

Annotated Commentary of Trump's First Address to the United Nations General Assembly

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On September 19, 2017, in front of the United Nations General Assembly, President Trump said that the United States is “ready, willing, and able” to “totally destroy” North Korea, a country with a population of 25 million people. President Trump boasted about his administration, added his disdain for nations not paying their fair share (presumably the ones that are “going to hell”), and stepped into tangents both undeserving of his office and embarrassing to the audience. We annotated portions of Trump’s speech with commentary and sources marking the ignorance on international affairs and the disdain for true global collaboration envisioned by the United Nations. This matters, because several of the issues address core areas of interest to the War Prevention Initiative. These thoughts are our own, but we encourage you to explore the cited sources behind our thinking.

Before the commentary, however, it is important to point to the issues that were omitted from the speech. President Trump used his first address to the United Nations to continue his well-known rhetoric of alienation and bullying, and left out several timely issues of global importance.

- 1. Climate Change:** Not once was global warming or climate change mentioned. The back-to-back hurricanes pelting the Caribbean and North America (especially Texas and Florida) alone should warrant some mention of the weather. Apart from a brief thank you to nations supplying hurricane relief, Trump neglected to bring up the United States’ pending withdraw from the UN-supported Paris Agreement aimed at cutting greenhouse gases (as of now, the U.S. and Syria are the only two states opposed to the agreement¹).
- 2. Russia:** Trump mentioned the importance and necessity of national sovereignty 19 times during his speech, providing examples of rouge states and criminal networks trafficking drugs and weapons, threatening borders, and using “technology to menace our citizens.” Unfortunately, he failed to mention possible Russian interference in foreign elections (which even Trump’s own pick for Ambassador to Russia believes to be true²), and barely touched on the glaring breach of sovereignty during Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.
- 3. Systematic killing in Myanmar.** The ethnic cleansing, rape, and forced migration currently underway in Myanmar is exactly the type of serious, time-sensitive problem that world leaders

¹ U.S. and Syria oppose Paris Agreement (<http://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/351643-nicaragua-to-sign-paris-deal-leaving-us-syria-as-only-countries>)

² 'No Question' Moscow Interfered (<http://time.com/4948302/jon-huntsman-russia-election-interference/>)

petition the UN to address. This was a major missed opportunity, at the cost of the lives or livelihoods of 400,000 Rohingya Muslims (and counting) ³.

Below are direct quotes from President Trump's speech to the United Nations General Assembly

Trump: *It has just been announced that we will be spending almost \$700 billion on our military and defense. Our military will soon be the strongest it has ever been.*

Comment: What is there to be proud about? The increase to the previous budget? The missed opportunity to create clean energy jobs, infrastructure jobs, hire teachers, improve veterans care, free education, healthcare for all, [enter your priority]? What about authentic security, where we reject American exceptionalism and domination and keep families, homes, neighborhoods and the nation safe? Constantly increasing military spending keeps us in the iron cage of a war system. In what is known as the "security dilemma," states believe they can only make themselves more secure by making their adversaries less secure, leading to escalating arms races

that have culminated in conventional, nuclear, biological and chemical weapons of horrific destructiveness. Placing the security of one's adversary in danger has not led to security but to a state of armed suspicion and as a result, when wars have begun, they have been obscenely violent. Common security acknowledges that one nation can only be secure when all nations are. The national security model leads only to mutual insecurity, especially in an era when nation states are porous. The original idea behind national sovereignty was to draw a line around a geographical territory and control everything that attempted to cross that line. In today's technologically advanced world that concept is obsolete. Nations cannot keep out ideas, immigrants, economic forces, disease organisms, information, ballistic missiles, or cyber-attacks on vulnerable infrastructure like banking systems, power plants, or stock exchanges. No nation can go it alone. Security must be global if it is to exist at all. In its briefest form, common security means that no one is safe, until all are safe. ⁴

³ The world's fastest-growing refugee crisis is taking place in Myanmar. Here's why: (<https://www.vox.com/world/2017/9/18/16312054/rohingya-muslims-myanmar-refugees-violence>)

⁴ A Global Security System: An Alternative to War. 2017 Edition (forthcoming)

Trump: *We live in a time of extraordinary opportunity. Breakthroughs in science, technology, and medicine are curing illnesses and solving problems that prior generations thought impossible to solve.*

Comment: Breakthroughs that are under threat, because the Trump administration has demonized, defunded, or ignored science at every turn⁵.

Trump: *Terrorists and extremists have gathered strength and spread to every region of the planet.*

Comment: According to the 2016 Global Terrorism Index by the Institute for Economics and Peace, only 0.5 per cent of terrorist attacks occurred in countries that did not suffer from conflict or political terror. The report concludes that terrorism is a highly concentrated form of violence, mostly committed in a small number of countries and by a small number of groups⁶.

Trump: *Rogue regimes represented in this body not only support terror but threaten other nations and their own people with the most destructive weapons known to humanity.*

Comment: In this same speech, Trump threatens the “total destruction” of North Korea in front of the UN General Assembly. Also, the U.S. is the only country that has ever used a nuclear weapon and we currently have over 6,800 of them on reserve—more than enough to destroy the planet many times over⁷.

⁵ All the Ways Trump’s Budget Cuts Science Funding (<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/03/trumps-science-health-budget/519768/>); Trump budget seeks huge cuts to science and medical research, disease prevention (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2017/05/22/trump-budget-seeks-huge-cuts-to-disease-prevention-and-medical-research-departments/?utm_term=.1193ec3c27d6)

⁶ Global Terrorism Index (2016) - <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2016.2.pdf>

⁷ Nuclear Weapons: Who has What at a Glance (<https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Nuclearweaponswhohaswhat>)

Trump: *It is entirely up to us whether we lift the world to new heights or let it fall into a valley of disrepair. We have it in our power, should we so choose, to lift millions from poverty, to help our citizens realize their dreams, and to ensure that new generations of children are raised free from violence, hatred, and fear.*

Comment: Trump should stop advocating for violence, spreading hatred, and creating fear through his rhetoric and actions on the domestic and international stage. To be sure, millions of Dreamers in the U.S. and North Korean citizens would love an opportunity to raise new generations.

Trump: *We do not expect diverse countries to share the same cultures, traditions, or even systems of government, but we do expect all nations to uphold these two core sovereign duties, to respect the interests of their own people and the rights of every other sovereign nation.*

Comment: Trump mentions the importance of sovereignty 19 times in this speech but ignores the fact that the US repeatedly ignores national sovereignty in the name of security (i.e. regime changes, drone strikes, special operations missions, espionage [even with allies]).

Trump: *The United States will forever be a great friend to the world and especially to its allies. But we can no longer be taken advantage of or enter into a one-sided deal where the United States gets nothing in return.*

Comment: Trump resorts back to the simplistic language through which he appeals to his fading base. The United States is not being taken advantage of. Governance (global or national), security, and diplomacy are not zero-sum games and the U.S. has a tremendous amount to gain from supporting international cooperation. Global collaboration is an inherent component of a Global Peace System which is already developing.

Trump: *From the beaches of Europe to the deserts of the Middle East to the jungles of Asia, it is an eternal credit to the American character that even after we and our allies emerge victorious from the bloodiest war in history, we did not seek territorial expansion or attempt to oppose and impose our way of life on others.*

Comment: The United States has a network of 800 military bases spread over 150 countries around the world—more than any other nation or empire in history. This is a reality that most Americans don't consider. Many of these bases were acquired after American occupation⁸. Anthropologist David Vine, who has studied the bases extensively, argues that the bases are doing us more harm than good. One must ask, how sovereign and independent are other nations on earth with all of these bases, power projection, and potential to launch wars?

Trump: *The score of our planet today is small regimes that violate every principle that the United Nations is based. They respect neither their own citizens nor the sovereign rights of their countries. **If the righteous many do not confront the wicked few, then evil will triumph. When decent people and nations become bystanders to history, the forces of destruction only gather power and strength.***

Comment: The day after this speech, the UN opened the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons with the support of 122 countries for signature. The only members against the treaty were the nuclear armed states and a few of their allies. Arguably the wicked few are the nuclear armed nations. The nations of the world have also rallied around the Paris Climate Agreement, which is supported by every country except the U.S. and Syria⁹.

Trump: **North Korea's reckless pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles threatens the entire world with unthinkable loss of human life.**

Comment: This applies to every nation pursuing or holding nuclear weapons. There are no exceptions.

Trump: **It is an outrage that some nations would not only trade with such a regime, but would arm, supply, and financially support a country that imperils the world with nuclear conflict.**

⁸ The United States Probably Has More Foreign Military Bases Than Any Other People, Nation, or Empire in History (<https://www.thenation.com/article/the-united-states-probably-has-more-foreign-military-bases-than-any-other-people-nation-or-empire-in-history/>)

⁹ U.S. and Syria oppose Paris Agreement (<http://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/351643-nicaragua-to-sign-paris-deal-leaving-us-syria-as-only-countries>)

Comment: If this is true, then it is also outrageous that the United States trades, arms, and supplies Saudi Arabia in their war against Houthi rebels in Yemen—a conflict the UN humanitarian chief calls a “humanitarian catastrophe” and where UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has called for a surge in diplomacy¹⁰.

Trump: *No nation on Earth has an interest in seeing this band of criminals arm itself with nuclear weapons and missiles.*

Comment: Trump makes a straight forward argument for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Trump: *The United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea.*

Comment: Trump calls for the destruction of an entire country and with that its population of 25 million people. This is deplorable on many levels, including the fact that such destruction can only be done via nuclear war. Trump also violates the UN Charter: “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.”¹¹

Trump: *Rocket man is on a suicide mission for himself and for his regime.*

Comment: Resorting to playground insults on the UN floor is embarrassing and will only serve to inflame tensions between North Korea and the United States. We are witnessing a very dangerous pattern of conflict escalation by two nuclear armed leaders whose power rests upon strong-man talk and action. In this pattern, a move by one must be answered with a stronger countermove by the other. This is unacceptable to Americans,

¹⁰ 'Manmade catastrophe': Yemen conflict has killed 1,100 children, says UN (<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/sep/05/man-made-catastrophe-yemen-conflict-has-killed-1100-children-says-un-united-nations>); Repair 'world in pieces' and create 'world at peace,' UN chief Guterres urges global leaders (<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=57549#.WcLzV8iGNhF>)

¹¹UN Charter: Article 2, Paragraph 4 (<http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-i/index.html>)

North Koreans and humanity. Furthermore, using demonizing language to alienate the “other” has proven to be detrimental to conflict resolution.

Trump: *It is time for North Korea to realize that the denuclearization is its only acceptable future.*

Comment: For the self-declared Master deal maker, this is a very ignorant statement. While of course we want a denuclearized North Korea, it is unfeasible to expect the regime to give away their biggest bargaining chip. We only have to look at breakdown of diplomacy and strong-arm tactics with Gaddafi and Hussein, both of whom lost their power and lives. For the North Korean regime, the nuclear capacity is their strongest guarantee for survival. Much better short and long-term actions exist. We support the set of urgent recommendations released by the Global Zero’s Nuclear Crisis Group¹², emphasizing the immediate steps of refraining from nuclear threats and provocative military action. Additional steps include: Talk with North Korea without preconditions; engage with the adversary through multiple levels of diplomacy; move away from the tit-for-tat mentality and towards problem-solving approaches through recognition and respect, even in an adversarial relationship; reference and implement the difficult but successful diplomatic strategies at our disposal (e.g. Iran Nuclear Agreement); engage conflict resolution experts in policy-making and the media; acknowledge the fears and the need for security in all parties involved; initiate citizen-diplomacy efforts to humanize “the other”.

Trump: *... it is far past time for the nations of the world to confront another reckless regime, one that speaks openly of mass murder.*

Comment: Exactly two paragraphs earlier in his speech, Trump speaks of his willingness to murder 25 million North Koreans.

¹² Urgent Steps to De-Escalate Nuclear Flashpoints
(https://globalzero.org/files/nuclear_crises_group_urgent_steps_june_2017.pdf)

Trump: *The Iranian government masks a corrupt dictatorship behind the false guise of a democracy. It has turned a wealthy country, with a rich history and culture, into an economically depleted rogue state whose chief exports are violence, bloodshed, and chaos.*

Comment: Actually, Iran's chief export is crude oil (almost 60%). Trump is using his well-known tactic of spreading hate and fear to rally support.

Trump: *This wealth, which rightly belongs to Iran's people, also goes to shore up Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship, fuel Yemen's civil war, and undermine peace throughout the entire Middle East.*

Comment: Saudi Arabia is leading a U.S. backed campaign in Yemen. Under the Trump administration, the U.S. military's role has expanded, leading to what the UN has called "the leading cause of the 13,920 civilians killed and wounded in the conflict so far¹³."

Trump: *We cannot let a murderous regime continue these destabilizing activities while building dangerous missiles, and we cannot abide by an agreement if it provides cover for the eventual construction of a nuclear program. The Iran deal was one of the worst and most one-sided transactions the United States has ever entered into. Frankly, that deal is an embarrassment to the United States, and I don't think you've heard the last of it. Believe me.*

Comment: Trump must have confused a campaign rally with the UN General Assembly. The Iran nuclear deal is a multi-party agreement between the Iran, the U.S., the United Kingdom, Russia, China, France and Germany. The deal has been successful in keeping Iran from developing nuclear weapons and is widely acknowledged to be a success story of diplomacy over war. This remark was immediately rebuked by other members of Iran nuclear deal¹⁴. Moreover, by signaling that he would dismantle an international agreement that is working, Trump is destroying the U.S. credibility for negotiating other agreements. At times when constructive dialog with North

¹³ Press briefing note on Yemen. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. September 19, 2017. (<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22100&LangID=E>)

¹⁴Basics of the Deal (<https://www.diplomacyworks.org/resources/basics-of-the-deal/>)

Korea is of utmost importance, negotiating parties, allies and adversaries alike, rightfully have little confidence in the U.S.

Trump: *From now on, our security interests will dictate the length and scope of military operation, not arbitrary benchmarks and timetables set up by politicians.*

Comment: The Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) has taken away congressional power from declaring war. Vague AUMFs allow presidents to write blank checks to launch military campaigns under many the pretense of security. Trump is reinforcing the already existing endless war powers for presidents.

Trump: *I have also totally changed the rules of engagement in our fight against the Taliban and other terrorist groups.*

Comment: The strict adherence to firm rules of engagement (ROE) is vital for civilian protection. ROEs go back to the Geneva Convention and are required by several NATO treaties. When leaders start to blur the lines between civilian and military targets, or what weapons can and cannot be used to reach their military goals, the results can be disastrous to all parties involved.

Trump: *For the cost of resettling one refugee in the United States, we can assist more than 10 in their home region.*

Comment: This isn't a monetary issue—an internal study by the Department of Health and Human Services found that refugees brought in \$63 billion more in government revenues than they cost¹⁵.

¹⁵ Trump Administration Rejects Study Showing Positive Impact of Refugees
(<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/18/us/politics/refugees-revenue-cost-report-trump.html>)

Trump: *The United States continues to lead the world in humanitarian assistance, including famine prevention and relief, in South Sudan, Somalia, and northern Nigeria and Yemen.*

Comment: Talking about the U.S. and humanitarian assistance in Yemen is a huge contradiction to the role of the military in causing the humanitarian catastrophe. See also earlier comment on Yemen.

Trump: *Major portions of the world are in conflict, and some, in fact, are going to hell, but the powerful people in this room, under the guidance and auspices of the United Nations, can solve many of these vicious and complex problems.*

Comment: The world has become slightly less peaceful. 93 countries have improved levels of peacefulness, 63 deteriorated. The decline in peacefulness is not taking place in major portions of the world, but mainly driven by conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa (2017 Global Peace Index). This data driven perspectives with the nuances of peacefulness or lack thereof stand in stark contrast to the dire picture painted by Trump.

Trump: *The American people hope that one day soon the United Nations can be a much more accountable and effective advocate for human dignity and freedom around the world.*

Comment: This is a great aspiration but it won't happen until there is a working regulatory and judicial arm of the UN that can hold states accountable. The ICC needs to be strengthened so we can hold states/leaders accountable (not only those in Africa). Serious reform of the UN is necessary, first and foremost, focus must be on reforming the Security Council¹⁶.

Trump: *In the meantime, we believe that no nation should have to bear a disproportionate share of the burden, militarily or financially. Nations of the world must take a greater role in promoting secure and prosperous societies in their own region.*

¹⁶ UN Reform in World Beyond War's Alternative Global Security System (<http://worldbeyondwar.org/alternative/>)

Comment: UN peacekeeping budget is only 8 billion a year—nothing compared to the 700 billion defense budget Trump brags about earlier in his speech. If the Trump administration would recognize the cost-effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts¹⁷, dramatic budgetary increases in violence and war prevention would reduce the need for military interventions and the associated costs. Dr. Scilla Elworthy just published her “Business Plan for Peace”¹⁸. Two billion dollars over ten years for Peace? Dr. Elworthy writes a compelling book demonstrating that Peace - with a capital P - is not some abstract aspirational goal for humanity, but that it can be approached with a sound business plan. Adding dollar amounts to supporting and amplifying effective alternatives to war and violence through numerous peace initiatives in an itemized overview is groundbreaking. Also, less people would suffer and die.

¹⁷ Measuring Peacebuilding Effectiveness (http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Measuring-Peacebuilding_WEB.pdf)

¹⁸ The Business Plan for Peace (<http://www.scillaelworthy.com/the-business-plan-for-peace/>)

