

Obama at the UN: A Defense of Unilateral Aggression

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US President Barack Obama delivered his fifth address to an opening session of the United Nations General Assembly Tuesday, mixing sanctimonious rhetoric about democracy and humanitarianism with naked threats of US military aggression.

While the media obsessed over whether the US president would stage a handshake with his Iranian counterpart, Hassan Rouhani—a meaningless gesture that the Iranians reportedly rejected—the real content of Obama’s 50-minute address was the elaboration of a foreign policy doctrine under which Washington arrogates to itself the right to militarily intervene in the Middle East as it sees fit to protect its “core interests.”

The speech made clear that the “turn to diplomacy” in relation to both Syria and Iran represents not some fundamental turn away from the predatory policy pursued by US imperialism in the region through the wars of the last decade, but rather a tactical shift imposed upon the Obama administration by the emergence of overwhelming and unanticipated popular hostility to yet another war of aggression in the Middle East.

This political reversal accounts for the decidedly defensive, at times self-pitying tone of Obama’s address, which was replete with complaints about Washington being maligned and misunderstood.

Before concentrating on the targets for imminent US aggression—Syria and Iran—Obama claimed credit for creating a “more stable” world during his five years in the White House. He pointed to the withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq—forced upon Washington by Iraq’s refusal to sign an agreement granting US forces immunity for war crimes—and the impending end of the war in Afghanistan, where the Pentagon is planning to leave up to 20,000 troops and maintain permanent bases.

He boasted that his administration had “limited the use of drones so they target only those who pose a continuing imminent threat” and to where “there’s a near-certainty of no civilian casualties.” This is nonsense. In Pakistan alone, it is estimated that more than 2,500 people have been killed in drone strikes, most of them civilians and the vast majority under Obama. The US president’s emergence as “assassin-in-chief,” ordering remote-control murders, is the starkest manifestation of US imperialism’s global criminality.

The US president also took credit for “working diligently to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay,” which remains open nearly five years after he promised to close it, with detainees subjected to the torture of forced feeding and men the CIA tortured being placed on trial for

their lives before military tribunals.

In spite of these supposed conquests for peace and stability, Obama acknowledged that “dangers remain,” including Al Qaeda terror attacks, sectarian conflict and “the potential spread of weapons of mass destruction.” All of these trends, he claimed, converged most powerfully in Syria.

No one would suspect from the US president’s remarks that Washington is employing and arming Al Qaeda in Syria, as it did in Libya in 2011, as a proxy force in a war for regime change, or that it has deliberately stoked sectarianism, together with its reactionary Arab allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar, for the same purpose.

The US president reiterated his unsubstantiated claims that the regime of Bashar al-Assad was responsible for the August 21 chemical weapons attack in the suburbs of Damascus and defended his “willingness to order a limited strike” on Syria, because of his determination that it was “in the national security interests of the United States.”

While claiming that evidence of the regime’s guilt in the August 21 incident was “overwhelming,” Obama offered no explanation of why Washington has refused to present its proof to the United Nations. Both the Syrian regime and Russia have charged that US-backed “rebels” staged the attack in order to blame it on the regime and provoke a US military intervention.

Chiding Russia for its opposition to a unilateral and illegal US war on Syria, Obama stated: “We’re no longer in a cold war. There’s no great game to be won, nor does America have any interest in Syria beyond the well-being of its people.”

There is a long history of the US bombing people for their own “well-being.” That other interests underlie these interventions goes without saying. Obama’s reference to the “great game”—the term used to describe the rivalry between British imperialism and the Russian empire over dominance in Central Asia—is telling. Precisely such predatory aims are involved in Syria, where Washington seeks to overthrow the Assad regime and replace it with a puppet government, as a means of isolating and weakening Iran, which it sees as a rival for hegemony in the energy-rich and strategically vital regions of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

Obama insisted that the deal reached between Washington and Moscow on the chemical disarmament of the Syrian regime be backed up with a “strong Security Council resolution” with “consequences” for Syria if it fails to meet the timetable set for destroying the weapons. Washington and its allies are pushing for a Chapter 7 resolution that would authorize military force. Russia has insisted it will veto any such measure.

“If we cannot agree even on this,” Obama said, “then it will show that the United Nations is incapable of enforcing the most basic of international laws.” This is pretense he intends to use for justifying a unilateral US military attack.

Much of the rest of Obama’s speech dealt with Iran and unsubstantiated US allegations that it is developing nuclear weapons. Despite his statement that “the diplomatic path must be tested” in US-Iran relations, Obama’s remarks consisted largely of ultimatums to Tehran, the implicit threat of military force and no concrete offer to lift the decades of US-driven sanctions that Rouhani in his own speech to the General Assembly described as

“violent—pure and simple,” adding, “It is the common people who are victimized by these sanctions.”

At the heart of Obama’s speech, and belying all its democratic and humanitarian blather, was a blunt definition of “US policy toward the Middle East and North Africa.”

“The United States of America is prepared to use all elements of our power, including military force, to secure our core interests in the region,” he said. First and foremost among these interests was “the free flow of energy from the region.” He also listed terrorism and weapons of mass destruction—the phony pretexts for the US invasion of Iraq—adding that “wherever possible” Washington would “respect the sovereignty of nations,” and wherever not, “we will take direct action.”

That Washington’s militarist policy is stated so nakedly before the United Nations is one more indication of the uncontrolled eruption of American imperialism and the growing danger that US threats against Syria and Iran could turn into a regional war and even a global conflagration.

Obama included a rhetorical barb aimed at Russian President Vladimir Putin, who criticized him for declaring in his speech on Syria earlier this month that Washington’s propensity to act militarily wherever it sees fit is what makes the US an “exceptional” nation.

“I believe America is exceptional,” Obama declared Tuesday. “In part because we have shown a willingness through the sacrifice of blood and treasure to stand up not only for our own narrow self-interest, but for the interest of all.”

Aside from the self-serving contention that Washington’s unending military interventions—from Somalia to the Balkans, Haiti, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen and Central Africa and elsewhere in the past two decades alone—are in the “interest of all,” this use of the term American exceptionalism betrays a historical ignorance that is unintentionally revealing.

Historically, this claim of “exceptionalism” was developed by bourgeois historians and sociologists to explain why, America, as opposed to the nations of “old Europe,” did not see the emergence of a mass socialist movement in the working class. This was attributed largely to the absence of a feudal past and an entrenched nobility, abundant natural resources and a political tradition that extolled egalitarianism. All of these supposedly contributed to the absence of the stark social inequality and class polarization that existed elsewhere.

Now, America’s “exceptionalism” is invoked not to praise American wealth and democratic institutions, but to justify American militarism—the means by which US imperialism increasingly seeks to offset its relative economic decline. This testifies to the depth of its political crisis, and the revolutionary implications of the sweeping changes in social relations during the past 35 years, which have turned the US into one of the most socially unequal nations on the planet.

Neither the media nor anyone in his UN audience paid attention to the opening of Obama’s remarks, in which he proclaimed the success of “efforts to recover” from the 2008 financial meltdown. “Today, jobs are being created, global financial systems have stabilized and people are once again being lifted out of poverty,” he proclaimed.

In fact, the current “recovery” is a success largely for the top 1 percent, which according to a recent report accounted for 95 percent of all increases in income between 2009 and 2012. At the same time, the latest Census survey shows average household incomes falling to the lowest level in a quarter of a century. Fully one-third of the American population fell into poverty at some point during the same period.

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