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Remarks by President Obama to the United Nations General Assembly

United Nations Headquarters
New York, New York

****Please see below for a correction, marked with an asterisk.**

10:18 A.M. EDT

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Mr. President, Mr. Secretary General, fellow delegates, ladies and gentlemen: **Seventy years after the founding of the United Nations, it is worth reflecting on what, together, the members of this body have helped to achieve.**

Out of the ashes of the Second World War, having witnessed the unthinkable power of the atomic age, the United States has worked with many nations in this Assembly to prevent a third world war -- by forging alliances with old adversaries; by supporting the steady emergence of strong democracies accountable to their people instead of any foreign power; and by building an international system that imposes a cost on those who choose conflict over cooperation, an order that recognizes the dignity and equal worth of all people.

That is the work of seven decades. That is the ideal that this body, at its best, has pursued. Of course, there have been too many times when, collectively, we have fallen short of these ideals. Over seven decades, terrible conflicts have claimed untold victims. But we have pressed forward, slowly, steadily, to make a system of international rules and norms that are better and stronger and more consistent.

It is this international order that has underwritten unparalleled advances in human liberty and prosperity. It is this collective endeavor that's brought about diplomatic cooperation between the world's major powers, and buttressed a global economy that has lifted more than a billion people from poverty. It is these international principles that helped constrain bigger countries from imposing our will on smaller ones, and advanced the emergence of democracy and development and individual liberty on every continent.

This progress is real. It can be documented in lives saved, and agreements forged, and diseases conquered, and in mouths fed. And yet, we come together today knowing that the march of human progress never travels in a straight line, that our work is far from complete; that dangerous currents risk pulling us back into a darker, more disordered world.

Today, we see the collapse of strongmen and fragile states breeding conflict, and driving innocent men, women and children across borders on an *epoch epic scale. Brutal networks of terror have stepped into the vacuum. Technologies that empower individuals are now also exploited by those who spread disinformation, or suppress dissent, or radicalize our youth. Global capital flows have powered growth and investment, but also increased risk of contagion, weakened the bargaining power of workers, and accelerated inequality.

How should we respond to these trends? There are those who argue that the ideals enshrined in the U.N. charter are unachievable or out of date -- a legacy of a postwar era not suited to our own. Effectively, they argue for a return to the rules that applied for most of human history and that pre-date this institution: the belief that power is a zero-sum game; that might makes right; that strong states must impose their will on weaker ones; that the rights of individuals don't matter; and that in a time of rapid change, order must be imposed by force.

On this basis, we see some major powers assert themselves in ways that contravene international law. We see an erosion of the democratic principles and human rights that are fundamental to this institution's mission; information is strictly controlled, the space for civil society restricted. We're told that such retrenchment is required to beat back disorder; that it's the only way to stamp out terrorism, or prevent foreign meddling. In accordance with this logic, we should support tyrants like Bashar al-Assad, who drops barrel bombs to massacre innocent children, because the alternative is surely worse.

The increasing skepticism of our international order can also be found in the most advanced democracies. We see greater polarization, more frequent gridlock; movements on the far right, and sometimes the left, that insist on stopping the trade that binds our fates to other nations, calling for the building of walls to keep out immigrants. Most ominously, we see the fears of ordinary people being exploited through appeals to sectarianism, or tribalism, or racism, or anti-Semitism; appeals to a glorious past before the body politic was infected by those who look different, or worship God differently; a politics of us versus them.

The United States is not immune from this. Even as our economy is growing and our troops have largely returned from Iraq and Afghanistan, we see in our debates about America's role in the world a notion of strength that is defined by opposition to old enemies, perceived adversaries, a rising China, or a resurgent Russia; a revolutionary Iran, or an Islam that is incompatible with peace. We see an argument made that the only strength that matters for the United States is bellicose words and shows of military force; that cooperation and diplomacy will not work.

As President of the United States, I am mindful of the dangers that we face; they cross my desk every morning. I lead the strongest military that the world has ever known, and I will never hesitate to protect my country or our allies, unilaterally and by force where necessary.

But I stand before you today believing in my core that we, the nations of the world, cannot return to the old ways of conflict and coercion. We cannot look backwards. We live in an integrated world -- one in which we all have a stake in each other's success. We cannot turn those forces of integration. No nation in this Assembly can insulate itself from the threat of terrorism, or the risk of financial contagion; the flow of migrants, or the danger of a warming planet. The disorder we see is not driven solely by competition between nations or any single ideology. And if we cannot work together more effectively, we will all suffer the consequences. That is true for the United States, as well.

No matter how powerful our military, how strong our economy, we understand the United States cannot solve the world's problems alone. In Iraq, the United States learned the hard lesson that even hundreds of thousands of brave, effective troops, trillions of dollars from our Treasury, cannot by itself impose stability on a foreign land. Unless we work with other nations under the mantle of international norms and principles and law that offer legitimacy to our efforts, we will not succeed. And unless we work together to defeat the ideas that drive different communities in a country like Iraq into conflict, any order that our militaries can impose will be temporary.

Just as force alone cannot impose order internationally, I believe in my core that repression cannot forge the social cohesion for nations to succeed. The history of the last two decades proves that in today's world, dictatorships are unstable. The strongmen of today become the spark of revolution tomorrow. You can jail your opponents, but you can't imprison ideas. You can try to control access to information, but you cannot turn a lie into truth. It is not a conspiracy of U.S.-backed NGOs that expose corruption and raise the expectations of people around the globe; it's technology, social media, and the irreducible desire of people everywhere to make their own choices about how they are governed.

Indeed, I believe that in today's world, the measure of strength is no longer defined by the control of territory. Lasting prosperity does not come solely from the ability to access and extract raw materials. The strength of nations depends on the success of their people -- their knowledge, their innovation, their imagination, their creativity, their drive, their opportunity -- and that, in turn, depends upon individual rights and good governance and personal security. Internal repression and foreign aggression are both symptoms of the failure to provide this foundation.

A politics and solidarity that depend on demonizing others, that draws on religious sectarianism or narrow tribalism or jingoism may at times look like strength in the moment, but over time its weakness will be exposed. And history tells us that the dark forces unleashed by this type of politics surely makes all of us less secure. Our world has been there before. We gain nothing from going back.

Instead, I believe that we must go forward in pursuit of our ideals, not abandon them at this critical time. We must give expression to our best hopes, not our deepest fears. This institution was founded because men and women who came before us had the foresight to know that our nations are more secure when we uphold basic laws and basic norms, and pursue a path of cooperation over conflict. And strong nations, above all, have a responsibility to uphold this international order.

Let me give you a concrete example. After I took office, I made clear that one of the principal achievements of this body -- the nuclear non-proliferation regime -- was endangered by Iran's violation of the NPT. On that basis, the Security Council tightened sanctions on the Iranian government, and many nations joined us to enforce them. Together, we showed that laws and agreements mean something.

But we also understood that the goal of sanctions was not simply to punish Iran. Our objective was to test whether Iran could change course, accept constraints, and allow the world to verify that its nuclear program will be peaceful. For two years, the United States and our partners -- including Russia, including China -- stuck

together in complex negotiations. The result is a lasting, comprehensive deal that prevents Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, while allowing it to access peaceful energy. And if this deal is fully implemented, the prohibition on nuclear weapons is strengthened, a potential war is averted, our world is safer. That is the strength of the international system when it works the way it should.

That same fidelity to international order guides our responses to other challenges around the world. Consider Russia's annexation of Crimea and further aggression in eastern Ukraine. America has few economic interests in Ukraine. We recognize the deep and complex history between Russia and Ukraine. But we cannot stand by when the sovereignty and territorial integrity of a nation is flagrantly violated. If that happens without consequence in Ukraine, it could happen to any nation gathered here today. That's the basis of the sanctions that the United States and our partners impose on Russia. It's not a desire to return to a Cold War.

Now, within Russia, state-controlled media may describe these events as an example of a resurgent Russia -- a view shared, by the way, by a number of U.S. politicians and commentators who have always been deeply skeptical of Russia, and seem to be convinced a new Cold War is, in fact, upon us. And yet, look at the results. The Ukrainian people are more interested than ever in aligning with Europe instead of Russia. Sanctions have led to capital flight, a contracting economy, a fallen ruble, and the emigration of more educated Russians.

Imagine if, instead, Russia had engaged in true diplomacy, and worked with Ukraine and the international community to ensure its interests were protected. That would be better for Ukraine, but also better for Russia, and better for the world -- which is why we continue to press for this crisis to be resolved in a way that allows a sovereign and democratic Ukraine to determine its future and control its territory. Not because we want to isolate Russia -- we don't -- but because we want a strong Russia that's invested in working with us to strengthen the international system as a whole.

Similarly, in the South China Sea, the United States makes no claim on territory there. We don't adjudicate claims. But like every nation gathered here, we have an interest in upholding the basic principles of freedom of navigation and the free flow of commerce, and in resolving disputes through international law, not the law of force. So we will defend these principles, while encouraging China and other claimants to resolve their differences peacefully.

I say this, recognizing that diplomacy is hard; that the outcomes are sometimes unsatisfying; that it's rarely politically popular. But I believe that leaders of large nations, in particular, have an obligation to take these risks -- precisely because we are strong enough to protect our interests if, and when, diplomacy fails.

I also believe that to move forward in this new era, we have to be strong enough to acknowledge when what you're doing is not working. For 50 years, the United States pursued a Cuba policy that failed to improve the lives of the Cuban people. We changed that. We continue to have differences with the Cuban government. We will continue to stand up for human rights. But we address these issues through diplomatic relations, and increased commerce, and people-to-people ties. As these contacts yield progress, I'm confident that our Congress will inevitably lift an embargo that should not be in place anymore. (Applause.) Change won't come overnight to Cuba, but I'm confident that openness, not coercion, will support the reforms and better the life the Cuban people deserve, just as I believe that Cuba will find its success if it pursues cooperation with other nations.

Now, if it's in the interest of major powers to uphold international standards, it is even more true for the rest of the community of nations. Look around the world. From Singapore to Colombia to Senegal, the facts shows that nations succeed when they pursue an inclusive peace and prosperity within their borders, and work cooperatively with countries beyond their borders.

That path is now available to a nation like Iran, which, as of this moment, continues to deploy violent proxies to advance its interests. These efforts may appear to give Iran leverage in disputes with neighbors, but they fuel sectarian conflict that endangers the entire region, and isolates Iran from the promise of trade and commerce. The Iranian people have a proud history, and are filled with extraordinary potential. But chanting "Death to America" does not create jobs, or make Iran more secure. If Iran chose a different path, that would be good for the security of the region, good for the Iranian people, and good for the world.

Of course, around the globe, we will continue to be confronted with nations who reject these lessons of history, places where civil strife, border disputes, and sectarian wars bring about terrorist enclaves and humanitarian disasters. Where order has completely broken down, we must act, but we will be stronger when we act together.

In such efforts, the United States will always do our part. We will do so mindful of the lessons of the past -- not just the lessons of Iraq, but also the example of Libya, where we joined an international coalition under a U.N. mandate to prevent a slaughter. Even as we helped the Libyan people bring an end to the reign of a tyrant, our coalition could have and should have done more to fill a vacuum left behind. We're grateful to the United Nations for its efforts to forge a unity government. We will help any legitimate Libyan government as it works to bring the country together. But we also have to recognize that we must work more effectively in the future, as an international community, to build capacity for states that are in distress, before they collapse.

And that's why we should celebrate the fact that later today the United States will join with more than 50 countries to enlist new capabilities -- infantry, intelligence, helicopters, hospitals, and tens of thousands of troops -- to strengthen United Nations peacekeeping. (Applause.) These new capabilities can prevent mass killing, and ensure that peace agreements are more than words on paper. But we have to do it together. Together, we must strengthen our collective capacity to establish security where order has broken down, and to support those who seek a just and lasting peace.

Nowhere is our commitment to international order more tested than in Syria. When a dictator slaughters tens of thousands of his own people, that is not just a matter of one nation's internal affairs -- it breeds human suffering on an order of magnitude that affects us all. Likewise, when a terrorist group beheads captives, slaughters the innocent and enslaves women, that's not a single nation's national security problem -- that is an assault on all humanity.

I've said before and I will repeat: There is no room for accommodating an apocalyptic cult like ISIL, and the United States makes no apologies for using our military, as part of a broad coalition, to go after them. We do so with a determination to ensure that there will never be a safe haven for terrorists who carry out these crimes. And we have demonstrated over more than a decade of relentless pursuit of al Qaeda, we will not be outlasted by extremists.

But while military power is necessary, it is not sufficient to resolve the situation in Syria. Lasting stability can only take hold when the people of Syria forge an agreement to live together peacefully. The United States is prepared to work with any nation, including Russia and Iran, to resolve the conflict. But we must recognize that there cannot be, after so much bloodshed, so much carnage, a return to the pre-war status quo.

Let's remember how this started. Assad reacted to peaceful protests by escalating repression and killing that, in turn, created the environment for the current strife. And so Assad and his allies cannot simply pacify the broad majority of a population who have been brutalized by chemical weapons and indiscriminate bombing. Yes, realism dictates that compromise will be required to end the fighting and ultimately stamp out ISIL. But realism also requires a managed transition away from Assad and to a new leader, and an inclusive government that recognizes there must be an end to this chaos so that the Syrian people can begin to rebuild.

We know that ISIL -- which emerged out of the chaos of Iraq and Syria -- depends on perpetual war to survive. But we also know that they gain adherents because of a poisonous ideology. So part of our job, together, is to work to reject such extremism that infects too many of our young people. Part of that effort must be a continued rejection by Muslims of those who distort Islam to preach intolerance and promote violence, and it must also be a rejection by non-Muslims of the ignorance that equates Islam with terror. (Applause.)

This work will take time. There are no easy answers to Syria. And there are no simple answers to the changes that are taking place in much of the Middle East and North Africa. But so many families need help right now; they don't have time. And that's why the United States is increasing the number of refugees who we welcome within our borders. That's why we will continue to be the largest donor of assistance to support those refugees. And today we are launching new efforts to ensure that our people and our businesses, our universities and our NGOs can help as well -- because in the faces of suffering families, our nation of immigrants sees ourselves.

Of course, in the old ways of thinking, the plight of the powerless, the plight of refugees, the plight of the marginalized did not matter. They were on the periphery of the world's concerns. Today, our concern for them is driven not just by conscience, but should also be drive by self-interest. For helping people who have been pushed to the margins of our world is not mere charity, it is a matter of collective security. And the purpose of this institution is not merely to avoid conflict, it is to galvanize the collective action that makes life better on this planet.

The commitments we've made to the Sustainable Development Goals speak to this truth. I believe that capitalism has been the greatest creator of wealth and opportunity that the world has ever known. But from big cities to rural villages around the world, we also know that prosperity is still cruelly out of reach for too many. As His Holiness Pope Francis reminds us, we are stronger when we value the least among these, and see them as equal in dignity to ourselves and our sons and our daughters.

We can roll back preventable disease and end the scourge of HIV/AIDS. We can stamp out pandemics that recognize no borders. That work may not be on television right now, but as we demonstrated in reversing the spread of Ebola, it can save more lives than anything else we can do.

Together, we can eradicate extreme poverty and erase barriers to opportunity. But this requires a sustained commitment to our people -- so farmers can feed more people; so entrepreneurs can start a business without paying a bribe; so young people have the skills they need to succeed in this modern, knowledge-based economy.

We can promote growth through trade that meets a higher standard. And that's what we're doing through the Trans-Pacific Partnership -- a trade agreement that encompasses nearly 40 percent of the global economy; an agreement that will open markets, while protecting the rights of workers and protecting the environment that enables development to be sustained.

We can roll back the pollution that we put in our skies, and help economies lift people out of poverty without condemning our children to the ravages of an ever-warming climate. The same ingenuity that produced the Industrial Age and the Computer Age allows us to harness the potential of clean energy. No country can escape the ravages of climate change. And there is no stronger sign of leadership than putting future generations first. The United States will work with every nation that is willing to do its part so that we can come together in Paris to decisively confront this challenge.

And finally, our vision for the future of this Assembly, my belief in moving forward rather than backwards, requires us to defend the democratic principles that allow societies to succeed. Let me start from a simple premise: Catastrophes, like what we are seeing in Syria, do not take place in countries where there is genuine democracy and respect for the universal values this institution is supposed to defend. (Applause.)

I recognize that democracy is going to take different forms in different parts of the world. The very idea of a people governing themselves depends upon government giving expression to their unique culture, their unique history, their unique experiences. But some universal truths are self-evident. No person wants to be imprisoned for peaceful worship. No woman should ever be abused with impunity, or a girl barred from going to school. The freedom to peacefully petition those in power without fear of arbitrary laws -- these are not ideas of one country or one culture. They are fundamental to human progress. They are a cornerstone of this institution.

I realize that in many parts of the world there is a different view -- a belief that strong leadership must tolerate no dissent. I hear it not only from America's adversaries, but privately at least I also hear it from some of our

friends. I disagree. I believe a government that suppresses peaceful dissent is not showing strength; it is showing weakness and it is showing fear. (Applause.) History shows that regimes who fear their own people will eventually crumble, but strong institutions built on the consent of the governed endure long after any one individual is gone.

That's why our strongest leaders -- from George Washington to Nelson Mandela -- have elevated the importance of building strong, democratic institutions over a thirst for perpetual power. Leaders who amend constitutions to stay in office only acknowledge that they failed to build a successful country for their people -- because none of us last forever. It tells us that power is something they cling to for its own sake, rather than for the betterment of those they purport to serve.

I understand democracy is frustrating. Democracy in the United States is certainly imperfect. At times, it can even be dysfunctional. But democracy -- the constant struggle to extend rights to more of our people, to give more people a voice -- is what allowed us to become the most powerful nation in the world. (Applause.)

It's not simply a matter of principle; it's not an abstraction. Democracy -- inclusive democracy -- makes countries stronger. When opposition parties can seek power peacefully through the ballot, a country draws upon new ideas. When a free media can inform the public, corruption and abuse are exposed and can be rooted out. When civil society thrives, communities can solve problems that governments cannot necessarily solve alone. When immigrants are welcomed, countries are more productive and more vibrant. When girls can go to school, and get a job, and pursue unlimited opportunity, that's when a country realizes its full potential. (Applause.)

That is what I believe is America's greatest strength. Not everybody in America agrees with me. That's part of democracy. I believe that the fact that you can walk the streets of this city right now and pass churches and synagogues and temples and mosques, where people worship freely; the fact that our nation of immigrants mirrors the diversity of the world -- you can find everybody from everywhere here in New York City -- (applause) -- the fact that, in this country, everybody can contribute, everybody can participate no matter who they are, or what they look like, or who they love -- that's what makes us strong.

And I believe that what is true for America is true for virtually all mature democracies. And that is no accident. We can be proud of our nations without defining ourselves in opposition to some other group. We can be patriotic without demonizing someone else. We can cherish our own identities -- our religion, our ethnicity, our traditions -- without putting others down. Our systems are premised on the notion that absolute power will corrupt, but that people -- ordinary people -- are fundamentally good; that they value family and friendship, faith and the dignity of hard work; and that with appropriate checks and balances, governments can reflect this goodness.

I believe that's the future we must seek together. To believe in the dignity of every individual, to believe we can bridge our differences, and choose cooperation over conflict -- that is not weakness, that is strength. (Applause.) It is a practical necessity in this interconnected world.

And our people understand this. Think of the Liberian doctor who went door-to-door to search for Ebola cases, and to tell families what to do if they show symptoms. Think of the Iranian shopkeeper who said, after the nuclear deal, "God willing, now we'll be able to offer many more goods at better prices." Think of the Americans who lowered the flag over our embassy in Havana in 1961 -- the year I was born -- and returned this summer to raise that flag back up. (Applause.) One of these men said of the Cuban people, "We could do things for them, and they could do things for us. We loved them." For 50 years, we ignored that fact.

Think of the families leaving everything they've known behind, risking barren deserts and stormy waters just to find shelter; just to save their children. One Syrian refugee who was greeted in Hamburg with warm greetings and shelter, said, "We feel there are still some people who love other people."

The people of our United Nations are not as different as they are told. They can be made to fear; they can be taught to hate -- but they can also respond to hope. History is littered with the failure of false prophets and fallen empires who believed that might always makes right, and that will continue to be the case. You can count on that. But we are called upon to offer a different type of leadership -- leadership strong enough to recognize that nations share common interests and people share a common humanity, and, yes, there are certain ideas and principles that are universal.

That's what those who shaped the United Nations 70 years ago understood. Let us carry forward that faith into the future -- for it is the only way we can assure that future will be brighter for my children, and for yours.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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11:00 A.M. EDT

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