

STRATEGIC CLARITY

Yes, Mr. President—Sovereignty!

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The President’s speech to the UN General Assembly last month contained the beginnings of a good idea for U.S. foreign policy. Now let’s see if he runs with it.

The last time I heard a President utter anything I wrote was in 1980. The President was Jimmy Carter, and he used my words because, whether he realized it or not, I wrote them for him. I was all of 21 when I worked in President Carter’s speechwriting office thanks to a great boss, Hendrik Hertzberg. Chris Matthews, not yet of *Hardball* fame, was also there; Chris got to meet with President Carter, but I never did. No matter: There President Carter would stand anyway, in the East Room or the Yellow Room, reading my words as if they were his.

If only I could get President Trump to do the same.

According to numerous pundits, columnists, and others, the President mentioned the word “sovereignty” 21 times in his September 19 UN General Assembly speech. In *The Sovereignty Solution: A Commonsense Approach to Global Security* (2011), I and my co-authors used the word “sovereignty” hundreds of times.¹

I was abroad when the President delivered his speech, but distance hardly dampened the surprise. No, I’m not claiming that White House speechwriters borrowed anything from our book. But I do feel somewhat proprietary about both the word and certain concepts associated with it. Granted, not all of the themes sounded in *The Sovereignty Solution* were unique to us, and not all of our themes were represented in the President’s speech. But a number of them were. If he only were to consistently put them into practice it would be a good thing for all of us.

Any policy bent on reinvigorating sovereignty should marry together two principles: “to each his own” with “don’t tread on me.” Both should be familiar to Americans. John Wayne’s character in *The Shootist* perhaps sums them up best: “I won’t be wronged. I won’t be insulted. I won’t be laid a-hand on. I don’t do these things to other people, and I require the same from them.”

President Trump has been heading in this “don’t, or else” direction ever since he announced his candidacy, while one thing his victory and that of other populists should make clear is that 21st-century fears have totally outstripped Washington’s ability to make the world feel sufficiently safe to hundreds of millions of Americans.

Consider the fact that 16 years of Sisyphean activity in Afghanistan and Iraq (not to mention Somalia, Yemen, Libya, and against al-Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram, and AQIM, to name just a few scourges) have not brought anything remotely like victory. Consider that even with the all of the crocodile tears shed over corruption, foreign leaders who receive U.S. taxpayer-funded assistance continue to *fail* at delivering essential services. Consider, too, the secrets spilled by what has become a succession of treason-minded government employees posing as transparency saints. Why shouldn’t Americans (and others) be worried?

All of which should lead to an obvious conclusion: In an era of non-stop spin, counter-spin, misinformation, disinformation, and “fake news,” we would be far better off if we had a national security strategy that placed a premium on strategic clarity, so that all audiences—foreign *and* domestic—knew where we stand, and what we would not countenance.

As President Trump already seems to intuit, we also need a military that can be operationally ambiguous. Telegraphing military deadlines or other details seldom makes sense. Yet without strategic clarity, operational ambiguity is fraught with danger. When the public can’t know what to expect if certain events occur, conspiracy theorists and political opportunists will fill the vacuum.

As it is, we are living with rampant fear-mongering, and are also showing ourselves to be increasingly divisible. That makes us vulnerable to manipulation, and worse. Consequently, we need something we Americans can collectively agree to stand for—something that binds us together and distinguishes us from others, but not in such a way as to rub our sense of exceptionalism in other peoples’ faces.

Here is where the President is on to something with his stress on sovereignty. But he needs to make the full case without contradiction and in measured tones.

I can’t reprise here all of the arguments we make in our book—which is why we wrote a book. But I can note a few of the ways in which the President’s remarks could portend greater global sanity if he can now transpose them from an initial speech to policy reality.

Again, the two predicates to bear in mind are “to each his own” and “don’t tread on me”—or, if I were to offer the President a summary tweet: “We’ll be us, you be you.” We Americans can’t be all things to all people. The more we try to be principled but non-judgmental, the more morally self-righteous but unprincipled we seem. We confuse and frustrate

others, not to mention ourselves. Far better to concentrate instead on what does (or should) make America great again—*for us*, which is what “we’ll be us, you be you” would deliver.

But back to President Trump and his speech. There are several significant overlaps between what he said and what we said. Consider a few.

The President said: “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.”

In *The Sovereignty Solution* we wrote: “In the end, we don’t have to be the same, think the same, or practice the same the world over. States just have to accede to the same set of rules for occupying the planet together.” Indeed, every country should be “just as free as we are to set its own course without worrying about outside interference ... so long as nothing they do violates others’ sovereignty in terms of pollution, refugee flows, or inability to police their own borders.”

Trump: “All responsible leaders have an obligation to serve their own citizens, and the nation-state remains the best vehicle for elevating the human condition.”

The Sovereignty Solution: “Until humans stumble or agree on a new way to arrange political space around the globe, states are the sociogeographic containers we have. Nothing else at the moment has states’ potential to box in ‘bad guys.’ Nothing else grants diverse peoples a freer rein to govern themselves as they see fit.”

Trump: “We must deny the terrorists safe haven, transit, funding, and any form of support for their vile and sinister ideology. We must drive them out of our nations. It is time to expose and hold responsible those countries who support and finance terror groups like al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, the Taliban, and others that slaughter innocent people.”

The Sovereignty Solution: “By rights, Washington should not even have to remind foreign leaders that they are responsible for anything that violates our sovereignty (including anyone who bears their country’s passport) ... in a world in which sovereignty demands the fulfillment of certain duties and doesn’t just promise [heads of state] deference —*non-state* actors, literally, would not exist.”

Trump: “All people deserve a government that cares for their safety, their interests, and their wellbeing, including their prosperity.”

The Sovereignty Solution: “The domestic bargain that lies at the heart of sovereignty for any people is that a government meet *its* citizens’ demands. How it accomplishes this is up to it to work out with them. That a government does so, though, is the only guarantee that none of its citizens will want to drag it into dangerous predicaments by rebelling,

thereby purposely or inadvertently attracting others' interest and support.”

Trump: “Today, if we do not invest ourselves, our hearts, and our minds in our nations, if we will not build strong families, safe communities, and healthy societies for ourselves, no one can do it for us.”

The Sovereignty Solution: “When countries have viable social contracts designed *by* and *for* them, indivisibility results. Ultimately, we should want all other countries to achieve this for at least two reasons: first, the world is too diverse for anything less. But second, the world needs to stay diverse. Without diversity there is no distinctiveness. Should the United States lose its distinctiveness not only would that be bad for us, but, in any kind of world, our loss would not be good for anyone else either.”

As discerning readers will note, I have cherry-picked my way through the President’s speech. I have also purposely avoided calling attention to any of its inconsistencies because I see no value just now in sharpshooting. I *want* the President to reinvigorate sovereignty, carefully, thoroughly, and so that it works.

For instance, take our escalating feud with North Korea. Ten years ago, when first making our sovereignty arguments, my co-authors and I proposed a “Standing Declaration of Preemption” for situations too time-constrained for formal declarations of war. The premise was that the President might need to move more swiftly than congressional debate over a declaration of war would allow (a return to which we also advocated). Just as with a declaration of war, a Standing Declaration of Preemption would require congressional debate to *pre*-approve the time-sensitive use of military force. To receive such pre-approval, the Administration would have to identify who exactly poses a threat, the specific nature of the threat, what would be required to neutralize it, and what the triggers for acting would be.

Here is what we wrote in late 2010 about Korea:

One example of the need for a standing declaration would likely be North Korea today. Given North Korea’s demonstrated nuclear and ballistic missile capability, the President could ask Congress for a standing declaration whose trigger would be North Korea readying its long-range ICBMs for launch without being willing to verifiably divulge their payloads. In such a case, with a Standing Declaration of Preemption, Congress would pre-authorize the President to use sufficient force to destroy the missiles prior to launch, while any further action against North Korea would require a formal Declaration of War.

Imagine how useful such a declaration would be today, not just for reassuring countries in Pyongyang’s blast range, but to send Kim Jong-un an unequivocal message: Stop playing “chicken” with us. Cross our red lines and the whole world will know what to expect: the elimination of your launch capabilities and your regime. Unfortunately, there is no such declaration in place and nothing like it on the horizon.

Another aspect of our “sovereignty rules” that should particularly appeal to President Trump is that all transgressions of U.S. sovereignty *require* a response since counterpunching is the only principled way to deter violators, no matter the scale of the violation. What those responses consist of would remain a closely held secret, in keeping with the “strategic clarity/operational ambiguity” approach we believe best protects our national security. Worth noting, too, is that applying the “or else” rule doesn’t require us to invade or to go nuclear, which is how some people misread any mention of decisive force. With its current arsenal, the U.S. military has numerous ways to eliminate violators without needing to turn their surroundings into glass.

Of course, what makes the case of North Korea especially tragic is that had we begun living in a “sovereignty rules” world decades ago, North Korea’s neighbors—not us—would have borne the responsibility of holding it to account. For example, no country should ever have allowed itself to be blackmailed into feeding its neighbor’s citizens. Nor should any country have put up with the abduction of its own people. Pick your metaphor: When countries bury their heads in the sand or kick the can down the road so as to not have to confront predatory or sociopathic neighbors, relations rarely improve. Indeed, diplomatic indecisiveness generally only ensures that unresolved situations worsen. Or as Lord Vansittart, staunch opponent of appeasement, said: “It is usually sound to do at once what you have to do ultimately.”

Meanwhile, if we take sovereignty seriously, we must acknowledge that other countries do have the right to develop whatever arsenals they choose. Just because a country seeks nuclear weapons and engages in vile rhetoric does not grant us the right to attack it. The sovereignty quid pro quo of “don’t tread on me” and “to each his own” provides other options. For instance, a country like North Korea that refuses to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty belongs on a nuclear watch list. Should an unattributable nuclear device be set off anywhere, it and all other countries on the list would then have to open themselves up to full inspection—or else. They would either have to be able to *prove* they had nothing to do with the attack, or they would place themselves in the category of being accomplices.

Sovereignty needs teeth. Otherwise, we will be stuck in the same no-win situations we find ourselves in right now. Consider that for the past several decades we’ve launched missile strike after missile strike in one country after another—and with what results? The litany of places whose china we keep having to break has only grown longer. President Trump is right about at least one thing: We don’t win any more. In part, this is because waging long, fitful wars from the shadows doesn’t fit our culture; it is certainly not our military’s forte. But winning also requires a decisive, not equivocating, application of force, and a decisive finish, which means that we dictate terms—terms that will render an adversary incapable of taking up arms against us (or our allies) again.

Common sense suggests that if we are not willing to be decisive, then military force must be the wrong foreign policy tool to use. Tellingly, a sovereignty-based approach to global security suggests exactly the same thing, especially since “don’t tread on me” represents just one half of the sovereignty equation. Remember, the other half is “to each his own.”

Nothing holds more promise for helping us inhabit the earth together with all of our clashing cultural, religious, and ideological differences than adoption of “we’ll be us, you be you” as a tenet of U.S. foreign policy. By the same token, nothing will more effectively impel foreign heads of state to have to live up to their sovereign obligations to their own citizens than reminding them what will happen should they not, especially when their dereliction causes American casualties.

No one is better positioned than President Trump to spell this out: “Be more responsible for and responsive to your own people, or else. Address their concerns. If you don’t, let just one of them target us out of a sense of justifiable frustration or anger with you. If you don’t then rectify the situation, you and your regime are finished.”

A decade ago, I thought the chances were good that, if the U.S. government began to operate according to the principles described above, other countries would see the value in following suit. I would now modify that assessment. I think the chances are better than good that, if President Trump adopted these principles and applied them consistently and wisely, numerous leaders (and aspiring leaders) would find themselves either wanting or having to follow suit.

Certainly, the President’s UN speech was not the usual presidential address. As a speech, it contained little in the way of soaring rhetoric. But, like much that President Trump does, it did defy norms, and it did lay down a marker. We will soon be able to see how serious the President is—if he makes more of sovereignty. We should all hope so, no matter what we think of the messenger. The global stakes are too high for anything less, just as they are too high for more of the same.

¹*A significantly more nuanced version of an [argument first published in these pages in 2007](#).*

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