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Empty Signifier in Practice:
Interrogating the ‘Civilizations’ of the United Nations
Alliance of Civilizations

Gregorio Bettiza

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European University Institute

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Abstract

This working paper investigates the reasons underpinning the growing use and widespread resonance of the concept of ‘civilizations’ – defined by cultural and religious markers – in scholarly, policy and public discourses, since the end of the Cold War. Such an inquiry is made all the more relevant since the concept of civilizations has not only remained at the level of language. It has, in fact, become embedded, instantiated, and operationalized within the global governance architecture, most prominently with the creation of the UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) in 2005. The UNAOC represents a remarkable development in the way international order is being understood and upheld within global governance institutions, as no longer solely dependent on states, or on the advancement of individual rights and economic opportunities, but also on what occurs between and within civilizations. Why have discourses and practices about civilizations acquired the political salience they have in international society at this historical juncture? This paper argues for an understanding of the concept of civilizations as a particular kind of ‘empty signifier’, underpinned by three overarching logics: a logic of interpretation centered on identity, a logic of critique towards liberal ‘end of history’ narratives and projects, and a logic of practicality that matches the interests of multiple state and non-state actors. This argument is empirically illustrated through an analysis of how these three logics, which explain the contemporary power and authority of the signifier of civilizations, also structure the mission, bureaucratic apparatus, and operations of the UNAOC.

Keywords

Civilizations, United Nations, Identity, Empty Signifier, Practice

“It would be pleasant to be able to define the word ‘civilization’ simply and precisely, as one defines a straight line, a triangle or a chemical element. The vocabulary of the social sciences, unfortunately, scarcely permits decisive definitions. Not that everything is uncertain or in flux: but most expressions, far from being fixed for ever, vary from one author to another, and continually evolve before our eyes.” P.3

Fernand Braudel (1995, 3)

“Civilizational analysis is important not least because the concept of civilization is being used. It seems, at this historical juncture, that the notion of civilization is a significant carrier of knowledge and of thereby attendant preferences and policies.”

Martin Hall (2007, 199)

The notion that what occurs within and between civilizations – largely defined around cultural and religious markers – matters in world politics, has gained considerable ground in scholarly, policy and public debates since the end of the Cold War. This development is most visibly represented not only by the wide resonance that Huntington’s controversial thesis of civilizational clashes has had over the past two decades (see BBC 2013; *Foreign Affairs* 2013), but also in the very institutionalization and operationalization of the UN Alliance of Civilizations (from now on UNAOC or the Alliance).

The UNAOC was established in 2005 with a vision to “work towards a more peaceful, more socially inclusive world, by building mutual respect among peoples of different cultural and religious identities” and to contribute “to reject extremism and embrace diversity.”¹ It seeks to support “broader efforts to ameliorate identity based crises” and portrays itself as a “leading United Nations platform for intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation”.² The Alliance claims both “a global scope underpinned by a universal perspective,” while also placing a particular focus “on addressing relations between Western and Muslim societies” (United Nations 2007, 5).

The UNAOC is the product of a joint diplomatic effort between José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, former Prime Minister of Spain,³ with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Prime Minister of Turkey, actively backed by the then-UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. Today the Alliance boasts a growing number of initiatives – ranging from high-level global conferences, to media activities and educational campaigns, to grass roots programs – involving a wide range of actors – states, international and regional organizations, civil society groups, scholars, religious leaders and organizations, foundations, the media and the private sector – aimed at helping to “reduce cross-cultural tensions and to build bridges between communities”⁴ from the local to the regional and global levels. As Thomas Uthup (2010, 407) argues, the UNAOC is “one of the key international actors involved in the complex interplay between intercultural relations and global politics”.

UNAOC initiatives are coordinated by a secretariat based in the UN headquarters in New York and headed by a High Representative,⁵ who reports directly to the UN Secretary General. Much of the Alliance’s agenda and programmatic guidelines were laid out in a report drafted by a High Level Group composed of leading figures in the fields of politics, academia, civil society, religion, international finance, and media from all regions of the world.⁶ The UNAOC also counts on the

¹ <http://www.unaoc.org/who-we-are/> (accessed 02/07/2014). For the UNAOC’s timeline see <http://www.unaoc.org/who-we-are/history/timeline/> (accessed 02/07/2014).

² Ibid.

³ Zapatero put on the international agenda the idea of an “Alliance of Civilizations between the Western and the Arab and Muslim worlds” during the 59th Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2004. For Zapatero’s speech see <http://www.un.org/webcast/ga/59/statements/spaeng040921.pdf> (accessed 02/07/2014)

⁴ <http://www.unaoc.org/who-we-are/> (accessed 02/07/2014)

⁵ Jorge Sampaio, former President of Portugal, was the first High Representative between 2007-2013, followed by Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, a diplomat of Qatar with a long experience at the UN and President of the Sixty-sixth session the UN General Assembly in 2011-2012.

⁶ For the High Level Group report see Alliance of Civilizations (2006) on the members see <http://www.unaoc.org/who-we-are/high-level-group/> (accessed 02/07/2014)

political and financial support of a Group of Friends, a community of countries and international organizations which have signed up to promote the Alliance's objectives.

Overall, the UNAOC represents a remarkable institutional change within the structures of the UN system. The UN has long been an organization whose primary goals are to ensure peace and security among and within nations, promote individual human rights, and reduce worldwide poverty. The Alliance, however, represents a novel development in the way international order is being understood and upheld, as no longer solely dependent on states, or on the advancement of individual rights and economic opportunities, but also on the state of intra- and inter-civilizational relations.

The interpretation of the UNAOC offered here, as representing a significant departure from standard ways of thinking and doing international relations, is not an entirely novel claim (see Bettiza 2014; Marchetti 2009; Michael and Petito 2009; Lachmann 2011). What has received far less attention, however, is why this way of thinking about and acting upon international politics has emerged in the first place, acquiring growing and persistent authority over time in the global public sphere and within global governance institutions. Most investigations into the UNAOC rarely, if ever, tackle this issue.

There are, for instance, a number of accounts that seek to explain, contextualize, critique or justify the UNAOC's emergence. A first line of explanation stresses the ideational and intellectual roots underpinning the Alliance. Some emphasize, here, the problematic and misplaced influence played by Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' thesis (Balci 2009). The thrust of Huntington's (1993a, 1993b, 1996) argument was that in the post-Cold War era, international conflict would be defined by cultural and civilizational fault lines, notably between the West on the one hand and the Islamic as well as Sinic worlds on the other.

It is further possible to point at the constructive role played, instead, by a wide range of normative proposals and initiatives for dialogue advanced by scholars and intellectuals, not simply as a reaction to Huntington, but as a legitimate autonomous intellectual tradition of understanding world politics (Dallmayr 2002; Dallmayr and Manoochchri 2007; Esposito and Voll 2000; Forst and Ahmed 2005; Kayaoğlu 2012; Lynch 2000; Michael and Petito 2009; Petito 2011, 2007). Here, the development of the UNAOC can be considered as "the latest phase in the evolving discussion of 'intercultural dialogue' at the UN-level" (Bloom 2013, 3), most prominently revitalized in the 1990s by former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami (1997, 2000; Khatami, van Ess, and Küng 2001) and his proposal to designate 2001 as the year of the Dialog among Civilizations. Overall, these scholars and political leaders sought to emphasize the possibility of engagement and cooperation across civilizational boundaries.

A second line of explanation, not necessarily mutually exclusive to the first, generally emphasizes the role played by contingent factors, historical events and political interests. The moment when the UNAOC was launched was key. This was at the height of perceived growing Western-Muslim tensions in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the Bush administration's controversial War on Terror and Iraq campaign. These events appeared, to many, as turning Huntington's scholarly thesis into present day reality. As a consequence they also opened a window of opportunity for civilizational dialogue proposals to be energetically put forward on the international policy agenda and institutionalized at the UN (Camilleri and Martin 2014, 5; see also Balci 2009; Kausch and Barreñada 2005).

Political leaders' interests were fundamental too. Khatami, who was at the forefront of diplomatic proposal for dialogue already in the 1990s, was moved as much by personal normative convictions as well as an interest in strengthening his hand domestically *vis-à-vis* reactionary political opponents while internationally presenting Iran as a possible partner of the West (Bettiza and Dionigi 2014, 10-11). In light also of the 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid, Zapatero of Spain wanted to sharply distance his government from the previous one, led by José María Aznar, which had largely backed and supported America's war in Iraq (Barreñada 2006, 99-100). Erdogan, had his own agenda too,

reaching out to European partners whose favorable stance was sought-after during European Union accession talks, while also presenting himself as a leading and reliable spokesperson for the Muslim world in a regional and international context (Balci and Miş 2008).

Yet, these explanations – the role of intellectuals, historical events, leaders' interests – contribute to raising even more questions than they answer. Why did the theory of one Harvard-based academic first published on the pages of *Foreign Affairs*, despite being repeatedly rejected and undermined by equally prestigious scholars on the pages of the same journal or comparably influential outlets,⁷ struck such a widespread and lasting chord in the first place? Why was there an intellectual movement, developed over the past two decades, which took seriously the ambiguous and controversial concept of civilizations, not only in the persona of Huntington, but also by all those promoting a view and framework of dialogue? Why have discourses of civilizational identities progressively come to resonate and gain authority in intellectual, policy, and political circles as broadly as they have, not only after, but also before 9/11 and the events that followed?

Moreover, the fact that civilizational discourses were already in place before 9/11, does not mean that they necessarily would be adopted and institutionalized at the UN thereafter, a time when the practice of “de-mythicizing” (Balci 2009, 98-99) civilizational narratives was well underway. In fact, intellectuals and policy-makers debating the creation of the UNAOC showed a clear understanding of the multiple problems and shortcomings, already voiced by the critics of civilizations discourses, of endorsing a civilizational frame of reference: from the risks of essentializing and objectifying civilizational differences as well as potentially mirroring and legitimizing clash narratives (Camilleri and Martin 2014, 13-14; Kausch and Barreñada 2005, 2-3).

Why, despite this reflexive self-awareness, many intellectuals and policy-makers still found civilizational discourses and dialogical initiatives to be a viable and necessary solution for advancing international peace and security? Moreover, why did political leaders find discourses about civilizations – either in clash as in the case of the Bush administration or Al Qaeda, or dialogue as in the case of Khatami, Zapatero, and Erdogan – to be a valuable and legitimate reservoir of meanings to draw upon and deploy, more or less instrumentally, for advancing their diverse purposes and agendas? Finally, why did a worldview and initiative around managing intra- and inter-civilizational relations and perceptions, sustained by a small group of intellectuals and political leaders, progressively gain traction within the UN where either the particularist interests of states or the general ones of humanity tend to dominate the agenda instead?

To sum up, there are many interpretations of world politics that are regularly articulated yet only few resonate globally and acquire international normative and political traction. Why, have discourses about clash and dialogue of civilizations struck such a widespread chord in international society, both before and after 9/11, ultimately becoming institutionalized in global governance initiatives such as the UNAOC? Moreover, if many of today's supposed civilizations have a long historical pedigree (Eisenstadt 1986), why have civilizational categories and identities acquired particular salience in the consciousness and rhetoric of international political actors at this particular moment in time?

Martin Hall, in the quote that opens this paper, perceptively suggests that the concept of civilization is being used at this historical juncture because it is a “significant carrier of knowledge”. This paper seeks to explore and push this argument further. It argues for an understanding of the concept of civilizations as an ‘empty signifier’. It is this quality of an empty signifier, that accounts for concept's (re)emergence, widespread use, resonance, and ultimately its institutionalization within the UN system

⁷ Few social scientists and theorists have endorsed Huntington's arguments. Among the many leading scholars that, instead, directly refuted his thesis, see Adib-Moghaddam (2011); Halliday (2002); Ikenberry (1997); Said (2001); Sen (2006); Walt (1997); see also (*Foreign Affairs* 2013); Hoge (2010). Beyond these powerful theoretical and philosophical critiques of Huntington's thesis, a range of empirical studies have questioned also the empirical validity of civilizational clashes (Chiozza 2002; Fox 2002; Henderson and Tucker 2002).

following the end of the Cold War. This said, the concept of civilizations while being an empty signifier, it not a signifier for *anything*, but is instead a carrier of *particular kinds* of knowledge. Civilizations captures, brings together, and gives meaning to a disparate number of objective trends, subjective interpretations, normative orientations, and interests at work at this juncture in international society.

The empty signifier of civilizations is underpinned, I would argue, by three distinct logics. First, at a time of rapid change and globalization, civilizations provide a particular interpretive framework that marks an important shift towards an identity-centered mode of understanding and explaining world politics as an alternative to more established modes of thinking. These include, for instance, the state-centrism of standard International Relations (IR) theories, the economic-centrism of neo-liberal and Marxist perspectives, and the individual-centrism of the human rights discourse. I call this first logic, the ‘logic of interpretation’. Second, references to civilizations in world politics act as an important catalyst for a range of, deeply normative, critiques directed towards globalization processes and the structures and agents of the liberal international order. I call this the ‘logic of critique’. Thirdly, civilizational discourses have a practical logic, that is, they are seen as useful by a wide range of more or less powerful actors in world politics at this time in history. I call this the ‘logic of practicality’.

Overall, this research is animated by an interest in understating and explaining the salience, power, and authority of the signifier of civilizations as this historical juncture in scholarly and public discourses. It is not concerned with proposing a genealogy of the concept of civilizations (O’Hagan 2002) or a historical overview of the field of civilizational analysis (Arnason 2003). Neither is the paper interested in exploring the origins, dynamics and relations of plural civilizations as objective entities across time and space in the social world (Braudel 1995; Eisenstadt 2003, 1986; Hobson 2004; Huntington 1996; Katzenstein 2010a, 2012a, 2012b; Puchala 1997; Toynbee and Somervell 1946). Nor is the paper concerned with civilization *in the singular* as a process (Elias 1994; Linklater 2010) or a politically expedient discourse (Bowden 2009; Gong 1984; Jackson 2006; Salter 2002; Suzuki 2009) that separates the civilized from the uncivilized.⁸ Lastly, the paper also does not seek to provide yet another critique of Huntington’s thesis,⁹ nor to advance arguments for (Esposito and Voll 2000; Kose 2009; Lynch 2000) or against (Balci 2009; Salt 2008; Tsutsumibayashi 2005) the necessity of inter-civilizational dialogues at the UN or more broadly.

The paper’s main focus, and thus contribution, is directed towards understanding and explaining why talking about and acting upon the notion that what occurs within and between a plurality of civilizations, generally defined along cultural and religious markers, has become a fixture of world politics – particularly following the end of the Cold War. Put differently, starting from the observation that discourses, institutions and practices around civilizations are spreading – most remarkably and emblematically in the case of the UNAOC – the paper seeks to unpack the deeper and wider processes that underpin such changes.

The study is based on an analysis of the concept of civilizations as it is used in scholarly and public debates, and its application to global governance initiatives such as the UNAOC. Theoretically, it is situated in the recent constructivist turn towards practices, in general (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Neumann 2002), and how imaginaries of civilizations become constitutive, and constituted by, international institutions and practices in and on the material world, in particular (Bettiza 2014 *forthcoming*, 2014). Methodologically, data and information have been collected from a range of sources. These sources include: secondary sources such as books, articles, and reports on civilizational analysis in general and the UNAOC in particular; primary sources such as speeches and documents by political leaders and high-level policymakers; a review of UNAOC institutional structure and

⁸ It is important to stress, however, that the two concepts of civilizations in the plural and civilization in the singular are not mutually exclusive. Their meanings, as we shall see, may and do often overlap in scholarly and public debates.

⁹ For an overview of this literature, see footnote 7.

operations collected mostly through information available on the website; a semi-structured interviews with selected scholars and officials involved, currently or in the past, in UNAOC activities; and a ten day field mission in New York in June 2014.

This working paper is structured as follows. The next section presents the concept of civilizations as a particular kind of empty signifier. It relates this signifier to certain interpretative, critical, and practical logics. The conceptual argument is further illustrated in the second part of the paper through a close analysis of the institutional arrangements, discourses and practices of the UNAOC. This section explores how the empty signifier of civilizations is instantiated and operationalized in the global governance policy arena. The Alliance is chosen because it represents one of the most striking institutional embodiments of, as well as exemplifying many of the dynamics and tensions embedded in, the signifier of civilizations as it is understood and employed at this historical juncture. The final section concludes with some reflections on the future prospects of the concept of civilizations, in general, and the Alliance, in particular.

Civilizations: Three Logics of an 'Empty Signifier'

Why has the concept of civilizations – along with discourses of civilizational clashes and dialogues – been increasingly adopted in scholarly, policy and public debates since the end of the Cold War? This section attempts to answer this puzzling question in two steps. First, by arguing for an understanding of the concept of civilizations as an 'empty signifier' of a particular kind. Second, by laying out three logics that the signifier of civilizations captures and addresses, which explain its meteoric rise and growing resonance over the past decades.

Empty Signifiers

So far in the IR literature, civilizations have been presented as an 'ideal model' (Marchetti 2009), a 'strategic frame of reference' (Petito 2011), or as an 'imagined community' (Bettiza 2014; O'Hagan 2002). I propose here to further understand the concept of civilizations as an empty signifier. The notion of an empty signifier has been developed in semiotics and in the field of post-structural discourse analysis.¹⁰ According to Daniel Chandler (Online), an empty signifier is:

“...variously defined as a signifier with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or non-existent signified. Such signifiers mean different things to different people: they may stand for many or even *any* signifieds; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean”.

A key issue here is the extent to which there is an actual signified, or none, that the signifier refers to. More post-structural theoretical perspectives tend to view empty signifiers as pointing to no actual object signified in the real world, compared instead to a concept over which there is no agreed upon meaning but that is still related to a signified. Despite these disagreements, it is important to note that, as Rachel Walker (1989, 182) argues, “the word ‘empty’ is something of a misnomer” because often we deal with terms which actually “[overflow] with meaning”. Meanings may shift from context to context and from time to time. The puzzle then, is to unpack and identify what kind of meanings does a particular signifier bring together and refer to.

Empty signifiers also have a number of important political implications and functions. For Ernesto Laclau (1996), empty signifiers are a product of power and ensure hegemonic relations. Their purpose “is to give a particular demand a function of universal representation” (Laclau 1996, 57). As Dirk Nabers (2009, 196) highlights, “The more specific the content of a signifier becomes, the more it will be contested, which leads to the failure of a hegemonic project...Power and the ability to rule will thus

¹⁰ In debates within and close to IR, the notion of an empty signifier has been applied in different ways and for different cases, for instance, to the concepts of 'governance' (Offe 2009), 'climate protection' (Methmann 2010), 'francophonie' (Glasze 2007), or 'freedom' (Nabers 2009).

depend on an actor's skill to present his own particular world view as compatible with the communal aims". Secondly, the capacity of empty signifiers to be "sufficiently broad or 'universal'" also allows "particular identities to use the term to form political alliances" (Townshend 2003, 132). Put differently, empty signifiers "can have different meanings and can thereby serve to unite disparate social movements" (Nabers 2009, 196). Finally, the vague nature of empty signifiers, enables its content to be filled in many ways and thereby to be appropriated not only by multiple actors, but also for a variety of different purposes.

The term civilizations, I argue, has become salient in public discourses only marginally because it purports to capture ontologically real civilizations and their dynamics in world politics. An important feature of the concept of civilizations is that it functions very much as an empty signifier. This is not to say, that – despite all the recognized complexities and difficulties inherent in identifying and defining what civilizations are, what they do, how many exist, where their boundaries lie, and who its representatives are – civilizations are not understood by some scholars or political leaders as objective signifiers, which exert powerful influences and forces in international society. What I am suggesting is that the widespread adoption of a highly contested concept and category such as that of civilizations in policy and political debates, is largely unrelated to the supposed real existence and effects of certain units of analysis or cultural contexts which remain, even for its most committed and closest observers, largely underdetermined.

As an empty signifier, civilizations brings together in a unified discourse a range of heterogeneous and often contradictory actors, practices, and interests. The concept can be implicated in hegemonic, as well as counter-hegemonic projects. It further circumscribes the terms around which disagreements as well as coalitions can occur. As Mustapha Tlili (2014, personal communication) suggests:

"Civilization should be understood as a sort of category for understanding the world, this category then becomes used also for practical purposes. It allows to understand, but also misunderstand and to manage the understanding and misunderstanding. We should see civilization more as a category of logic than a substance."

While the vagueness of the notion of civilizations contributes in important ways to its popularity, it is important to stress that what we are dealing with is a *structured* vagueness. That is, the notion of civilizations is a carrier of certain meanings and understandings, but not others. It permits certain modes of thought and action, but not others. What does the empty signifier of civilizations, or as a 'category of logic' as Tlili puts it, thus stand for and do? What meanings and knowledge is it a carrier of and what functions does it absolve at this historical moment? Put differently, what is civilizations a signifier of and for?

Three logics

I argue that references to civilizations are mostly being used because they capture certain interpretative, critical, and practical logics at work internationally during a time of dramatic global change since the end of the Cold War. In other words, civilizations, as an empty signifier, resonates because it is constitutive of a particular way of interpreting world politics, and of particular normative orientations and political projects, which have gained ground over the past two to three decades.

First, civilizations provide a particular interpretive framework that marks a shift towards an identity-centered mode of understanding and explaining world politics. This is an alternative mode of thinking about the international compared to those that generally dominate scholarly and public discussions, namely state-centrism (standard IR theories), economic-centrism (neo-liberal and Marxist perspectives), and individual-centrism (human rights discourses). In other words, at the core of civilizational discourses is the notion that identity *matters*, for better or worse, in world politics.

As Raffaele Marchetti (2009, 147) highlights, civilizations are generally intended as "the ultimate cultural reference, beyond any other local and national element". Hence, for Marchetti (2009, 147),

“while the notion of identity is reinterpreted as multilayered, civilizational identity is acknowledged as the ultimate, most encompassing layer”. This echoes Huntington’s (1996, 43) observation that civilizations constitute, “the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species”.

Thus, while at a first glance much of the discussions about civilizations refer to macro-cultural entities or contexts which are often defined in religious terms, at their core these debates often put the issue of identity at the center of accounts of world politics (see also Hall and Jackson 2007; O’Hagan 2007). They do so not only for the most macro level beyond the strictures of the state, but also all the way down to the meso and micro levels within and beneath the state. Identity matters politically, the logic goes, and thus we should make this the focus of our analytical and, more or less explicitly stated, normative investigations.

The trends that have pushed identity at the forefront of political analysis and discourses are multiple. We are living, it is commonly argued, in a world of major and rapid transformations and change (Held 1999; Rosenau 1990), with globalizing processes playing a critical role in dislocating, destabilizing, and pluralizing identities (Dunn and Goff 2004; Lapid and Kratochwil 1997; Mozaffari 2002) and actors (Ruggie 1993; Scholte 2005; Risse 2002) within and beyond the state (see also Marchetti 2009). Likewise technological innovations are diffusing power and empowering individuals and non-state actors (Nye 2011, ch.5).

During such transformations and unsettled periods, cultural and religious identity markers acquire growing social and political salience (Kinnvall 2004; Roy 2010; Swidler 1986). Previously homogenous societies are also becoming, thanks to transnational flows of peoples and ideas, increasingly culturally and religiously heterogeneous (Modood 2013). Religions are experiencing a public revival (Berger 1999; Casanova 1994), further contributing to re-orienting actors behaviors and to re-imaging their belonging along transnational and civilizational lines (Eisenstadt 2000; Petito 2010; Shani 2008).

As a group of extremists tore down, in the name of a religion and a transnational community of people, the symbols of American power on 9/11 – an event that Huntington’s thesis appeared to predict for some – political rhetoric would increasingly recast international relations of enmity and amity along distinct cultural groupings: a secular or Christian West and a religious Muslim world. What Huntington (1996, 37) had vividly in mind when he came up with his thesis, however, was not just Islam, but also the experience of Yugoslavia that disintegrated along religious and ethnic lines as Communist ideology and power declined.

Within this context of change, the signifier of civilizations appears to analytically capture two interrelated, but also somewhat distinct, global dynamics linked to identity. What can be conceptualized as, respectively, *the politics of identity* and *identity politics*. First, civilizations discourses are a representation at the most macro level of the growing force that the politics of identity is acquiring internationally (Gutmann 1994; Parekh 2008). The politics of identity is linked to the emergence of social and political programs aimed towards the recognition, recovery or imposition of a particular identity at the local or global levels – whether national, cultural, ethnic, religious, or civilizational.

These programs range from calls for the creation of multicultural societies, to the acknowledgement of indigenous and linguistic rights, disputes over the presence of religious symbols (be they crosses or hijabs) in public spaces, European Union constitutional debates over Christian roots, the re-emergence of right-wing populisms, domestic and transnational forms of Islamist politics, the Asian values debate, Hindu nationalism, or the spread of a range of Christian, Jewish and other religious fundamentalisms and orthodoxies. Civilizations discourses captures the most macro-level, along with it also the other lower levels, at which the politics of identity and recognition takes place.

Second, civilizations discourses are representative of the phenomenon of identity politics. Identity politics along civilizational lines appears to be linked to the need to map and order along distinct cultural complexes an otherwise bewildering and dizzying array of politically salient actors beyond simply the state which today populate the international sphere, whether: individuals (bloggers, leakers, converts, religious leaders), non-state organizations (social movements, NGOs, religious organizations, terrorist and criminal organizations, or corporations), regional organizations (the European Union (EU), NATO, the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC), or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)) and international organizations (the UN or the World Bank).

This process of ordering shifts attention away from a focus solely on states or, alternatively, non-state organizations, towards instead stressing relations among *peoples* understood as organized politically along different units – be them states, but also sub-state and supra-state actors – and structured in part by their civilizational, cultural, and religious identity (Bettiza 2014). In other words, civilizational discourses help locate a multiplicity of international actors, as well as what they want and do, by assigning them particular identity markers.¹¹

It is within this interpretative framework then that debates regarding the state of ‘Western-Muslim world’ or ‘Christian-Islam’ relations, the *problématique* of ‘who speaks for’ the West or Muslims, or questions regarding what Westerners or Muslims ‘think’ of each other, acquire social and political meaning (see Dialogues 2006; Esposito and Mogahed 2007; Pew 2006, 2011). It is also thanks to this interpretative logic that it becomes possible to talk about, for instance, an NGO such as Save the Children, a regional organization such as the EU, and a state such as the United States as belonging and acting on behalf of the West; or about widely different entities such as Al Qaeda, Turkey, or the OIC as – more or less – legitimate representative actors of the Muslim world. In parallel, scholarly or public debates about civilizational clashes, often easily overlap and resonate with similar discussions about emerging conflicts along identity cleavages whether ethnic, sectarian, or religious.

Overall, then, references to civilizations capture an emerging interpretative logic that understands and explains multiple political actors and actions as either directed towards upholding a specific identity (the politics of identity) or stemming from a specific identity (identity politics). Echoing this conclusion, is Pasquale Ferrara (2014, personal communication), Secretary General of the European University Institute (EUI) and former head of the Policy Planning Unit in the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who suggests:

“Huntington struck a chord because he appears to have identified a fundamental development in the international relations of the XXIst century, that what matters is not solely economic or military power, or the advancement of human rights and democracy, but identity. While human rights might have been the principal theme of the second half of the XXth century, the theme of collective identity – issues of recognition against globalization and economic technocracy – is the salient issue of today”.

This mode of understanding world politics generates a particular set of political and policy *problématiques* with regards to the sources of international peace and security. For instance, the core question here is not what would be the best possible organization of political power and authority domestically and its defense internationally, as is the case with state-centric perspectives. Nor it is concerned with the merits or demerits of capitalism and markets and the measures required to reap its positive benefits (for neo-liberals) or curb its disastrous consequences (for Marxists) that generally preoccupy economic-centric approaches. It is neither consumed with identifying the appropriate definition and multiple expressions of individual rights and the best possible way of upholding these universally which marks individual-centric perspectives.

¹¹ The notion that identities enable and constrain state and non-state actors’ interests and behaviors is also a staple of much IR Constructivist literature (Katzenstein 1996; Lapid and Kratochwil 1997; Wendt 1994), which has gained growing traction and recognition in the field since the 1990s.

Its defining *problématique* is, instead, how to appropriately manage the dislocation, encounter, mixing, and overlap of diverse and plural identities at the individual, domestic, transnational, international and global levels. “Managing cultural, religious and civilizational differences within and across national borders”, Joseph Camilleri and Aran Martin (2014, 18) for instance claim, “is one of the defining challenges of our time”.

The second logic that constitutes the empty signifier of civilizations, is its ability to provide an overarching discourse that connects a range of deeply normative critiques of globalization, the liberal order, and Western cultural, intellectual, economic, political and military hegemony. References to civilizations – both as potentially clashing or in need of dialogue – are often rooted in a critique of universalist and universalizing ‘end of history’ narratives and processes, especially as they increasingly appear to overlap with, or are explicitly applied to, American foreign policy since the end of the Cold War.

This perspective draws from, and can be situated in, wider political and social theoretical debates. Whether communitarian and religious critiques of liberal secular universalist norms and projects (Dallmayr 2002; Dallmayr and Manoochehri 2007; De Bary 1998; Michael and Petito 2009; Petito 2007; Weiming 2000), sociological critiques of singular and homogenizing modernization paradigms (Berger and Huntington 2003; Eisenstadt 2003), conservative skepticism of liberal utopianism and hubris (Huntington 1996), or post-colonial and non-Western critiques of Western economic, political and cultural imperialism (Esposito and Voll 2000; Hobson 2007, 2004; Tsygankov 2008).

Huntington’s clash thesis has been much censured for its essentialist and determinist views of civilizations and orientalist ones of Islam. Yet few such critiques, especially those coming from a dialogue perspective, would disagree with a central normative concern of Huntington’s. That is, the late Harvard professor’s attack on “Western arrogance” manifested in its, and especially America’s, efforts “to promote a universal Western culture” and its “values of democracy, free markets, limited government, human rights, individualism, the rule of law” (Huntington 1996, 183-184). These attempts, while embraced by “minorities in other civilizations”, also can and do generate “widespread skepticism to intense opposition” by majorities in non-Western cultures (p.184). As Huntington bluntly concludes: “What is universalism to the West is imperialism to the rest” (p.184).

To sum up, civilizations discourses underpin a generalized critique of liberal universalism, standard modernization and globalization paradigms, and/or Western policies that runs across a broad range of intellectual orientations – whether communitarian, conservative, left, religious, non-Western and post-colonial. Critiques then differ in important ways, however, when articulated along a clash or dialogue perspective. Clash theorists, like Huntington, see civilizational diversity and cultural pluralism as incommensurable and thus a perennial source of tensions and conflicts. The best that we can hope for, these theorists argue, is prudence and restraint.

Scholars and political leaders advancing a civilizational dialogue perspective, instead, generally value cultural pluralism, they see it as a source of enrichment and a key for building a more peaceful and just, less hegemonic or Western/liberal-centric, international order. What is required to reach such a goal, and to dispel narratives of clash, are inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogues and initiatives across all levels to foster greater understanding, appreciation and cooperation among actors populating an inescapably diverse international community (Forst and Ahmed 2005; Michael and Petito 2009; Dallmayr and Manoochehri 2007).

The third logic underpinning the use and diffusion of the concept of civilizations is one of practicality. Civilizations are a practical empty signifier for advancing the political projects and interests of a wide range of powerful, as well as less powerful, state and non-state actors in world politics. In other words, civilizational discourses are used because they are deemed authoritative and thus useful.

Powerful actors, mostly states and their leaders, can and have employed civilizational discourses as convenient rhetorical tools for sustaining hegemonic projects by essentializing differences, ‘othering’ opponents, and legitimizing a range of security practices. The value added of the civilizations signifier, compared to that of culture or nation for instance, is that it also has deep moral connotations to it. Those employing this discourse can use it to present themselves as the defenders or promoters of ‘civilization’ in the face of ‘barbarism’, whether across history (Adib-Moghaddam 2011; Bowden 2009; Jackson 2006) or in present day times of heightened terrorist threats (Pasha 2007; Salter 2002). As Tony Blair (2007, 82) claims, the fight against extremists “is not a clash between civilizations; it is a clash *about* civilization [emphasis in original]”. Civilizational discourses, thus, can help to distinguish both self from other as well as right from wrong (Katzenstein 2010b, 12).

Yet, following the critical logic embedded in the signifier of civilizations laid out above, civilizations discourses can also provide important ideological and rhetorical resources for counter-hegemonic projects – especially with an anti-colonial, anti-Western, or anti-liberal slant. This is the case, for instance, with the ‘Asian values’ debate most prominently promoted by political leaders from authoritarian countries like Malaysia and Singapore emerging in opposition to the claim of the universality of human rights norms (Zakaria and Yew 1994). Or the anti-Western rhetoric, which builds upon a generalized sense of grievance and injustice for past and present wrongs, that Islamist actors rely upon to legitimize their diverse political programs (Ayoob 2007). Likewise Moscow is seeking to muster a particularist civilizational identity discourse in order to legitimize, and provide the ideological glue, for its regional military and institutional projects (Lukin 2014).

Political leaders, especially from middle-range powers, may have their own incentives to employ the signifier of civilizations. At a time when civilizational imaginaries proliferate, those who are able to successfully present themselves and their countries as legitimate spokesperson for a civilization or as mediators between different civilizations can also gain considerable symbolic capital, in terms of prestige and recognition, in the domestic and international realms.

One may still be surprised, thought, that states would adopt a civilization rhetoric given that as a signifier the concept generally undermines the centrality of the state in world politics. Yet, as Joseph Camilleri (2014, personal communication) suggests: “power is at the center of the concept of civilization, especially if we think of civilizations defined as a center of power encompassing a significant space over a significant period of time”. In other words, there is a power factor embedded in the concept of civilizations that states can exploit by presenting themselves as civilized, civilizational leaders and spokespersons, or civilizational bridges and mediators.

A wide range of civil society actors, also have important incentives to adopt and sustain the civilizations signifier. As already hinted, the very notion of civilizations empowers non-state actors as politically salient agents in international society. Furthermore, civil society actors, whether secular or religious, can gain substantial symbolic power as well as economic resources, while by-passing state authority, if they are able to present themselves as influential representatives of a particular civilization – whether its armed defenders, or moderate negotiators. Some faith-based actors have a further incentive in the diffusion of the civilizations signifier, since it can open up greater space in secular and secularized domestic and global public spheres to put forward their religious voices and concerns.

Finally, heads of states, civil society activists, and religious leaders have had, without doubt, instrumental reasons for endorsing and sustaining civilizational discourses. It is interesting to note, however, that it has been intellectuals and scholars (also political leaders with careers as intellectuals or scholars) who have had a central role in articulating and popularizing the very same concept of civilizations for our present times. This may not be that surprising since, as Peter Katzenstein (2010b, 12) notes, civilizations are: “deeply meaningful to many members of the cultural elite, as self-conscious and lived identities, civilizations do not rank at the top for most people and typically do not manifest themselves in an everyday sense of strong belonging”.

The role of Samuel Huntington is, of course, paramount here. Yet, a number of further scholars have been key in promoting, in scholarly and public debates, notions of dialogue among and within civilizations, such as Joseph Camilleri, Fred Dallmayr, John Esposito, Fabio Petito, Mustapha Tlili, Tu Weiming. Likewise, many prominent advocates for dialogue in the policy arena, are leaders with an affinity to intellectual enquiry such as Mohammad Khatami, former president of Iran and theologian, Vaclav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic and playwright, and Ahmet Davutoğlu, foreign minister of Turkey and scholar.

For most of these elites, dialogue is seen as one of the most suitable instruments to meet the critical challenges of post-Cold War world politics. Dialogue – whether civilizational, cultural or religious – is understood as a vital tool for reducing identity-based conflicts, countering misperceptions, curbing extremism, increasing awareness of the other, advancing international understanding, engagement and cooperation, and – ultimately – creating a more peaceful and secure international society.

These three logics – interpretative, critical, and practical – may be operating separately or together any time that invocations of civilizations, civilizational identities and boundaries, or civilizational dynamics and relations are articulated and endorsed in scholarly, policy and public discourses. Empirically a significant case where all three logics come together and overlap is with the UNAOC.

The Civilizations Signifier in Practice: the Case of the UN Alliance of Civilizations

This section explores how the multiple meanings and many of the tensions that are embedded in, and assigned to, the concept of civilizations – as it is used in international discourses – are reflected and embodied in the UNAOC. In particular, it unpacks how the interpretative, critical, and practical logics laid out in the section above, play out in the mission, institutional make-up, and operationalization of the Alliance.

The Logic of Interpretation in Practice

The most immediate issue pertaining to the first logic of the civilizations signifier, the ‘logic of interpretation’, revolves around the question of what understanding and, possibly, definition of civilizations is the Alliance working with, if any? In other words, is the UNAOC built around the recognition that there are concrete and distinct civilizations in international society, or is the concept of civilizations a signifier for a range of other meanings?

A close look at UNAOC documents and reports shows no single and clear-cut use or definition of the concept of civilizations (see also Bloom 2013). The concept of civilizations – which in the Alliance is generally employed in parallel to those of culture and religion – is left vague and unspecified, to which a wide range of meanings are attached. Scholars and policymakers involved in debates leading up to the Alliance’s creation did struggle with this issue. Revelatory of this difficulty, is the following passage summarizing one of these preliminary debates held in Madrid in 2005:

“No consensus could be reached as to what might be a suitable definition of the term “civilization”, despite its being excessively used. Hence, several participants were in favour of dropping the term, since it allowed for too many interpretations” (Kausch and Barreñada 2005, 17).

These same preliminary debates as well as UNAOC founding documents however reveal that despite its character as a controversial and contested empty signifier, the concept of civilizations helps to capture something meaningful. Civilizational discourses are generally linked to the key role which ‘identities’, and ‘perceptions’ of ‘self and other’ appear to be playing in world politics in the XXIst century (UNAOC 2006, 8; Kausch and Barreñada 2005, 4). This tension between civilizations as an objective category and its role as an empty signifier for identity issues, is then carried forward in the

very same practices of the Alliance itself. As Thomas Uthup (2014, personal communication), who served as Research and Education Manager for the UNAOC between 2008-2011, argues:

“Our objective at the Alliance was not to point out what civilization meant. The term ‘civilization’ was not used very much in the day-to-day work. The way I saw it, is that we would mostly focus on actions, and on actions towards ‘the other’”.

While the logic of identity-centrism is clearly at work here, a number of revealing tensions flare up as this interpretative framework becomes operationalized in the UNAOC. First, the notion of ‘otherness’ employed by the Alliance is not completely free-floating, but anchored to two particular understandings of which ‘other’ the UNAOC should be concerned with. These two understandings are embedded in a tension, both within wider civilizational discourses and in the Alliance’s agenda itself, between a narrow set of ‘others’ and a more broad and open ended one. In the former, narrow sense, the principal others are the ‘West’ and the ‘Arab/Muslim world’, in the latter, broader sense, the other is understood in a general sense of diversity – in this case the other could be religious, linguistic, national, regional, ethnic, and so on.

The tension between these two interpretations of self and other, both of which take place at the macro global as well as the micro local level, is first and foremost evident in the mission laid out for the UNAOC by the High-Level Group Report:

“The analysis [of the report] focuses on relations between *Western and Muslim societies* though the approach taken by the High-level Group to this issue may serve as a reference for the bridging of *other divides* in the interest of establishing peace and harmony [emphasis added]” (UNAOC 2006, 11).

Much, although not all, of the UNAOC’s emphasis during what can be seen as its first operational phase, between 2006 and 2011, was placed on Western-Muslim relations. Zapatero’s 2004 speech at the UN, which sparked the initial interest in the Alliance itself, suggested that an alliance of civilizations was mostly needed “between the Western and the Arab and Muslim worlds”. Joining Spain, a Christian country with an important Muslim past, was Turkey, a Muslim country with a considerable Christian history. “Each of these two countries had ‘the other’ within, this was a powerful symbolism”, highlights Mustapha Tlili (2014, personal communication). At a time when narratives and perceptions of civilizational, cultural, and religious clashes were abounding between the West and Islam, the UNAOC’s mission would be to counter and dispel such discourses with alternative narratives and practical projects.

Time and history have moved on since. The charged rhetoric and dynamics of the War on Terror have somewhat receded following the arrival of Barack Obama, the Middle East has been in the thralls of dramatic internal transformations brought about by the Arab spring from 2011 onwards, and global interests are also increasingly focusing on the possible threats or opportunities brought about by emerging powers, in general, and China, in particular. In this context, the UNAOC is widening its agenda from the narrow concern with West-Islam relations, towards putting the broader and general issue of managing identity pluralism and diversity more squarely at the center of its mission. In a way the UNAOC is increasingly attempting “to perform on the world stage”, as Camilleri and Martin (2014, 9) put it, “something of the functions normally assigned to national government departments or agencies entrusted with the task of managing cultural diversity within a national context” .

One of the clearest expressions of this evolving agenda was articulated by UNAOC’s High Representative Nassir Abdulaziz al-Nasser in a 2014 lecture at Coventry University. In the lecture, the High Representative acknowledged that the UNAOC was born at a “critical juncture” when new forms of “fanaticism” risked “pitting the West against the Muslim World” as Huntington “predicted a decade earlier” (Al-Nasser 2014a). Yet, “beyond its immediate purpose”, he continued, “the new institution [i.e. UNAOC] was intended to equip the United Nations with a new tool of preventive diplomacy to apply to situations of cultural and identity tensions” rising from globalization. Al-Nasser (2014) would thus explain:

“...today more than at any other time in history — diversity is the reality that informs human life [...]The questions for the international community and policy makers in general are therefore: How to overcome the tensions generated by such a theory? How to manage diversity and turn it into an incubator of progress, peace, and security — locally, nationally, and internationally?”

This move towards a broader agenda beyond Western-Muslim relations appears directed also towards bringing in greater participation in UNAOC activities (and funding) by Asian countries and societies. The extent to which these countries and societies are interested in being increasingly involved in UNAOC initiatives, and the degree to which the Alliance is actually bureaucratically capable and willing to open up and make itself relevant to Asia, is an open question. This issue will be addressed later in this section.

A second tension embedded in scholarly and public discourses about identities, in general, and civilizations, in particular, pits the security dimension centered on the possibility/reality of ‘clashes’ against the peace-building ethos of ‘dialogue’ proposals. This tension manifests itself as well in the Alliance’s mission and activities. Whether it is in the case of the narrow West-Muslims agenda or the broader identity-based one, the conundrum between pursuing a conflict resolution and anti-terrorist mandate compared to a peace-building one continuously runs through the Alliance.¹²

This security versus peace tension is evident in the Alliance’s very first implementation plan for 2007-2009, where its stated goals were, on the one hand, to “improve understanding and cooperative relations among nations and peoples across cultures”, while on the other hand, “help counter the forces that fuel polarisation and extremism” (UN 2007, 5; see also UNAOC 2006, 3). Similarly, a 2014 meeting of states and international organizations supporting the UNAOC, whose main theme was ‘Strengthening International Cooperation in Preventing Terrorism’, reinforced the notion that the Alliance’s “overarching goals are to counter factors that cause polarization, radicalization and violence between and within communities” (UNAOC 2014, 1). While, in parallel, the High Representative has also been keen to emphasize, in a recent statement, that the UNAOC: “is more than a mechanism to address conflicts. The organisation’s distinctive programme [...] make it uniquely suited to enhance cross-cultural engagement within and between countries, not least within regions” (Al-Nasser 2014b, 4).

As will be discussed in greater detail below, the UNAOC’s programmatic activity is mostly structured around four main themes: education, media, migration, and youth. Initiatives connected with these themes have to a great extent themselves exhibited this dichotomy between a peace-centered or security-focused agenda. In particular, education and youth activities have tended to concentrate on the peace-building dimension, while the media and migration activities largely seek to address the anti-extremism and conflict-resolution dimension.

Upholding these mirroring interests, either for a more peacebuilding stance or a more security-oriented one, are two different constituencies that uphold and refer to the civilizational signifier. The roots of the former peacebuilding agenda are found in the dialogue movement. The intellectual tradition and experience of this movement spills into the UNAOC from two sources. First, the UNAOC was informed, although not explicitly linked in any direct way, by the experience of the 2001 UN Year of Dialogue among Civilizations and the activities surrounding it promoted by Khatami of Iran.¹³ Second, the Alliance’s strategic and operational mission was laid out in a report by a High-level

¹² Some (Balci 2009; Lachmann 2011, 189-192), have critiqued the UNAOC for being mostly a security-oriented entity, because of its focus on addressing the possibility of civilizational clashes between the West and Islam and issues of terrorism. Others (Camilleri and Martin 2014, 14), have highlighted, instead, the existence of a security versus peace tension in the organization’s mission and operations.

¹³ Compared to Khatami’s Dialogue among Civilizations experience, which was largely time-bounded, focused on rhetorical declarations and operationally limited to encounters between cultural and religious leaders, the Alliance would be a more open-ended initiative focusing on funding a wider range of programs and actions, as well as targeting a broader

Group of ‘sages’, selected across cultures and regions, which comprised many exponents of a dialogue of civilizations interpretative framework, including Khatami himself.¹⁴

On the other hand, states and international institutions have largely been keen to stress the latter, security, dimension (see for instance UNAOC 2014).¹⁵ The choice of words for the initiative privileging an ‘Alliance’ over a ‘Dialogue’ of civilizations emblematically reflects this often uneasy encounter of interests and perspectives. As pointed out by some, while the term Alliance does suggest a notion of cooperation, it nevertheless also conjures images of war, conflict and military threats (Camilleri and Martin 2014, 13-14; Kausch and Barreñada 2005, 17). “Alliances,” Camilleri and Martin (2014, 14) note, “are formed to counter a common enemy”.

A third tension engendered by the interpretative logic of identity-centrism at the basis of the Alliance, revolves around who the UNAOC’s main stakeholders and the targets of its initiatives are, whether: governmental, intergovernmental and/or non-governmental. As Ferrara (2014, personal communication) points out: “there is a tension between a more traditional Westphalian state-centric agenda, and a more transnational focus, which is connected with the civilizations discourse”.

UNAOC documents reveal an interpretative framework that goes beyond that of the state as the central referent-object, without however fully endorsing the centrality of the individual rights-bearer as the alternative referent. The level at which the UNAOC understands itself as operating is that of relations within and among ‘societies’, ‘peoples’ or ‘communities’, which – despite being understood to belong to a common humanity – are seen to be divided along (mostly) civilizational, religious and cultural lines (UNAOC 2006, especially 4 and 8). It is at this level that states, individuals, and any other politically salient organized collective actor, are believed to be embedded. As the UNAOC website explains:

“Since its inception, the UN Alliance of Civilizations has become a leading United Nations platform for intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation. It has connected governments, lawmakers, local authorities, civil society organizations, the media, and individuals devoted to promoting understanding across diverse communities”.¹⁶

Lachmann (2011, 197), describes the Alliance as “multilayered” where at “each level, the question of who can be considered a contributor to intercultural dialogue leads to choices about who is excluded and who is included”. Likewise, Isaías Barreñada (2006, 3) suggests that:

“A crucial element of the proposal is the combination of the actors at the heart of it. The proposal is to bring together the United Nations (UN), governments and civil societies in an approach that responds more to a new kind of internationalism than to classic multilateralism”.

In practice, this interpretative framework, manifests itself in a sort of “hybrid” (UNAOC Official 2014, personal communication) institutional and operational structure. The UNAOC does not fit or compare easily with other UN entities: it is not a UN agency (like the UNDP or UNICEF), it does not belong to the UN Secretariat, nor is it in the office of the Secretary General – although the UNAOC High Representative does report directly to the Secretary General. It is “considered to be essentially a programme lasting as long as it is relevant”, which “sets it apart both from fully-fledged organizational structures and from being a time-limited activity of an organization” (Lachmann 2011, 193).

(Contd.) _____

range of stakeholders including political leaders and grass roots activists. For a more detailed comparison between the Dialogue among Civilizations and the Alliance of Civilizations, see Bloom (2013); Lachmann (2011).

¹⁴ For a list of the members of the group – which included leaders in the fields of politics, academia, civil society (including religions), international finance and media – see <http://www.unaoc.org/who-we-are/high-level-group/>. For the report see UNAOC (2006).

¹⁵ For instance, the UN’s (UN 2006, 4) and the EU’s (European Union 2009, 6) anti-terrorist strategies refer to the UNAOC as a helpful instrument in the fight against terrorism.

¹⁶ <http://www.unaoc.org/what-we-do/> (accessed 02/07/2014)

The Alliance has a small bureaucratic structure, with a secretariat composed of around ten to twenty officials depending on resources, headed by a High Representative housed in the UN New York headquarters, which manages and coordinates most of its activities. Furthermore, the Alliance does not have to report to the UN General Assembly nor does it officially depend on decisions by member states organized as an executive board of countries. States are still involved in the policy-making process of the UNAOC, yet mostly through a voluntary-based Group of Friends,¹⁷ a community of countries and international organizations which supports and promotes the Alliance's objectives.

For better or worse, this institutional configuration – limited bureaucratic capacity and member-state intervention – both leaves greater leeway as well as forces the UNAOC to work and build partnerships with civil society actors: local or international NGOs, faith-based organizations, philanthropies and the private sector. This deep engagement with civil society is a particular feature of the UNAOC, which further distinguishes it from other UN entities. While other UN entities do maintain relations with civil society actors, these relations are generally subject to certain regulations and constraints and often occur in a rather hierarchical manner. The UNAOC, instead, has little or no constraints in its mandate to work with civil society, which the Alliance tends to approach more as equal partners. As a UNAOC Official (2014, personal communication) puts it:

“In practice the UNAOC has introduced the concept that the ‘owners’ of the UN are not only the member states, but civil society actors, which also have a better knowledge and conscience of the cultural dimension of inter-human relations“.

Reflecting the peculiarity of this ‘hybrid’ and ‘multilayered’ structure, UNAOC initiatives – whether directed towards addressing the narrow West-Islam agenda or the broader global diversity one – can be conceptualized as pitched on two different planes: one at a high-politics international level and the other at a more local or transnational grass-roots one.

At the high-politics international level, the Alliance's activities revolve around states, political leaders, and cultural elites. Practices here mostly center on influencing global public discourse and perceptions through symbolic gestures, speeches, and media initiatives¹⁸ aimed at dispelling clash of civilizations narratives, showing that dialogue and engagement are a possibility, and improving understanding of the other. The High-Level Group Report (UNAOC 2006, 18-21) further envisioned a role for the UNAOC in contributing to resolving some of the most contentious political conflicts, which aggravated tensions between the West and the Muslim world.

These included, for instance, finding solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to the mounting violence in Afghanistan and Iraq; creating a more consistent respect for multilateralism, international law and human rights; as well as supporting greater commitment to political pluralism in Muslim countries. While the UNAOC never really took up this role, it has promoted the development of national and regional strategies detailing how governments and multilateral institutions would work towards contributing to the UNAOC's goals.¹⁹

¹⁷ <http://www.unaoc.org/who-we-are/group-of-friends/> (accessed 02/07/2014).

¹⁸ A particularly interesting project launched in 2008, which however appears somewhat dormant at the time of writing, is the Rapid Response Media Mechanism. The project is designed, in an era of 24-hour media cycles and breaking news events, to provide a database of “opinion leaders who provide quick reactions and accurate analysis to journalists worldwide on complex political, social and religious issues and crises...to help enhance understanding about complex and polarizing issues”. See <http://www.theglobalexperts.org/about> (accessed 02/07/2014). The mechanism was mobilized, for instance, to reduce the potential negative fall-out in anticipation of the release of right-wing Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders' controversial anti-Islam film *Fitna* in 2008. An opinion piece co-signed by Muslim religious leaders from diverse regions and a slate of 10 experts from diverse regions prepared to provide insightful comment and analysis on the film through mass media outlets and consultations with influential civil society partners were prepared (UNAOC 2008, 6).

¹⁹ To date, twenty-seven Member States have submitted national strategies and there are three approved regional strategies with another four that are either under preparation or planned.

A substantial part of the Alliance's activities, are in parallel directed at the grass-roots and civil society level. The High-Level Group Report would be instrumental in setting this agenda. "We recognize", the Report (UNAOC 2006, 25) premises, "that mutual fear, suspicion, and ignorance across cultures has spread beyond the level of political leadership into the hearts and minds of populations". A range of policies and programs would be proposed, in particular in the fields of education, youth, migration and media identified as potentially playing "a critical role in helping to reduce cross-cultural tensions and to build bridges between communities" (p.25). Since 2006, the UNAOC has thus funded and supported a wide range of civil society-led initiatives in these four fields, as well as partnering, promoting or coordinating a range of other programs such as exchange programs, conflict-resolution initiatives and projects in the fields of sports, music and entertainment.²⁰

These two largely distinct and separate high-politics and grass-roots levels, converge, meet, and interact in the yearly Global Forums. These forums bring together prominent personalities and scholars, political leaders, and policy-makers, along with partner civil society organizations from a wide variety of sectors and issues – such as community leaders, business, media, religious, youth, and women.²¹ High-level plenary sessions and final communiqués stressing the importance of inter-civilizational dialogues and understanding, overlap with youth-led forums, inter-faith roundtables, or the launch of new locally specific grass-roots intercultural initiatives.

The extent of participants' diversity, across levels and sectors, as well as numbers – which in the case of the 2011 forum in Doha, Qatar, registered around 2.500 attendees – is quite unique in the context of other UN-sponsored yearly conferences and forums (Camilleri 2014; Uthup 2014). These have been mostly held in the past either in European or Middle Eastern sites,²² the 2014 forum instead takes place in Bali, Indonesia. The location is, again, quite symbolic for multiple reasons. The country is famous for its internal diversity, Bali was the site of a terrorist attack in 2002, and while the choice of Indonesia positions the Alliance quite prominently on the Asian map, it does so however within the borders of a country which hosts the largest Muslim population in the world.

Lastly, given the extent to which the civilizations signifier in scholarly and public discourses is shot through and filled with references to religious traditions, interpretations, and communities (Eisenstadt 2000; Camilleri and Martin 2014, 19-33; Huntington 1996; Petite 2010), it is not surprising then to find that religion plays a critical role in the UNAOC's thinking (UNAOC 2006, 9-10) and practices (Uthup 2010). Religion is a particularly salient identity marker, both for the more narrow West-Islam agenda as well as for the broader global multicultural diversity one; it is considered a force for violence and conflict or peace and justice, which underpins the clash-dialogue tensions in the UNAOC's mission; and religious leaders and organizations are among the civil society actors most keenly interested in partnering with the Alliance itself.²³

The Alliances' founding documents and actions reveal an acute understanding of the increasing political salience that religion commands, especially in a post-9/11 world (UNAOC 2006, 9-10). Hence, despite the largely secular nature of the UN as an institution, the UNAOC has attempted to position itself as a credible interface at the global and local levels between religious leaders and political and societal actors, seeking to "encourage the positive role that religious leaders and communities can play in public debates, often in interaction with politicians and other civil society actors" (Uthup 2010, 408). The UNAOC has been particularly active in promoting inter-religious dialogues and initiatives, fostering better education and dispelling stereotypes about religion, funding

²⁰ <http://www.unaoc.org/what-we-do/> (accessed 02/07/2014).

²¹ <http://www.unaoc.org/global-forums/> (accessed 02/07/2014).

²² These being Madrid, Spain, in 2008; Istanbul, Turkey, in 2009; Doha, Qatar, in 2011; and Vienna, Austria, in 2103; with the exception of Rio De Janeiro, Brazil, in 2010.

²³ As Aran Martin (2014, personal communication), a research associate at the Center for Dialogue La Trobe University, explains: "Some of the most committed people to inter-civilizational dialogue are in reality committed to inter-religious dialogue. Civilizational discourse can give more space and legitimacy to religious people in the public sphere".

projects aimed at reforming madrassas, supporting faith-based organizations committed to dialogue and conflict resolution, and helping to undermine forms of religious extremism. “The Alliance”, Uthup (2014, personal communication) explains, “has become the principal UN entity that deals with religion as an *issue*, not solely as an *actor* as some other UN entities do in their frequent interaction with faith-based organizations”.

The Logic of Critique in Practice

The second logic constitutive of the civilizations signifier, the ‘logic of critique’ against universalizing and homogenizing ‘end of history’ narratives, in general, and American power, in particular, is visibly at work in multiple ways in the creation and operation of the UNAOC. First and foremost, the Alliance was promoted by Spain and Turkey, and actively backed by Kofi Annan, as an alternative intellectual paradigm and multilateral diplomatic challenge to the Bush administration’s polarizing, securitized, and unilateralist War on Terror rhetoric and practices. Unsurprisingly the initiative received a lukewarm and skeptical reception by the United States itself.²⁴ It has been only under the Obama presidency – when a new approach of engagement with the Muslim world and the broader international community emerged – that the United States finally joined the Alliance’s Group of Friends, in 2010.

Furthermore, a vibrant critique, along post-colonial lines, of the West and the present world order tends to underpin the narrative of the High-Level Group Report. The threat of homogenization and uniformity that globalization presents to local cultures and traditional lifestyles, the widespread inequalities of wealth and power including the disproportionate influence that the West enjoys in multilateral political and economic bodies, the double-standards with which human rights and democratic norms are defended and promoted in the international system; are presented in the Report as some of the main factors creating “a fertile ground for the emergence of identity-based politics, which can, in turn, lead to violent tensions among communities and fuel hostile relations among them” (UNAOC 2006, 8).

Furthermore, alighting the growing mistrust which appears to exist between the West and Muslims and which extremists cynically exploit, the Report continues, is the “perception among Muslim societies of unjust aggression stemming from the West” (p.12). This perception, it is argued, has its roots in “European imperialism” (p.12) and is perpetuated by the “contemporary realities that shape the views of millions of Muslims” (p.17), such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, violence in Afghanistan and Iraq, or the discrimination faced by Muslim immigrants in Europe.

In a more recent UNAOC Asia-South Pacific Regional Consultation, held in Shanghai in November 2012, similar critiques of the Western-centric liberal order were advanced by its participants. The consultation’s main objectives were twofold, explore how the Alliance could adapt to meet the needs of the region, and how the region’s “cultures and civilizations might contribute to the global conversation on the coexistence of cultures and values” (Camilleri and Martin 2014, 53). In a world where “rules [are] set largely by great powers [i.e. the West],” participants claimed, they also saw the “non-Western world [as] well placed to propose alternative models of interaction” (p.54). The UNAOC was seen, Camilleri and Martin (2014, 54) report, as having the potential to fulfill the “desire of non-Western countries to become actively engaged in the task of defining shared global norms”.

²⁴ The initiative was described as “sketchy” by the then US ambassador to Spain in a private diplomatic cable. See http://elpais.com/m/elpais/2010/12/06/actualidad/1291627040_850215.html (accessed 02/07/2014).

The Logic of Practicality in Practice

The third logic, the ‘logic of practicality’, that underpins the use and diffusion of the concept of civilizations is further noticeable in the context of the UNAOC. First and foremost, Zapatero, Erdoğan and Kofi Annan all found an instrumental value in adopting and pushing the agenda of civilizational dialogue. All three saw substantial domestic and international political gains in visibly and publicly distancing themselves from the Bush administration. Not surprising then, Ferrara (2014, personal communication) explains, “the Alliance’s creation was taken in many quarters at the time as a highly politicized move in opposition to America’s and the neoconservative interventionist agenda”. Yet, rather than being seen simply as obstinate obstructionists, the UNAOC would provide a concrete alternative discourse and practice for legitimizing Zapatero’s, Erdoğan’s and Annan’s opposition to America’s war in Iraq.

Likewise, civilizational discourses and dialogical activities such as the Alliance, received the backing of a number of key global powers seeking to balance America’s unconstrained unilateralism, such as Russia’s Vladimir Putin (Putin 2007; Rianovosti 2005), and the former Chinese President Hu Jintao (Jintao 2006). Moreover, one of the more general political functions that empty signifiers serve, that is uniting different social actors and movements, can be appreciated here, considering the ideological distance that existed between the secular and progressive Zapatero, and the religious and conservative Erdoğan.

States and other international organizations see the Alliance as a potentially useful security tool to fight extremisms of different kinds and diffusing tensions and conflicts worldwide. The degree to which the UNAOC successfully serves this security purpose, and hence can command the continued interest by states, is an open question.

Among the states that appear particularly keen in upholding the civilizational referent in the global public sphere are Muslim-majority ones. First of all, the Alliance thus far has provided ample space for action and visibility, at the highest in international diplomatic levels and multilateral forums, to leaders and officials of Muslim-majority countries. Second, Middle Eastern political figures are interested in competing for the symbolic capital that the civilizations signifier can bestow on the individual – Khatami, Erdoğan, or Arab leaders –, the state – Iran, Turkey, or Qatar – and culture – Iranian, Turkish or Arab – that can be perceived as the leader and model within the Muslim world and the authoritative representative for Muslims worldwide. Third, civilizational discourses and references to cultural particularities, can be exploited by Middle Eastern heads of states for dodging inconvenient questions regarding the poor application of human rights and democratic norms in their home countries.

Likewise European countries and leaders benefit from their participation in the Alliance too. First, extolling the virtues of dialogue provides a convenient opportunity for deflecting questions and critiques levied against European states and societies for their treatment, stereotyping and discrimination of immigrants with Muslim backgrounds. Second, upholding a dialogue narrative has provided a convenient way for certain European leaders to differentiate themselves and their countries from the United States. Third, states and political figures not usually at the forefront of international diplomatic activities, such as Spain or Portugal, may have stood to gain gained in symbolic capital and recognition on the world stage by taking lead roles in the Alliance.

Lastly, civil society actors – whether NGOs, religious groups, or academic institutions – are among those who have benefitted the most from the Alliance’s activities and projects. Indeed, in part due to the transnational ethos of the Alliance, and in part due the institutional constraints in implementing and managing programs, the UNAOC has actively sought to partner with civil society organizations. For many of these organizations, the UNAOC represents an important source of intangible legitimacy (i.e. the UN brand) and very tangible funding. Furthermore the Global Forums, have provided important venues for civil society actors to connect, showcase and promote their agendas and activities to other grassroots organizations worldwide, high-level policymakers, political authorities, and donors.

Conclusion: Future Prospects of the UNAOC and the Civilizations Signifier

This working paper was motivated by a particular puzzle: why has the concept of civilizations gained the wide resonance in scholarly and public discourse at this historical juncture, ultimately, becoming operationalized within global governance institutions in 2005 with the UN Alliance of Civilizations? It argued for an understanding of the concept of civilizations as a particular kind of 'empty signifier', underpinned by three overarching logics that help to understand and explain its contemporary power and authority. These logics were described as: a logic of interpretation centered on identity, a logic of critique towards liberal 'end of history' narratives and projects, and a logic of practicality that matches the interests of multiple state and non-state actors.

The workings of these three logics were then illustrated through an analysis of the UNAOC's emergence and operationalization. This conclusion, however, is not intended to be a simple summary of this analysis. But rather it wants to point at how the logics that sustain the empty signifier of civilizations and structure much of the UNAOC's mission, institutional architecture, and programming, also contain the seeds of the Alliances' potential progressive demise.

First, as history moves on, it remains to be seen the extent to which the UNAOC is institutionally and strategically capable of reframing its mission and broadening its horizon beyond the narrow issue of West-Muslim / European-Middle Eastern relations, and its security concern with terrorism. The challenge here is whether the Alliance can and will be able to globalize its agenda and open itself up to include the perspectives and interests of emerging powers, most notably in Asia. The UNAOC is aware of this challenge and a number of efforts are being made – in line with the identity-centrism that underpins the interpretative logic of the civilizational signifier – to reach out and make the Alliance more relevant to Asian countries, particularly China.

A significant moment in the Alliance's engagement with China was a 2012 UNAOC Asia-South Pacific Regional Consultation held in Shanghai laying the first steps for the development of a regional strategy. In recent remarks peppered with praises towards Confucian tenets and delivered during the opening session of the 2014 World Cultural Forum, in Shanghai, UNAOC's High Representative Al-Nasser (2014c) renewed the commitment to "welcome China's active involvement" in all of the Alliances' activities. It may be that, given China's resistance to liberal norms (especially issues of human rights and democracy) and its parallel efforts to promote its culture worldwide through the Confucius Institutes, the country could develop an active interest in the Alliance's framework.

Results are mixed however. Multiple factors seem to be keeping the Alliance anchored to the narrow West-Islam dichotomy and further reproducing it also within the Asian context. First, New Zealand and Australian governments and civil society organizations, generally recognized as the vanguard of the West in Asia, have been the keenest Asian partners of the UNAOC thus far.²⁵ Likewise, while the choice of holding the 2014 Global Forum in Bali, Indonesia, may appear in line with a more global agenda, a UNAOC Official (2014) cautions not "to read too much this event as 'opening up' the Alliance to Asia", since "Indonesia still remains quite situated in the terrorism/Muslim world paradigm".

The persistence of this narrow agenda, may be also delaying China's engagement. In fact, the country has thus far not come forward with any substantial project or monetary proposal. Organizations such as ASEAN and most of its member countries, have not taken much of the Alliance's agenda on board either. This is due, some argue (Camilleri and Martin 2014, 38), to a general skepticism within ASEAN towards empowering civil society organizations and opening up at the policy level the thorny issue of cultural, religious and ethnic tensions.

²⁵ UNAOC's first engagement with the Asia region came in 2007, when New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clarke convened a symposium in Auckland to discuss the practical application of the Alliance to the Asia-Pacific region. The 2012 Shanghai Regional Consultation, was proposed as a follow-up to the Auckland symposium by La Trobe University's Centre for Dialogue, Melbourne, Australia (Camilleri and Martin 2014, 51).

In parallel, it remains to be seen whether the Alliance's European and Middle Eastern political and economic backers are also interested in substantially pushing the UNAOC to engage with other regions and to broaden its mandate. In particular, Middle Eastern countries and Muslim leaders may stand to lose international power and prestige gained from playing a central role in the Alliance. So far two High Representatives have been appointed, the first from a European country the second from a Middle Eastern one. Key to know whether the UNAOC is serious about globalizing its activities, will be whether the next High Representative will come from a different region and cultural identity background compared to the previous ones.

Second, the UNAOC is plagued by a constant shortage of funds that severely restricts its institutional and operational capacity. While inadequate resources are not a novelty for UN entities, the logics embedded in the civilizational signifier, in general, and in dialogical discourses, in particular, contribute to aggravating the Alliance's situation. The Alliance's 'hybrid' and 'multilayered' institutional architecture – which is highly sensitive to civil society engagement, while in parallel not requiring compulsory state support and involvement – underpins a financial structure which is sustained by voluntary, rather than automatic, state contributions.

In this context, funding becomes erratic and hard to come by. The appointment to High Representative of Al-Nasser, an uninspiring international diplomat and bureaucrat, seems driven more by the fund-raising imperative of tapping into Qatari resources, than providing the politically prominent and energetic leadership that an entity like the Alliance thrives on.

Furthermore, the critical logic in the civilizations signifier underpinning the UNAOC, has contributed to limit the United States' – along with some of its key allies – engagement and interest in the initiative. Many of the domestic and international imperatives that first pushed Spain and Turkey to cooperate and to provide the main sources of funding for the Alliance, especially in the highly contentious post-9/11 international atmosphere, have petered out with time. It is quite emblematic that at the last 2014 UNAOC Global Forum in Bali, neither the Prime Minister of Spain nor Turkey appeared. Possibly further compounding states' loosening support, more generally, is the lack of proven effectiveness and measures of success especially in the security realm.²⁶

Thus the Alliance has increasingly sought support from the private sector and philanthropists to sustain its initiatives. Such a support may be seen in line with the UNAOC's transnational and people-centered outlook that elevates partnerships with civil society. Yet, this type of funding structure, however, is leaving the UNAOC with a decreasing amount of non-earmarked resources to plan strategically its activities, while making it dependent on fleeting funds earmarked for project-specific initiatives exposing the Alliance to the whims of individual business and philanthropic donors (UNAOC 2013, 19-20).

Given all these uncertainties, what future lies ahead for the Alliance then? Tlili (2014) puts it as follows:

“In theory the UNAOC should have a bright future – given the role and importance of ‘identity’ issues and anxieties in a globalizing world, important changes occurring in the Arab world, rise of extremist movements and parties in Europe – yet in practice it depends on member states and their support”.

I take a slightly different view. Compared to Tlili's argument, this paper was based on the assumption that there is never too much distance between theory and practice, between meanings and actions, interpretations and interests. Practice is embedded in and constituted by theory, and *vice versa*. Thus we could see member states' support as fleeting also because the theory is. Like the UNAOC's

²⁶ One of the few exercises in this regards, is Camilleri and Martin's (2014, 12) quantitative-based discourse analysis recovering the Alliance's successful role – according to their findings – in countering clash of civilizations narratives in media outlets.

functionality and dis-functionality are reflective of the power, but also contradictions, embedded in the logics underpinning the signifier of civilizations at this present historical juncture.

This said, only time will tell whether identity-based issues will continue to be a central concern for scholars and practitioners of world politics, if cultural – rather than, say, economic – critiques of ‘end of history’ liberal narratives and projects become ever more dominant and entrenched in international society, and if civilizational references and discourses retain their practical power for states and non-state actors. If all this were to happen, the UNAOC – or a similar entity that evolves to supersede it – is poised to have a brilliant future. Especially, since the Alliance will be at the operational forefront of a truly lasting shift in the way international politics is interpreted and practiced.

The opposite may be true too, though. If the empty signifier of civilizations, and the three logics underpinning it, only managed to capture an intense but short-lived historical moment, then the UNAOC is likely destined for growing irrelevance. It may become one of the myriads purposeless entities – quickly launched, but hard to disappear – that populate the UN galaxy, like abandoned satellites orbiting the Earth.

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Author contacts:

Gregorio Bettiza

University of Exeter

Department of Politics

Amory Building

Rennes Drive

EX4 4RJ Exeter

United Kingdom

Email: g.bettiza@exeter.ac.uk