

“America First” Means a Retreat From Foreign Conflicts

In a Muted UN Speech, Trump Commits to Pulling Back

By Charles Kupchan

If U.S. President Donald Trump’s address before the UN General Assembly on Tuesday is remembered for anything, it will be for what was not said. Despite the recent attack on Saudi Arabia’s oil installations, which the U.S. government has traced to Iran, Trump avoided talk of retaliatory strikes. His tone was subdued and devoid of the bellicose flourishes that are his trademark. Indeed, compared with Trump’s previous speeches at the UN, this one was unusually measured and his style of delivery less abrasive and confrontational.

The U.S. president’s uncharacteristically tame performance even earned him a modest round of applause—no small accomplishment given the hostile reception he usually gets from the diplomatic community. Members of the audience were clearly relieved: they had expected far worse.

Trump’s monotone and lack of bluster could have been a product of distraction. He was, after all, having a bad day. Just before delivering his UN speech, Trump addressed the gathering storm over his alleged effort to tie military assistance to Ukraine to Kiev’s willingness to dig up political dirt on former Vice President Joe Biden, a top contender for the Democratic presidential nomination. As he engaged the media, Trump sought to deflect charges of abuse of power by suggesting that he had held up the assistance package in order to put pressure on European allies to do more for Ukraine. “I always ask,” he said, “Why aren’t other countries—in Europe, especially—putting up money for Ukraine?” As for the claim that he pressured Ukraine for personal political gain: “I didn’t do it at all,” Trump insisted as he met with Polish President Andrzej Duda.

The bait and switch did not work. By the end of the day, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi had announced the launch of a formal impeachment inquiry. A bad day indeed.

But Trump’s unwillingness to beat the war drums on Iran was a product of more than his domestic tribulations. His speech again displayed his neo-isolationist conviction that the United States must shrink its obligations abroad. “We want partners, not adversaries,” Trump said. “America’s goal is not to go with these endless wars, wars that never end.” Trump’s reluctance to take military action against Iran lines up with his determination to pull U.S. troops out of Syria and Afghanistan. As he heads into his bid for reelection, the president is intent on demonstrating to voters that he is ending wars, not starting them. His choice of the slogan “America first” is not coincidental in this respect: the refrain is an explicit callback to the interwar isolationists who fought so hard to keep the nation out of World War II.

Trump has generally been adept at delivering on his campaign promises, pulling out of pacts, reining in free trade, and clamping down on immigration. The main exception is on the retrenchment front, where Trump’s pledges of ending endless wars have fallen short. Whether

foiled by the Pentagon or by his hawkish former national security adviser, John Bolton, Trump has failed to get U.S. forces out of Syria and Afghanistan.

Now that Bolton is out of the way, Trump could well be pivoting toward delivering on retrenchment. The muted tone and absence of bellicose talk in Tuesday's address may signal that Trump intends to head into the election season determined to make good on his promises to pull back.

Trump's subdued tone and cautious stance on Iran notwithstanding, he did keep his usual "America first" rhetoric front and center in his UN speech. One of his central messages to the General Assembly—that globalism needs to be replaced with nationalism—repeated the main theme of his two previous UN speeches. In Trump's words: "If you want freedom, take pride in your country. If you want democracy, hold on to your sovereignty. And if you want peace, love your nation. . . . The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots. The future belongs to sovereign and independent nations."

Trump of course did not miss an opportunity to take a swipe at multilateralism and the UN itself, reiterating his hostility to "international unions that tie us up and bring America down," as he put it in a 2016 campaign speech. On Tuesday, as he touted his refusal to join an arms trade treaty sponsored by the UN, his formulation was similar: "There's no circumstance under which the United States will allow international entities to trample on the rights of our citizens, including the right to self-defense."

In character, Trump added to his paean to the sovereign nation a salvo against immigration. "Many of the countries here today are coping with the challenges of uncontrolled migration," Trump observed. "Each of you has the absolute right to protect your borders. And so, of course, does our country." He explicitly addressed migrants from Central America, warning, "If you make it here, you will not be allowed in; you will be promptly returned home." The message suggests that Trump is already in campaign mode and that his firm stance on immigration is set in stone. Indeed, Trump clearly sees immigration policy as a wedge issue for the 2020 election and will keep the issue in the limelight.

Trump doubled down on his trade dispute with China as well. He accused Beijing of bad faith, claiming that China has "declined to adopt promised reforms, it has embraced an economic model dependent on massive market barriers, heavy state subsidies, currency manipulation, product dumping, forced technology transfers and the theft of intellectual property, and also trade secrets on a grand scale." Trump signaled a tough negotiating stance, declaring: "I will not accept a bad deal for the American people." Judging by this rhetoric, a prolonged and escalating trade war looms ahead.

The "America first" nationalism, the unilateralism, the anti-immigrant fervor, the China bashing—these are all trademark Trump. They have become the new normal.

What most stood out on Tuesday were the parts of the speech that pulled in the opposite direction—namely, Trump's understated stance on Iran and his palpable desire to distance the United States from far-flung military conflicts. Now that he is eyeing reelection and surrounded by a foreign policy team that consists of loyal foot soldiers, Trump is going to be Trump. That means he is going to avoid military conflicts and extract the United States from what he sees as an excess of foreign obligations.

Trump may not like the United Nations or the internationalism it stands for. But, ironically, he may in the end further one of the body's main objectives—to reduce the incidence of war