



UNGA SPEECHES AT THE 75TH SESSION 2020: KEY TAKEAWAYS

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



The 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly marked a break from the past as world leaders addressed the annual UNGA event virtually, an unprecedented session in the history of the UN due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The theme for UNGA 2020 was “The future we want, the United Nations we need; reaffirming our collective commitment to multilateralism.” World leaders addressed an increasingly polarized UN on its 75th anniversary, with the pandemic high on the agenda, along with other issues of global concern. The UNGA 2020 was chaired by Turkish diplomat, Volkan Bozkir who was the President of the 75th session.

President Donald Trump’s pre-recorded speech to the UNGA’s 75th session reflected his foreign policy postures calling America a peacemaker for brokering Israel’s normalization of ties with Arab states. He accused China of being an aggressor and for being responsible for spreading the coronavirus. The UN, he said “Must hold China accountable for their actions.”¹ President Trump also attacked Iran in his speech, calling it a sponsor of terror.

President Xi Jinping’s speech at the UNGA struck a conciliatory note as he talked about fighting Covid-19 and stressed on the need for the global community to fight common problems and embrace multilateralism. He also highlighted China’s role and its willingness to ensure sound

¹ Quint Forgey, "Trump: U.N. 'must hold China accountable' for pandemic", *Politico*, September 22, 2020 <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/22/trump-condemns-china-on-the-world-stage-419908>

initiatives to fight the pandemic and reminded the world that global governance needs improvement and reform.

French President Emmanuel Macron, in his UNGA speech outlined the need for meaningful multilateralism in order to tackle the contemporary challenges. He also touched upon the deep divides which prevent functional international cooperation.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, in his UNGA speech shed light on the UN Security Council's role and that it should take into account the interests of all member states more broadly. President Putin also praised the veto right of the permanent five members of the UNSC and called for this right to be preserved, which in his opinion is a reflection of the balance of power. Apart from this, he stressed on Russia's partnership within Eurasia. Among others, he talked about the need for the extension of the new US Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) which is due to expire in February 2021, as well as cyber security related issues and also the Covid-19 vaccine. Regarding outer space, he said that Russia is putting forward an initiative to sign a binding agreement between all the leading space powers that would provide for the prohibition of the placement of weapons in outer space, and threat or use of force against outer space objects. President Putin signaled Russia's keenness to share its experiences regarding the Covid-19 vaccine.

British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, in his UNGA address talked extensively about global approaches to fight another pandemic like Covid-19. He also talked about the need for a global pandemic early warning system. Prime Minister Johnson's speech also touched upon lifting export controls on related items like protective equipment and other items used in fighting the pandemic.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in his UNGA address stated that the UN has been ineffective in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic and said that behind the tension in the Eastern Mediterranean, there are countries which are acting on the premise that "the winner takes it all." He also said that Turkey does not have designs on anyone else's right. President Erdogan also touched upon the need for the restructuring of the UNSC in order to make it more effective, transparent and accountable.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, in his address called upon the need for the reform of the UN and also stressed on the need for India to be included in the decision making structures of the UN, referring to India's bid for a permanent seat at the UNSC. In her UNGA address, the Prime Minister of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina Wajid talked about the fight against the coronavirus and stated that Bangladesh has been a contributor to international peace and security.

Speaking at the occasion, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani gave a clear message to the United States that Iran is not a bargaining chip in US elections and that the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Program of Action (JCPOA) as one of the biggest achievements in the history of diplomacy. He added that his country had remained faithful to the agreement in spite of what he termed persistent violations by the US. He appreciated the resilience of the Iranian nation and stated that independence is far more important for the Iranian nation than any compromise.

In his address, King Salman Bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia termed Iran as a force of chaos in the Middle East, accusing it of being a source of extremism in the region. While praising Saudi Arabia, he shed light on the Kingdom's donations to numerous countries over the last three decades. King Salman also expressed his support for the Trump administration's efforts in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, he did not say anything about the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel by close Saudi allies in the Arab world.

The Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani in his speech shed light on the threat of epidemics, calling it one of the most serious challenges since the UN's founding 75 years ago. The Emir also said that a serious evaluation of multilateral action is required, especially in the UNSC. Moreover, he emphasized on the need to revive multilateralism in order to make the UN more effective. The Emir also reiterated the call for lifting the illegal blockade of Qatar by UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt.

The UNGA speeches by heads of prominent powers reflected increasing tensions between some powers, as well as the need to revive effective multilateralism. The speeches reflected the foreign policy postures of the UN members, some of which were reconciliatory whereas others represented a deepening polarization.