides and promote mutual respect, organizations like UNAOC and ICAC contribute to creating a more harmonious and cooperative environment, not only within the Balkans but also as a model for other regions facing similar challenges.

A significant project of the International Center Alliance of Civilizations (ICAC) is its co-organization of the School for Young Leaders, an initiative founded by former Macedonian President Dr. Gjorge Ivanov in 2010.



This prestigious annual program aims to cultivate leadership skills among young professionals from diverse backgrounds. ICAC contributes by shaping the curriculum, inviting globally recognized lecturers, and supporting participants throughout the experience. With over 500 participants and 300 distinguished speakers since its inception, the program has become a hub for emerging leaders. In 2018, it was honored as the Best Socially Responsible Project in Europe by the World Business Angels Investment Forum.

In recent years, the interest among students from Asia has been steadily growing, reflecting a desire to build stronger ties with Europe. This East-West connection is vital for fostering mutual understanding, cross-cultural collaboration, and innovative partnerships that transcend borders. The School serves as a bridge, enabling young leaders from Asia and Europe to connect, exchange ideas, and develop a shared vision for a more peaceful and interconnected world.

Migration and the Path to Social Cohesion

Another critical area where UNAOC has been instrumental is migration and refugee integration. The Eurasian region, particularly at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, has witnessed waves of migration due to conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine.

Migration often triggers social anxieties, leading to xenophobic policies and anti-immigrant sentiments. UNAOC works with municipal governments, civil society, and international organizations to ensure that migrants are not just seen as statistics but as individuals with rights, cultures, and contributions to host societies.

The Intercultural Cities Program, in collaboration with the Council of Europe, supports local governments in developing policies that promote the integration of migrants while preserving cultural diversity. Cities like İstanbul, Moscow, and Athens have benefited from such initiatives, creating inclusive urban environments that celebrate rather than suppress multiculturalism.

Eurasia's Role in the Emerging World Order: A Crossroads for Civilizational Alliance

Zbigniew Brzezinski, in *The Grand Chessboard*, highlights: "About 75 per cent of the world's people live in Eurasia, and most of the world's physical wealth is there as well, both in its enterprises and underneath its soil. Eurasia accounts for about three-fourths of the world's

known energy resources." If the 20th century was defined by the Atlantic world and its institutions, the 21st century is increasingly being shaped by what happens across the vast and complex space of Eurasia. Stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok, and from İstanbul to Ulaanbaatar, Eurasia is more than just a geographic region. It is a civilizational meeting ground. It is where East meets West, where Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and secularism intersect, and where the legacies of empire, colonization, and resistance still reverberate. In the context of building an *Alliance of Civilizations*, Eurasia holds an irreplaceable role, not just as a theater of tensions, but as a crucible for solutions.

First, Eurasia is the microcosm of global diversity. Nowhere else is there such a concentration of linguistic, religious, ethnic, and cultural plurality. This diversity is both a source of richness and a trigger for potential fragmentation if not managed inclusively. From the Balkans to the Caucasus, from Central Asia to the heart of Russia, the narratives that shape identity have often been framed in oppositional terms. Yet, these same regions are also home to centuries-old traditions of coexistence, trade, and shared culture.

Second, Eurasia is emerging as a geopolitical center of gravity. As the world transitions into a multipolar order, powers like China, Russia, Türkiye, and the European Union are all projecting influence across the region. But with influence comes responsibility. Eurasian nations have the opportunity to lead not just in strategic affairs, but in shaping a new ethic of coexistence. In this way, Eurasia can be a laboratory for post-Westphalian diplomacy: one that does not merely balance power but fosters mutual recognition, intercultural dialogue, and collaborative governance. Another aspect is the role of the European Union.

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However, the European Union can maintain and even enhance its global relevance if it succeeds in establishing a coherent and unified foreign policy, something it currently lacks. In the absence of such a strategy, the EU's influence in global affairs is increasingly being challenged by rising powers, particularly from Asia. Countries like China, India, and regional coalitions in Southeast Asia are stepping into geopolitical vacuums, offering alternative models of engagement, investment, and diplomacy. This growing presence underscores the urgency for the EU to move beyond fragmented national approaches and assert itself with a common

voice on the world stage. Only through strategic coherence can the EU remain a credible actor in shaping the international order.

Third, Eurasia is essential for the UNAOC's mission to succeed on a global scale. Peace in Eurasia is not a regional concern, it is a bellwether for global stability. If interethnic tensions flare in the Caucasus, if migration crises in Eastern Europe are met with xenophobia, or if nationalist narratives dominate Central Asian discourse, the ripple effects are felt far beyond the region. But the reverse is also true: when reconciliation is achieved, when inclusive cities flourish, and when young leaders promote intercultural understanding, Eurasia can become a source of global inspiration.

In practical terms, this means UNAOC's work in the region should not be peripheral, it should be central to the architecture of future peace. By partnering with Eurasian governments, civil society, academic institutions, and faith communities, UNAOC can help unlock the region's potential to become a bridge, not a battleground between civilizations.

It also means expanding investment in regional platforms: from youth forums in the South Caucasus, to media literacy programs in Central Asia, to interfaith summits in Eastern Europe. Peace cannot be outsourced or imposed. It must be built from the ground up, and Eurasia is rich with local actors ready to lead the way.

As the world edges toward new forms of alignment and confrontation, Eurasia's path forward will either



reinforce global divides or become the hinge through which a more cooperative world order turns. The mission of the Alliance of Civilizations, when grounded in Eurasia, is not simply to prevent conflict, it is to reimagine the future as one in which identity is not weaponized, but woven into the fabric of peace. In this sense, the question is no longer whether Eurasia matters, but whether the rest of the world is ready to listen, learn, and build with it.

The Return of Diplomacy and the Shift in Geography

A striking feature of today's evolving international landscape is not only *what* is being discussed in diplomatic circles—but *where*. For much of the modern era, cities like Geneva, Vienna, and Oslo served as the quintessential backdrops for peace talks, international treaties, and multilateral negotiations. These European capitals stood as symbols of neutrality and the liberal international order born out of postwar consensus.

But in recent years, diplomacy has begun to migrate—both symbolically and strategically—eastward. Cities such as Riyadh, Jeddah, İstanbul, Doha, and Astana are increasingly hosting high-level dialogues and peace efforts, reflecting a broader geopolitical transformation. The shift is not just about geography—it's about ownership. These regions are no longer just the subjects of international diplomacy; they are becoming its architects.

The upcoming UNAOC Global Summit in Riyadh captures this new reality. That a global forum on intercultural dialogue and peacebuilding will be held in Saudi Arabia, a country actively reshaping its regional and global role while underscores a world in flux. It highlights the emergence of new diplomatic centers, especially across Eurasia and the Middle East, where the lines between East and West, Global North and Global South, are being renegotiated.

Recent events illustrate this transformation vividly. In early 2024, Jeddah hosted a series of critical negotiations involving the United States and Russia, signaling a willingness, even among adversaries to find common ground in new venues. Saudi Arabia, traditionally a quiet player in high-level diplomacy, is now stepping into the role of convener, leveraging its strategic location and expanding global partnerships. The Jeddah talks, initially focused on grain corridor security and nuclear risk reduction, marked one of the rare moments of U.S.-

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Russia engagement since the escalation of the Ukraine conflict, yet another indication that traditional diplomatic capitals no longer hold exclusive sway.

Türkiye, too, continues to position İstanbul as a dynamic forum for global dialogue. Its efforts to mediate during the early phases of the Ukraine war, and its hosting of interfaith and intercultural initiatives, are grounded in its unique civilizational identity as both a European and Asian power. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan's capital, whether referred to as Astana or Nur-Sultan, has quietly become a trusted site for international negotiations, particularly in multilateral formats involving Central Asian security and interreligious understanding.

This geographic shift also reflects a deeper phenomenon: the *return of diplomacy* in an age of multipolar uncertainty. As polarization, conflict, and populist nationalism erode long-standing multilateral frameworks, new diplomatic spaces are not only welcome—they are necessary. Platforms like UNAOC are capitalizing on this momentum to bring dialogue into regions often overlooked by the traditional centers of global governance.

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The road to peace in the 21st century will not be paved solely in Geneva or Vienna. It will pass through Riyadh, Jeddah, İstanbul, and Astana, places where old narratives are being challenged and new conversations are beginning. UNAOC's presence in these cities is not just symbolic; it's strategic. It affirms that in a fractured world, diplomacy must be both mobile and inclusive—rooted in respect, shaped by diversity, and driven by shared responsibility.