**The U.S. Should Not Join the 'Alliance of Civilizations'**

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The Obama administration has announced its decision to join the United Nations “Alliance of Civilizations.” The move is intended, the announcement says, to support the organization’s goal of “improved understanding and cooperative relations among nations and peoples,” and to realize President Obama’s “vision of active U.S. engagement with other nations and international organizations.” This decision continues a troubling trend in U.S. foreign policy of engaging with multilateral organizations even when there is little or no chance that doing so will advance U.S. interests.

For instance, one of the early decisions the Obama administration made to differentiate itself from the “unilateralist” Bush administration was to announce that the U.S. would run for a seat on the U.N. Human Rights Council. The Council was created in 2006 to replace the hugely discredited U.N. Commission on Human Rights, which had failed to confront governments that violated the rights of their citizens, allowed human-rights abusers to join for the sole purpose of blunting the Commission’s effectiveness, and demonized Israel at every opportunity. The Bush administration recognized that the Council would be no improvement over the discredited Commission and refused to run for a seat on it. As predicted, the new Council was as bad as, perhaps worse than, the old Commission. The presence of the U.S. on the Council under President Obama has done little to improve its work.

In another example, President Obama decided to attend in person last December’s United Nations Climate Change Conference, in an attempt to overcome what appeared to be intractable differences between nations that were preventing adoption of a new treaty limiting emissions of certain greenhouse gases. The appearance of intractable differences between nations was, in fact, a reality; the differences scuttled negotiations, and the Copenhagen conference was widely deemed a failure.

In 2002, under President Bush, the U.S. decided to rejoin the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), believing that the organization had addressed the problems that had led the U.S. to withdraw under President Reagan. Just recently, however, UNESCO revealed how questionable its judgment still is, despite U.S. membership, when it announced plans to proceed with awarding the UNESCO–Obiang Nguema Mbasogo International Prize for Research in the Life Sciences, funded through a $3 million grant from Pres. Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, of Equatorial Guinea. Obiang’s rule has been characterized by rampant corruption and repression.

President Bush also established, in 2007, the position of an American envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), to “listen to and learn from representatives from Muslim states, and . . . share with them America’s views and values.” The Obama administration named its own envoy to the OIC earlier this year. Neither envoy has been successful in getting the OIC to moderate its hostility toward freedom of expression or Israel. For instance, the OIC remains obsessed with demonizing Israel at the U.N. Human Rights Council, and the organization supports (in the Human Rights Council and in the General Assembly) constraints on freedom of speech and religion through its Defamation of Religions efforts.

This leads us back to the decision to join the Alliance of Civilizations. The AoC is the successor to the Iranian-proposed Dialogue of Civilizations, and is the brainchild of former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan. It is intended to improve relations between Western and Muslim countries by responding “to the need for a committed effort by the international community — both at the institutional and civil society levels — to bridge divides and overcome prejudice, misconceptions, misperceptions, and polarization which potentially threaten world peace.”

Unfortunately, the AoC agenda has been largely driven by Muslim nations and the OIC, to the detriment of its ostensible purpose. For instance, the body has echoed the anti-Israel sentiments of the OIC (the AoC released a report in 2006 blaming the 1948 establishment of Israel, along with Western support for Israel, for “beginning a chain of events that continues to be one of the most tortuous in relations between Western and Muslim societies”), and it supports constraints on freedom of expression and speech in order to combat “Islamophobia.”

As I argue in ConUNdrum: The Limits of the United Nations and the Search for Alternatives, multilateralism is a tool, not an end in itself. The U.S. should be open to going through the U.N. or other international organizations to address joint concerns, but it must not fall victim to the foolish belief that that declining to participate in a multilateral body or initiative always harms U.S. interests. Several Heritage papers conclude that the decision of the U.S. to join the AoC is very unlikely to substantively change the body or its deliberations. A dialogue subject to censorship and anti-Israel bias, regardless of intent, is unlikely to be productive or fruitful. The U.S. should not lend its support to such a flawed endeavor.

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