

TRUMP AT THE 81ST UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY: AMERICAN POWER, COERCIVE DIPLOMACY AND THE EMERGING INTERNATIONAL ORDER

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



“America is back.”

“Our military is the most powerful on earth.”

“Our power is expanding.”

These opening declarations of President Donald Trump’s address to the 81st Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on 22 September 2026¹ established the central premise of his speech: American power as the organizing principle. Trump declared:

“America is back.”

He linked this to economic, technological, military, and energy capabilities, describing the U.S. as having *“the most powerful”* military and asserting that American technology was *“second to none.”*

This goes beyond typical presidential self-promotion. It lays the foundation for everything that follows. In Trump's view, the global order relies more on a nation's power and readiness to act than on international institutions or norms. The argument becomes explicit when Trump states:

“I do not believe in letting problems fester. They only become harder to solve.”

And then contrasts his approach with previous administrations:

“While others have talked, I have acted.”

¹ Speech by President Donald Trump at the 81st UNGA Session, September 22, 2026, *United Nations General Assembly*, <https://gadebate.un.org/en/81/united-states-america>

The language is important. Trump does not merely argue that American leadership is necessary. He presents decisiveness as a foreign-policy virtue in itself. Prolonged negotiations, institutional processes, and incremental diplomacy are implicitly linked to delay, while rapid action is linked to success. The speech outlined a view of the U.S. international order in which peace emerges from power rather than as an alternative to it, with diplomacy relying on military strength, economic influence, and personal connections.

Iran: The Clearest Expression of Trump's Coercive Diplomacy

Iran occupied the largest portion of President Trump's speech as it brought together virtually every element of Trump's foreign-policy doctrine: military force, economic pressure, nuclear non-proliferation, maritime security, deterrence, negotiations, and threats of escalation. Trump described Iran as:

"The number one sponsor of terror"

He also claimed that he had proposed economic cooperation to Tehran in exchange for abandoning its nuclear program and countering terrorism. Trump stated that Iran refused these offers, leading the U.S. to carry out significant military actions targeting Iranian nuclear and military facilities.

The most consequential passage was his explicit presentation of two possible futures:

"Will a deal be made with Iran that lets them rebuild and create a far greater country than it ever was before?"

or:

"Do I annihilate the Islamic Republic and do it quickly?"

This is among the strongest examples of coercive presidential rhetoric at a UNGA podium in recent U.S. history. Importantly, the threat was immediately accompanied by an offer of negotiation:

"I believe we'll make a deal right after the election."

This illustrates what could be called coercive bargaining rather than diplomacy. The underlying proposition is that diplomacy becomes effective when the adversary understands the consequences of refusing the American offer. This formulation captures the central tension in Trump's foreign-policy narrative.

Furthermore, Iran marked the clearest departure from the usual rhetoric of recent U.S. presidential diplomacy. Trump urged countries to back the *"complete economic isolation of Iran"* until Tehran

stops attacking commercial ships, gives up its nuclear goals, and halts support for terrorism. He described military measures as having physically shifted the strategic balance before negotiations yielded a resolution.

Gaza And the Transformation of Trump's Peace Narrative

Trump's presentation of Gaza is considerably more conciliatory than his treatment of Iran. He claimed that the Gaza war had been ended, that the hostages had been returned, and that the UN Security Council had endorsed his 20-point peace plan and the Board of Peace.

His language shifts from confrontation to achievement:

"We ended the war in Gaza, saving untold thousands of lives."

He further emphasized the return of hostages:

"Every single one of them."

Gaza serves an important purpose in Trump's speech. It is presented as evidence that force and pressure can eventually produce political settlement. The broader trajectory is therefore not simply militaristic. Trump is attempting to establish a model in which coercion creates bargaining leverage and personal diplomacy converts that leverage into settlements. Trump uses Gaza as evidence that direct presidential involvement, pressure, and personal relationships can accomplish what prolonged multilateral diplomacy has failed to achieve.

This is consistent with his wider claim that he has helped settle eight conflicts, including:

"Cambodia and Thailand, Kosovo and Serbia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda, Pakistan and India, Armenia and Azerbaijan."

For Pakistan, the reference is particularly significant. Trump attributed considerable importance to his role in the India-Pakistan crisis, quoting the Pakistani Prime Minister as saying that Trump was responsible for saving millions of lives.

The important point for understanding the speech is that Trump himself sees these episodes as evidence for a particular model of diplomacy: personal relationships + economic leverage + tariffs + credible threats + rapid intervention.

He explicitly explained his methodology:

“The reason I was able to make these settlements was the use of my relationships. Very special relationships ... trade, the use of tariffs and the threat of tariffs and various other reasons depending on the country.”

This is perhaps the most concise description of the Trump administration’s foreign-policy problem-solving.

Ukraine

On Ukraine, Trump's rhetoric is comparatively restrained. He stated:

“We continue to seek an end [to] the disastrous war between Russia and Ukraine.”

He emphasized the human cost and said:

“It's time to stop the killing.”

He also claimed that Washington was working with both Moscow and Kyiv and asserted:

“We will get that one done.”

Doing so, Trump does not place NATO or the broader Western alliance at the center of his Ukraine narrative. He emphasizes ending the war through direct negotiations and pressure on the combatants, representing a shift from collective deterrence to transactional conflict resolution.

Venezuela, Mexico, Cuba and The Western Hemisphere

The Venezuela section reveals another important feature of Trump's worldview: the restoration of an explicitly regional conception of U.S. power. Trump claimed that the U.S. conducted a military operation in Caracas, arrested Nicolás Maduro, and subsequently negotiated a major oil agreement. He declared:

“To the victor belong the spoils.”

More importantly, he stated:

“The United States will no longer permit threats to America to gain a foothold anywhere in the Western Hemisphere.”

and:

“If necessary, we will use our unmatched military might to secure the vital national interests of the United States.”

This language indicates a revived concept of U.S. regional security based on a sphere of influence, portraying the administration's stance as a renewed Monroe Doctrine posture in the Western Hemisphere.

Trump's description of Mexican cartels as:

“The ISIS of the Western Hemisphere” and his advocacy of killing, detaining, or expelling cartel members further demonstrates the extension of national-security language into transnational crime.

The significance is that the boundary between domestic security and foreign policy becomes increasingly blurred. Migration, cartels, drugs, hostile foreign actors, and territorial security are incorporated into a single conception of national defense.

Greenland and NATO

Trump's discussion of Greenland is another sign that he is incorporating geographic competition into his foreign-policy outlook. He presented Greenland primarily as a strategic security asset, asserting that the U.S. would establish a permanent military presence and construct two major military bases. The argument is framed in terms of Arctic security, North Atlantic defense, and prevention of adversarial military presence.

This suggests Trump's conception of American global leadership is not limited to traditional theatres of conflict. Strategic geography itself is becoming securitized—from the Arctic and Greenland to the Strait of Hormuz and the Western Hemisphere.

At the same time, Trump presented NATO as becoming stronger and praised increased defense spending. Trump's approach is not simply anti-alliance. Rather, a more conditional, burden-sharing-oriented conception of alliances.

The United Nations as an Object of Contestation

Perhaps the most consequential institutional element of the speech is Trump's criticism of the UN system. He claimed that his administration had implemented:

"The most sweeping U.N. reforms in history"

and highlighted a reduction in the UN budget and personnel.

Yet he simultaneously argued that:

"The United Nations has great, great potential."

This distinction is crucial. Trump does not oppose the UN's existence; he opposes what he sees as supranationalism that limits national sovereignty. His statement clearly reflects this view.

"There is no global government. And while I'm president, there will be no global taxes."

His attack on the International Criminal Court (ICC) is even more direct:

"We will never allow U.S. service members or anyone else to be investigated or given show trials by an anti-American tribunal with no jurisdiction over us."

He then urged ICC members to withdraw. Trump's perspective is almost the opposite: international institutions are legitimate only if they serve national interests and remain subordinate to sovereignty.

Artificial Intelligence: From Global Governance to Technological Supremacy

The AI portion of the speech adds an important future-oriented component. Trump rejected efforts to construct a global governance framework that could constrain U.S. technological development. He argued:

"Whoever wins superintelligence wins."

He further asserted that the U.S. was leading China in this area and would maintain that advantage.

This represents a shift in what national security means for the current U.S. administration. Technological leadership is treated almost like military superiority. Trump's argument is simultaneously economic, strategic, and geopolitical: the country that controls the next generation of advanced AI will possess a decisive source of national power.

This contrasts strongly with the broader multilateral approach visible elsewhere at the 81st UNGA. UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for international governance and independent oversight of AI, arguing that the technology was advancing faster than regulatory systems.²

The growing divide is not just about AI regulation. It also highlights a larger debate: whether AI should be managed as a global governance issue or as a strategic rivalry in which technological dominance is a matter of national security.

Trump clearly favors the second conception.

Trump Compared with Obama and Biden: A Transformation in Language

Obama's 2016 UNGA speech clearly contrasts with today's U.S. administration, acknowledging the dangers of nationalism and isolationism while advocating international cooperation. He warned against retreating into a world divided along "age-old lines of nation and tribe and race and religion."³

He also argued:

*"We cannot return to the old ways of conflict and coercion."*⁴

Trump's 2026 speech uses almost the opposite vocabulary. His repeated references to "strength," "power," "threat," "isolation," "annihilate," "military might," "tariffs," "enemies," and "sovereignty" create a much more confrontational rhetorical environment.

Biden's 2024 language occupies an intermediate position. His speech acknowledged war and geopolitical rivalry but repeatedly returned to historical reconciliation. He observed:

*"Even from the horrors of war, there's a way forward. Things can get better."*⁵

The emphasis was on historical transformation—from enemies to partners—and on the possibility of diplomacy despite strategic competition.

² "Guterres: 'Cracks Have Become Canyons' As World Faces Four Tests of Power," *United Nations General Assembly*, September 22, 2026, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/09/1168392>

³ Address by President Obama to the 71st Session of the United Nations General Assembly, *White House*, September 20, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/20/address-president-obama-71st-session-united-nations-general-assembly>

⁴ "Remarks by President Obama to the United Nations General Assembly," *White House*, September 28, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/28/remarks-president-Obama-united-nations-general-assembly>

⁵ "Rise in Impunity Worldwide 'Politically Indefensible and Morally Intolerable', Secretary-General Says as General Assembly Begins Annual High-Level Debate," *United Nations General Assembly*, September 24, 2024, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/ga12633.doc>

Trump's 2026 speech, by comparison, places much greater emphasis on the president's personality as an instrument of foreign policy. He repeatedly attributes settlements to his personal relationships and his own decisions. This creates a highly personalized model of diplomacy.

Is Trump's Language More Aggressive?

Aggressiveness is not measured simply by the number of military references. It is visible in the vocabulary and framing. Trump uses direct threat language:

"Annihilate the Islamic Republic"

"Unmatched military might"

"They should be killed, exiled, or detained"

"The terrorist regime is behaving badly," and describes international institutions in highly confrontational terms, including the ICC as a *"rogue institution."*

His predecessors, like Obama and Biden, certainly used strong language regarding terrorism, Russia, Iran, and other threats. The difference is not that Obama and Biden rejected force while Trump embraced it. Rather, the difference lies in how they position force linguistically. For Obama and Biden, force generally appears as one instrument within a wider system of alliances, law, diplomacy, and multilateral action. For Trump, force and the credible threat of force are themselves presented as the foundation upon which diplomacy becomes possible.

The speech therefore points toward a U.S. foreign policy in which American power is both the means and the message. Military readiness is intended to deter adversaries; economic pressure is used to compel negotiations; personal diplomacy is used to conclude settlements; and technological supremacy is presented as essential to maintaining the American position in the emerging global order.

The speech is particularly revealing when measured against the crises surrounding the 81st UNGA.

1. Iran: Trump presents the war as moving toward a decisive choice between Iranian capitulation/negotiation and further escalation. Yet U.S.-Iranian officials met shortly after his UN speech, showing that even Trump's most confrontational rhetoric coexists with active diplomacy.⁶

⁶ "Trump Says US and Iran Met for 3 Hours After His Threat During United Nations Speech," *News 10*, September 22, 2026, <https://www.wsls.com/news/politics/2026/09/22/the-latest-trump-returns-to-un-at-moment-of-anxiety-about-iran-ai-and-future-of-world-body-itself>

2. Ukraine: Trump promises a rapid settlement, but the ongoing war shows how difficult it is to turn presidential pressure into a negotiated outcome. His speech therefore presents an intended trajectory rather than an established result.
3. Gaza: Trump presents the conflict as already resolved and his peace architecture as the basis for reconstruction. This represents the speech's strongest attempt to demonstrate that coercive diplomacy can produce political settlement.
4. Western Hemisphere: Venezuela, Mexico, and Cuba are framed through national-security and territorial-security concepts, indicating a stronger U.S. regional posture. Reuters has identified this as a renewed sphere-of-influence approach.⁷
5. UN system: Trump advocates reform while simultaneously attacking elements of the multilateral system. This is consistent with a broader U.S. policy of reducing institutional constraints while retaining the UN as a platform for American diplomacy.
6. AI: Trump identifies technological superiority as a central determinant of future geopolitical power, suggesting that U.S.-China technological competition will become increasingly important alongside traditional military competition.
7. Climate: The relative absence of climate change from Trump's speech is itself analytically important. At a UNGA whose wider discussions include climate change as a major global challenge, Trump's speech places substantially greater emphasis on energy abundance and national economic strength.

Trajectory of U.S. Foreign Policy Suggested by The Speech

The speech indicates several broad directions for the remainder of Trump's second term.

1. The U.S. foreign policy is likely to remain heavily transactional. Relationships will be assessed through concrete security, economic, and strategic returns rather than primarily through shared values.
2. Economic instruments will continue to function as foreign-policy weapons, and tariffs as tools for conflict settlement, increasingly blurring the boundary between trade policy and security policy.

⁷ Simon Lewis, "Trump Pledges 'Unmatched Military Might' Against Drug Cartels," *Reuters*, September 22, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/trump-vows-unmatched-military-might-he-rallies-regional-anti-cartel-allies-2026-09-22>

3. Military credibility will remain central to diplomacy. The expansion of ammunition production, military investment, force projection, and military capacity will serve not simply as a deterrent but as a negotiating instrument.
4. Personal diplomacy will remain important. Trump repeatedly attributes diplomatic breakthroughs to his personal relationships with foreign leaders, creating opportunities for rapid leader-to-leader negotiations but also making diplomacy more dependent on presidential relationships.
5. U.S. relations with international institutions are likely to remain selective rather than institutionally committed.
6. Great-power competition is increasingly moving beyond conventional military geography. AI, critical technologies, Arctic territory, energy, and maritime routes are now part of the conception of national power.

Conclusion

Trump's 81st UNGA speech represents a hybrid doctrine of coercive diplomacy in which military superiority, economic pressure, tariffs, and personal relationships reinforce one another. Its central proposition is straightforward: American power creates the leverage; leverage creates negotiations; negotiations produce settlements; and settlements demonstrate the effectiveness of American power. The most important departure is not simply a change in tone from moderate to aggressive. It is a change in the underlying conception of how international order is produced. The speech suggests that the international system should increasingly accommodate American power rather than constrain it.