

Obama postures as Europe's protector in Athens

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Outgoing President Barack Obama delivered a farewell public speech in Greece yesterday that was so out of step with reality as to appear delusional.

Prior to his departure for Berlin, Obama's primary political mission in Athens was to reassure the major European powers that the United States remains committed to the NATO military alliance and to the preservation of the European Union (EU)—a task made necessary by the hostile statements of Republican president-elect Donald Trump.

During his campaign in July, Trump declared, "I want to keep NATO, but I want them to pay." His statements were widely interpreted in Europe as a challenge to Article 5 of the NATO treaty, which provides that an attack on one NATO member is an attack on all treaty members. Denouncing European states for not meeting agreed targets on military spending, Trump added, "They will pay if asked by the right person... Hillary Clinton said: 'We will protect our allies at all cost.' Well how the hell can you get money if you're gonna say that?"

This was accompanied by supportive statements regarding Britain's June 23 referendum vote to exit the EU, with Trump declaring, "I think the EU is going to break up... the people are fed up."

Obama sought to counter these threats by reassuring his intended European audience that Trump would be constrained by the supposedly inherent power of democracy in general, US democracy in particular and America's long engagement with Europe. "It's why we stand together in NATO—an alliance of democracies," he declared.

"In recent years, we've made historic investments in NATO, increased America's presence in Europe, and today's NATO—the world's greatest alliance—is as strong and as ready as it's ever been. And I am

confident that just as America's commitment to the transatlantic alliance has endured for seven decades—whether it's been under a Democratic or Republican administration—that commitment will continue, including our pledge and our treaty obligation to defend every ally."

He went on to praise the EU for "the progress it has delivered over the decades—the stability it has provided, the security it's reinforced," describing the bloc as "one of the great political and economic achievements of human history."

The carefully selected and well-heeled gathering at the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Centre applauded Obama's every utterance. But his reassurances regarding the "world's greatest alliance" and one of history's "great political and economic achievements" are references to institutions that have brought untold suffering to the peoples of Europe and the world.

His pledge to uphold Article 5 is a threat of war against Russia, as underscored by his pledge to "support the right of Ukrainians to choose their own destiny." The EU has, moreover, plunged millions of Greek workers ever deeper into a social nightmare, based on an austerity programme that Obama did not shy away from endorsing. He even praised the Syriza-led government of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras for its imposition of austerity measures dictated by the EU and the IMF in order "[t]o stay competitive, to attract investment..." In this context, his promise to support Greece as it "continues to implement reforms" sounded like a threat.

An equally fundamental problem for Obama is that he is delivering a promissory note that he cannot cash and which he instead entrusts to Trump.

He offered instead a melange of banalities,

contradictions and outright lies. His opening remarks were a cringe-worthy exercise, utilising random Greek words and phrases, references to “the tragedies of Aeschylus and Euripides,” “the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides” and to Socrates and Aristotle. He praised Greece for giving birth to the ideas of democracy and the rule of law. But this served merely to introduce his main theme, that America remained the land where “all men are created equal and endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights.”

Yes, the presidential campaign was fought “hard”, he said, “[b]ut after the election, democracy depends on a peaceful transition of power, especially when you don’t get the result you want.” American “democracy is bigger than any one person”, he added. “In the coming weeks, my administration will do everything we can to support the smoothest transition possible.”

Quite how this grotesque effort to lend legitimacy to Trump’s presidency is supposed to safeguard democratic ideals Obama did not say. Rather, he was forced to admit that US and other democratic regimes around the world faced “serious challenges” because the “same forces of globalization and technology and integration that have delivered so much progress, have created so much wealth, have also revealed deep fault lines.”

Obama cannot mention the word capitalism, which would imply the existence of an alternative system, socialism. Instead, he tried to square a hymn of praise to the benefits of “globalisation” in supposedly improving “the lives of billions of people” so that “the world has never, collectively, been wealthier, better educated, healthier, less violent than it is today” with the fact that “this global integration is increasing the tendencies towards inequality, both between nations and within nations, at an accelerated pace.”

Without pause, Obama went on to describe “global elites, wealthy corporations--seemingly living by a different set of rules,” of the “rich and the powerful” accumulating “vast wealth while middle and working-class families struggle to make ends meet” and this feeding “a profound sense of injustice and a feeling that our economies are increasingly unfair.”

“This inequality now constitutes one of the greatest challenges to our economies and to our democracies,” he warned, especially because “everybody has a cellphone and can see how unequal things are.”

Obama warned against what he described as “movements from both the left and the right” pulling back “from a globalized world” as evidenced in Trump’s victory and “in the vote in Britain to leave the EU.” But he then demanded, “We cannot sever the connections that have enabled so much progress and so much wealth.” To which American, Greek and British workers would reply, “Wealth for the super-rich, grinding poverty for the rest of us.”

The remainder of Obama’s speech combined warnings against a retreat into “comfort in nationalism or tribe or ethnicity or sect,” with the claim that his administration had “pursued a recovery that has been shared now by the vast majority of Americans” ensuring that “inequality is being narrowed.”

Like his own, Europe’s governments now had to make clear that they “exist to serve the interest of citizens, and not the other way around.”

One wonders how Obama thinks that he can get away with such nonsense--other than the fact that he rarely speaks to anyone but the lords of finance, the US military and the obscenely rich show-business figures who still treat him like a fellow celebrity. But his administration and the policies of austerity and war he has pursued in the interests of Wall Street are responsible for Trump’s emergence. If he was a more honest man, he would have spared us the references to the pantheon of Greek cultural figures and cited instead France’s King Louis XV, “Après moi le deluge!”



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