

## Eugene Robinson: Obama's reality check

By Eugene Robinson

If President Obama ever was a -foreign-policy idealist, he's not one now. The address he delivered Tuesday at the United Nations amounted to a realist manifesto for defending U.S. "core interests" — using force, when necessary — without trying to impose American values on unready or unwilling societies.

The speech laid out an Obama Doctrine for confronting a rapidly changing world full of dangers new and old. "I believe America is exceptional," the president said, citing the nation's historic willingness to offer "the sacrifice of blood and treasure . . . for the interest of all." But his updated vision of U.S. leadership, although sweetly phrased, was tightly focused and unsentimental.

In the Mideast, Obama said, the United States will use military action if necessary to secure "our core interests." He identified these as defending allies against aggression, ensuring the free flow of oil from the region, dismantling terrorist networks and preventing "the development or use of weapons of mass destruction."

He specifically relegated democracy, human rights and free markets to a lower tier. We will continue to promote these ideals, he said, but with the knowledge that "we can rarely achieve these objectives through unilateral American action" and that "democracy cannot simply be imposed by force."

Obama went beyond rejecting the "freedom agenda" that George W. Bush pursued with such martial zeal. The president specifically declared that "the United States will at times work with governments that do not meet, at least in our view, the highest international expectations but who work with us on our core interests."

He cited Egypt as an example, saying that he will maintain a "constructive relationship" with the new government as long as it respects the peace agreement with Israel and cooperates in the fight against terrorism.

In other words, Obama has no intention of calling the coup that deposed Mohamed Morsi's government by its proper name, which would trigger a cutoff of U.S. aid. Likewise, the White House can be expected to continue its silence about the ongoing repression of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose leaders are now jailed or in exile.

Implicit throughout Obama's speech was that the early promise of the Arab Spring — an unstoppable wave of democracy spreading throughout the region, fueled by nonviolent "people power" — has been replaced by alarm at the eruption of Islamic extremism and sectarian violence.

Two years ago, U.S. support for the autocratic monarchy in Bahrain, which was violently repressing pro-democracy protests, looked like an exception to the administration's overall policy in the Mideast. Obama's words at the United Nations suggest that, henceforth, such realpolitik will be the rule.

The president committed U.S. power and prestige to two long-shot initiatives. Trying to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict looks, to me, pretty much like an impossibility at this point — but not a waste of time, since it is better to have some sort of peace process under way than not. Negotiating an end to the threat posed by Iran’s nuclear program, on the other hand, is clearly the right idea at the right time.

By all accounts, the stranglehold sanctions on the Iranian regime are causing real pain. The new moderate leadership seems to have been given unprecedented freedom to negotiate a loosening of the vise. President Hassan Rouhani may not have the will or the latitude to reach a settlement in the next three months, as he claims, but it would be a tragic mistake not to find out.

At the same time — and I think this has to be a factor in the president’s thinking, underpinning the entire Obama Doctrine — the Syria experience showed how reluctant Americans are to contemplate another Mideast war.

I don’t mean to suggest that Obama would hesitate to order an attack on Iran if all else failed, because preventing the mullahs from obtaining the bomb is one of his “core interests.” But the overwhelming public rejection of military action in Syria has to be seen as an instruction to explore every avenue of negotiation before resorting to force.

“I’ve made it clear that, even when America’s core interests are not directly threatened, we stand ready to do our part to prevent mass atrocities and protect basic human rights,” Obama said. “But we cannot and should not bear that burden alone.”

The president challenged other nations to join in the “multilateral use of military force” when possible and necessary, as in Libya, or else “reckon with the cold logic of mass graves.” Sounds like cold realism to me.

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