

A Missed Opportunity at the UN

In this his first opportunity to address the world community – the UN General Assembly – President Trump missed the chance to rally the international community behind US leadership to deal with our most pressing security threat – a nuclear-armed North Korea.

He started with a recitation of global security challenges and opportunities – interspersed with an obligatory call for UN reform and increased burden sharing for UN activities. The message was to rally an international coalition of “strong, sovereign nations” to address these challenges. Had the speech continued on that theme to address international terrorism, organized crime and other transnational threats the reaction to the speech would have been quite different. Almost as if he did not know he was addressing the world community of nations he slipped into his political rally rhetoric.

He launched into a defense of “America first” and why the US would not enter into one-sided agreements from which the US realized no benefit. From the lofty to the petty in the space of a few minutes, the President of the United States no longer sounded like a world leader, but a self-centered politician bent on appealing to his domestic base.

Identifying North Korea as the key global security threat, President Trump could have suggested an international action plan for a coalition based on enhanced collective diplomacy and strengthened sanctions to deter North Korea. No: stunningly he simply resorted to a threat to “totally destroy North Korea” through US military action. Did the President understand what he said? Did he receive a briefing before making such an outrageous statement on the human cost of unilateral military action to “totally destroy North Korea?” Does he understand the human losses South Korea will suffer when North Korea responds with massive counter fire on the South? Apparently not, for he chose to insult Kim Jong-un as “Rocket Man” rather than show any humanity to the innocents who would be victims of his total destruction policy. At that point, he lost the opportunity to build the necessary international support

US Presidents – Republican and Democrat alike – have delivered tough messages about the need for collective action against the threat of the day, whether a nation-state or non-state actors. If collective action were not possible, the US would act in a coalition of the willing. Never, however, has a US President threatened another state, however reprehensible, with total destruction. That crossed a line and inflicted damage on what the US stands for and its ability to rally the international community to the “common cause” of dealing with the threat North Korea represents.

What is to be done? First, recognize the immense damage – culminating in this speech – that this Administration has done to the international standing of the US in less than one year in office. Second, create the families and communities in the United States that reflect enduring American values embodied in our Constitution and embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Third, demilitarize US foreign policy. Strengthen, not weaken, the Department of State to achieve US foreign policy objective through concerted international diplomacy rather

than unilateral military action with consequences too horrible to contemplate. Fourth, let the White House and Congress know through direct correspondence, letters to the editor, and the ballot box that it is time to rebuild not destroy the US leadership if we are to meet the challenges President Trump noted in his speech.