

Obama's UN speech and the crisis in US policy

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In his speech to the United Nations General Assembly Tuesday, US President Barack Obama elaborated a doctrine of aggressive war in pursuit of US interests in the Middle East that stands in direct opposition to the founding charter of the UN and the most fundamental tenets of international law.

The US, he said, “is prepared to use all elements of our power, including military force, to secure our core interests” in the Middle East and North Africa. Paramount among these “core interests” was “the free flow of energy from the region.”

This doctrine has a long pedigree in US foreign policy. Enunciated in slightly varying forms by Eisenhower and Carter as well as Bush senior and junior, it has been carried into practice in military interventions in Lebanon, the 1991 Gulf War, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the US-NATO war on Libya, as well as numerous smaller covert interventions, bombing campaigns and cruise missile attacks.

In the immediate wake of having been forced to retreat from the use of US military force against Syria, Obama's reiteration of this policy rang somewhat hollow. He found himself compelled to pull back from what had been an imminent military assault in the face of overwhelming popular opposition both at home and abroad.

This was expressed first in the vote against a resolution for war in the British House of Commons, depriving Washington of its key international ally in the assault on Syria, and then in the massive outpouring of antiwar sentiment in the US itself, presenting the US president with the politically untenable prospect of having his request for an authorization for the use of military force resolution rejected by the US Congress.

It was under these conditions that Russia threw Obama a lifeline in the form of a proposal for Syria's

chemical weapons disarmament, and the US administration seized it in order to extricate itself from a serious crisis.

Within this context, Obama's speech signaled a significant tactical recalibration on the part of US imperialism. It advocated a “diplomatic resolution” of the dispute over Syria's chemical weapons and a “political settlement” of the two-year-old civil war that Washington has fomented, funding and arming Islamist-led militias seeking to topple the government of Bashar al-Assad.

With respect to Iran, which has been the principal target of US intervention in the region, including in Syria, Obama declared that Washington is “not seeking regime change.” Saying, “I firmly believe the diplomatic path must be tested. He announced that Secretary of State John Kerry would meet his Iranian counterpart in an attempt to reach an agreement on Iran's nuclear program.

It is doubtful that the administration itself has a clear understanding of where it will end up with this approach. Given the political obstacles to military action, it may well amount to playing for time—going through the motions of diplomatic efforts in order to make the case that they proved fruitless because of Syrian and Iranian intransigence, leaving no option but war. Implicit in the statement about “testing” the diplomatic path is the threat that should it fail, military measures will follow.

On the other hand, Iran long served as a pillar of US policy in the Middle East and it is not excluded that the leaders of the Islamic Republic, a right-wing bourgeois regime, might cut a deal with the “Great Satan.” When the Iranians see what Washington is demanding in return for an easing of punishing sanctions, however, they may well, in the words of one US official,

experience “sticker shock.”

Whatever the short-term shifts, the predatory strategic aims of US imperialism remain unchanged. While immediate military action has been postponed, the danger of war remains, driven by the deep-rooted contradictions and the crisis of American capitalism.

For the past two decades, in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse, it has been the policy of successive US administrations to utilize American imperialism’s military preeminence as a means of offsetting the erosion of its economic dominance. This has been expressed principally through a succession of wars and interventions in the strategically vital and energy-rich regions of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

It is far from clear, however, that Washington’s use of its military assets has served to advance these aims. Each of its wars has ended in debacle. While Obama bragged in his speech about ending the war in Iraq, the reality is that over 1,000 people are being killed every month in sectarian political violence, while the government is more closely aligned with Iran than with the US. Afghanistan, where Obama claimed that the US occupation forces had “achieved their mission,” the results threaten to be as bad or worse. And Libya remains crippled by violent clashes between rival militias, even as China appears poised to make the greatest gains in oil contracts.

Given this record, there was not only overwhelming popular opposition, but significant trepidation within the US ruling establishment over an intervention in Syria. This military action threatened to become not the “unbelievably small” strike promised by Secretary of State Kerry, but a war with incalculable consequences that might spill over into a confrontation with Iran and even Russia, which has built up its own naval fleet in the eastern Mediterranean.

It also became increasingly evident that the campaign for regime change in Damascus involved a significant element of adventurism, with the US relying on Al Qaeda-led forces and an opposition that has disintegrated into mutually warring criminal gangs.

The US establishment must work through the deep-going contradictions in its policy as well as the political implications of the evaporation of popular support for military action and the military implications of an attack on Syria turning into a broader war.

Obama’s reiteration of the Middle East war doctrine

at the UN—as well as his rhetorical defense of “American exceptionalism”—was no doubt aimed at a domestic audience, including powerful forces within the state apparatus and its military and intelligence arms that are absolutely committed to military intervention and see any wavering as a betrayal. This is augmented by significant political forces within both bourgeois parties, not least among them the Israel lobby, which sees any negotiations with Iran as capitulation.

Under these conditions, the threat of war has not ended. And the longer US aggression is postponed, the greater the scale of the next inevitable eruption of American imperialism.

To paraphrase Leon Trotsky, we must follow not the map of imperialist diplomacy, but the map of the class struggle. The cataclysm of a new outbreak of global war can be prevented only by means of the independent mobilization of the international working class in the struggle to put an end to world capitalism.



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