

International Progress Organization



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**Unity in Diversity**  
**Eurasia’s Contribution to Civilizational Dialogue**

**Lecture**

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# I

The geographical distinction between the “continents” of *Europe* and *Asia* is not only factually misleading, but semantically inappropriate since the Latin word “continens” (*terra continens*) means a contiguous land mass. Reasons that are more related to the history of the “occident” and those countries’ power struggles than to physical geography appear to be at the origin of a rather artificial division of the vast Eurasian continent into two separate entities along an imaginary North-South line.

The traditional “exclusivist” paradigm, separating Europe from Asia, has narrowed the collective intellectual horizon and distorted, to a considerable extent, the civilizational self-perception of nations and ethnic and cultural communities inhabiting the continent along a vast east-west axis where the great civilizations of mankind have originated.

If one wants to understand the complex interaction between cultures and civilizations in the course of several millennia, the notion of “Eurasia” may be much more appropriate in view of the historical and geographical realities. Only a comprehensive – truly *con-tinental* – approach (in the sense of the original Latin term) will allow us to understand the geostrategic realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (in regard to the political, economic as well as socio-cultural relations) and, thus, enable us to overcome the mindset of the “Great Game” according to which Eurasia, and especially its center, is perceived as playing field for the assertion of the strategic interests involving the major non-Eurasian power.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of physical geography, Eurasia is one continent; culturally, this continent has served as a bridge between Eastern and Western civilizations since ancient times. “Orient” and “Occident” – as historical and socio-cultural notions – both relate to the Eurasian geographical space and should not be confused with the conventional continental notions of “Asia” and “Europe.”

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<sup>1</sup> See Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.

While the great civilizations have interacted and prospered along an East-West axis of enormous extension,<sup>2</sup> the dogmatic “continental division” has evolved in a framework of exclusivist thinking – mainly on the part of the dominant forces of the “occident.” It is an often ignored fact that the classical Greek as well as Christian heritage owes a lot to ancient Eastern civilizations and that, in more practical terms, the Silk Road was not only a route of trade and power-driven exchanges between the dominant players of successive epochs, but an avenue of East-West interaction in terms of culture and civilization.

Never in history has civilizational exclusivism been compatible with peace and prosperity, whether at the regional, continental or global levels. However, the emphasis on being different and the effort to relate to others (namely other civilizations) on the basis of a distinct identity is not to be confused with exclusivism. Awareness of the diversity of civilizations is the main element of a *mature self-realization* of each community. A civilization can only fully understand itself and, thus, succeed in its historical mission if it is able to define (in the meaning of the Latin term *de-finitio* [drawing the borders]) its basic perception of the world and its specific value system in distinction from other such systems. This “dialectic of cultural self-comprehension”<sup>3</sup> implies, at the same time, a basic respect for and appreciation of the “Other” on the basis of *partnership* and *equality*.

## II

What does this “law of civilizational interdependence” mean in terms of the present international constellation? Global peace and stability are threatened because of the predominance of one particular worldview, and value system, that has been aggressively asserted in the name of “globalization,” and thus has effectively prevented, if not excluded, the assertion of cultural and civilizational diversity. It is an undeniable fact that

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<sup>2</sup> On the importance of Eurasia’s landmass stretching along an east-west axis – in distinction from the Americas’ north-south axis – for the success and global influence of civilizations see Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York: Norton, 2005, esp. *Prologue*: “The regionally differing courses of history.”

<sup>3</sup> See Hans Köchler, *Cultural-philosophical Aspects of International Cooperation*. Lecture held before the Royal Scientific Society, Amman-Jordan [1974]. *Studies in International [Cultural] Relations*, Vol. II. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1978. See also: Hans Köchler (ed.), *Cultural Self-comprehension of Nations*. Tübingen: Erdmann, 1978.

the process of globalization has brought about a trend towards social and cultural uniformity which – for cultural communities on all continents – it was difficult to resist due to the overwhelming influence of the electronic media, conveying the world-view and value system of only one civilization.<sup>4</sup> In economic as well as political terms, however, the globalization model has been proven to be unsustainable, profoundly destabilizing the international order in a manner only few would have envisaged just a decade ago.

The Eurasian civilizational space – comprising diverse cultural and social traditions that have evolved and interacted with each other over several millennia – can provide a genuine *counterbalance* to the cultural-civilizational uniformity of globalization and may thus also have a stabilizing effect on the international political and economic situation. If the Eurasian cultures and civilizations, represented by state actors and civil society alike, will find a *modus vivendi* and agree on the preservation of their identity by way of their mutual recognition, they may eventually contribute to the emergence of a *multipolar* world order – a stable balance of power – that will replace the conflict-ridden, essentially unipolar power structure of today, a system that has by now been discredited not the least due to the worldwide economic instability it has created.

In order to mitigate the effects of unregulated, almost anarchical, globalization at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century,<sup>5</sup> it is of utmost *strategic* importance to recreate, and affirm, the conceptual framework of Eurasia as one geographical and socio-cultural space. Dialogue along Eurasia’s East-West axis – genuine *East-West dialogue* that leaves behind the legacy of the East-West conflict of the Cold War era – means the preservation, even advancement, of cultural and civilizational identity for all through the joint affirmation of the *unity of purpose* in their commitment to the “inclusivist” Eurasian paradigm (as distinct from the exclusivist “bi-continental” approach).

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<sup>4</sup> See Hans Köchler, “Philosophical Aspects of Globalization – Basic Theses on the Interrelation of Economics, Politics, Morals and Metaphysics in a Globalized World,” in: *Globality versus Democracy? The Changing Nature of International Relations in the Era of Globalization*. Studies in International Relations, Vol. XXV. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 2000, pp. 3-18.

<sup>5</sup> For details see the author’s analysis: *The Collapse of Neoliberal Globalization and the Quest for a Just World Order*. Statement delivered at the international conference “Prague Dialogue on Europe in the XXI Century,” Prague, 14 May 2009. I.P.O. Online Papers, 2009, at [www.i-p-o.org/Koehler-Globalization-World\\_Order-IPO-OP-2009.htm](http://www.i-p-o.org/Koehler-Globalization-World_Order-IPO-OP-2009.htm).

It is to be noted, however, that this approach does not exclude dialogue with the cultures and civilizations of other continents, namely Africa and the Americas. In this context, emphasis on the Eurasian paradigm only means that the nations and civilizations of this continent relate to others on the basis of “unity in diversity,” acknowledging, *inter alia*, their historical interconnectedness.

In geostrategic terms, each partner in this dialogue will individually be in a better position to deal with the circumstances of globality; the common attachment to the Eurasian paradigm will enable each of the cultural or civilizational communities to better withstand the pressures towards socio-cultural uniformity, and to defend its “civilizational sovereignty,” which is no less important than traditional state sovereignty that relates to a polity’s legal position in the concert of powers.

Unity of purpose is not to be confused with (cultural) uniformity. The latter can only be avoided if the distinct cultures and civilizations see themselves as being *united* in the common purpose of preserving their spiritual and civilizational identity, and thus integrity, in a global environment that is characterized by an essentially *unipolar* power constellation; this kind of political unipolarity is necessarily in conflict with multipolarity in terms of cultures and civilizations as it has developed over thousands of years. Self-reflexion, being able to see oneself through the eyes of the other(s), which is at the roots of genuine dialogue, can only be achieved in a multipolar environment.

In the context of increasing confrontations along civilizational lines, triggered by the global struggle for power and influence that also includes forces from outside the Eurasian area,<sup>6</sup> it is the historical mission of the continent (understood as a multi-level space of political, economic and cultural interaction) to become the *nucleus of a new multipolar world order*, which is indispensable for sustainable peace in the era of globality. This will have to be a system of international *power relations* that protects the political independence and civilizational integrity of all states within the joint commitment towards equal rights of every nation, culture and civilization.

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<sup>6</sup> On the geostrategic implications see the author’s paper “The Clash of Civilizations Revisited,” in: Hans Köchler and Gudrun Grabher (eds.), *Civilizations: Conflict or Dialogue?* Studies in International Relations, Vol. XXIV. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1999, pp. 15-24.

Furthermore, the nations of the largest continent must not fall victim to a policy of *divide et impera* that uses the civilizational paradigm to sow the seeds of mistrust and create a climate of fear, which might breed future global conflict. Only the unity of purpose, defined along those geostrategic lines, among the nations and civilizations of Eurasia will preserve the rich multitude of civilizational expressions, protecting each partner's identity and contributing to a lasting order of peace among the nations on all continents.

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