

Obama at the UN: Reality Dawning, But Diplomacy Without Teeth Remains His Response

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Sep 29, 2015

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Brief Analysis

Although the president's speech correctly diagnosed the latest grave challenges to the international order, he has yet to acknowledge that belligerent actors will not respond to U.S. diplomatic signals unless they are backed by U.S. military power.

For those accustomed to President Obama's foreign policy rhetoric, his September 28 speech to the UN General Assembly probably sounded like more of the same: plenty of self-congratulatory commentary on the Iran deal and relations with Cuba, and the usual laundry list of problems to joust with and programs to launch, with little detail and seemingly few prospects for concrete action. But two elements in the speech suggest the potential for a tougher, more confrontational U.S. policy if the president follows through on some of his words.

First, he began and ended the speech with lengthy tributes to global values, the American cooperative approach to world problems, and -- of particular note -- an extended defense of democracy and other humanitarian values such as openness and tolerance. Although his administration has often been leery about preaching democracy on global stages, mentioning these values was nothing unusual for an American president. What was new, however, was his specific reference to the system that glues these values together across the globe: "It is this international order that has underwritten unparalleled advances in human liberty and prosperity. It is this collective endeavor that has brought about diplomatic cooperation between the world's major powers, and buttressed a global economy that has lifted more than a billion people from poverty." All true, but seldom so specifically cited by him since his 2009 Nobel Peace Prize speech.

Second, the president offered an explicit warning that this system is under challenge, as "dangerous currents risk pulling us back into a darker, more disordered world," and as "some major powers assert themselves in ways that contravene international law." This is nothing short of a breakthrough for him. After all, just eight short months ago,

his administration put out a National Security Strategy full of happy talk, from its opening declaration ("Today, the United States is stronger and better positioned to seize the opportunities of a still new century and safeguard our interests against the risks of an insecure world") to its repeated emphasis on progress and positive trajectories, with only passing reference to the many threats already gathering from Ukraine to the "Islamic State"/ISIS.

This new recognition corroborates a point of view first signaled by Walter Russell Mead in his brilliant December 2013 essay "The End of History Ends." While this presidential change of orientation is overdue, it is certainly welcome. But the key question remains, what will Obama do about it?

Here the UN speech was unfortunately less clear, mixing specific condemnation of those "dangerous currents" and "major powers" with the same rhetoric that has characterized the president's response to these threats over the past four years -- a worldview best captured by his initial public response to Russia's Syrian military gambit on September 11, when he said Moscow's strategy was "doomed to failure." In New York, he tried to describe why aggressive and illegal behavior is so "doomed" by reiterating a theory that can best be described as "not really our problem, it's self-correcting." In line with this, he lectured his listeners, many of whom hail from "more disordered" regions that are looking ever "darker" by the day: "Indeed, I believe that in today's world, the measure of strength is no longer defined by the control of territory. Lasting prosperity does not come solely from the ability to access and extract raw materials. The strength of nations depends on the success of their people -- their knowledge, their innovation, their imagination, their creativity, their drive, their opportunity -- and that in turn depends on individual rights and good governance and personal security. Internal repression and foreign aggression are both symptoms of the failure to provide this foundation." His subsequent remarks on Iran reflected this mindset: "Chanting 'Death to America' does not create jobs, or make Iran more secure. If Iran chose a different path, that would be good for the security of the region, good for the Iranian people, and good for the world."

The flaw in this logic is clear: what if leaders do not recognize that they are hurting their people through foreign aggression? Or, even worse, what if the majority of the people are actually delighted by their leaders' xenophobic international power grabs, as polls seem to indicate is the case with most Russians, most Chinese, and many Iranians? That fact, coupled with the nondemocratic nature of these countries, means that their "historic mistakes" are inherently not self-correcting as the president would like to believe.

So who or what will stop these belligerent powers and reverse their mistakes? For most of the past seventy years, the answer has been the United States and military force -- when possible in a coalition, but if necessary alone. In his Nobel remarks, the president got it right: "The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms." But where was that language at the UN? To be sure, he called out the sins of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad ("who drops barrel bombs on innocent children"), spoke at length about the continued horrors of ISIS, took Iran to task repeatedly (e.g., for deploying "violent proxies to advance its interests"), and even indirectly criticized Turkey's president for his authoritarian tendencies ("Leaders who amend constitutions to stay in office only acknowledge that they have failed to build a successful country").

But the president quickly reverted to form by discounting military responses time and time again. For example, he dismissed the argument "that the only strength that matters for the United States is bellicose words and shows of military force; that cooperation and diplomacy will not work," later telling the audience to "look at the results" of his administration's nonmilitary response to Ukraine and the Iran nuclear issue. But in the former case, the Russians still have control of Crimea and eastern Ukraine, and in the latter case, it was crushing sanctions backed by credible threats of American and Israeli force that produced Iranian compromise.

The president also noted, "I lead the strongest military that the world has ever known, and I will never hesitate to protect my country or our allies, unilaterally and by force where necessary. But I stand before you today believing in

my core that we, the nations of the world, cannot return to the old ways of conflict and coercion." As examples of these old ways, he cited the error of American military involvement in Iraq and Libya. And despite condemning the Assad regime, he gave no hint of pressing for military action against it. Similarly, while acknowledging the ongoing military operations against ISIS, he made no mention of the military goal he himself selected: to ultimately destroy the group.

So how does the president plan on dealing with ISIS, Assad, and Russia? His answer, unsurprisingly, is collective action, long-term sociological change (e.g., "Lasting stability can only take hold when the people of Syria forge an agreement to live together peacefully"; "So part of our job, together, is to work to reject [ISIS-style] extremism that infects too many of our young people"), and, above all, diplomacy.

Indeed, the D word got much play in the UN speech, whether explicitly or implicitly. This included offers of talks with Russia and Iran on the Middle East, without an explanation of what exactly such talks would aim to accomplish or how they would stop Russian fighters, Iranian surrogates, or ISIS executioners. Rather, the president simply explained that diplomacy is "hard." For that hard work to be successful, however, he needs to acknowledge that there must be consequences, including force, for those unwilling to give up their dreams of a "darker, more disordered world" -- in other words, they need to believe that the United States will not let them create such a world.

In the end, the president's UN speech correctly diagnosed the disease for the first time, but he has not yet embraced the most important medicine to contain and eventually eradicate it. That would require more direct U.S. steps, such as immediately deploying F-22s to Israel to counter the topline Russian Su-34s now in Syria; moving quickly with Turkey to set up an "ISIS no-go zone" in northern Syria, with a U.S. air and limited ground presence; and dramatically changing the tempo of air operations, rules of engagement, and use of forward advisory and air-control teams against ISIS, before Moscow announces similar steps. These and similar actions would finally give President Obama and Secretary Kerry something to talk about with Vladimir Putin and his allies.

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