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# THERE IS NO TRUMP DOCTRINE, ONLY CONTRADICTIONS AND BLUSTER

By John Cassidy September 21, 2017



*Trump's address to the United Nations General Assembly this week made clear that the President has no coherent foreign-policy stance.*

Photograph by Roman Vondrous / CTK via AP

**T**he things our President says. At a lunch with African leaders on Wednesday, Donald Trump praised the continent's business potential by noting that many of his friends were "going to your countries to get rich." A

bit later in his remarks, he spoke about how effectively African countries had responded to some recent health-care crises, such as the Ebola outbreak, and added that “Namibia’s health system is increasingly sufficient.” (There is no country named Namibia.)

Anybody can mispronounce the name of an unfamiliar place, and it’s long been clear that geography isn’t one of Trump’s strengths. But he seems to view many foreign countries almost exclusively on the basis of how eager they are to play host to Trump-branded hotels and golf courses. (Ireland, Scotland, and Dubai are good, while continental European countries are bad.) Namibia, an arid, sparsely populated nation that gained independence from South Africa in 1990, clearly hasn’t made it onto the Trump Organization’s target list.

On Tuesday, addressing the United Nations General Assembly for the first time, Trump displayed a similar attitude toward the U.N. itself, noting how the organization’s presence on the East Side of Manhattan had boosted the fortunes of the nearby Trump World Tower condominium building, which was completed in 2001. “I actually saw great potential across the street, to be honest with you,” Trump said at the beginning of his speech. “And it’s only for the reason that the United Nations was here that that turned out to be such a successful project.”

Eventually, Trump got around to non-real-estate matters. He promised that, as President, he would always put America’s interests first, threatened to “totally destroy North Korea,” and described Iran as a “rogue state.”

Afterward, many people on the right hailed his blunt language. Ed Morrissey, a conservative blogger and talk-show host, said that Trump had dispelled fears that “globalists” inside the Administration had moderated his approach. The evangelist Franklin Graham said that the speech “made you proud to be an American.”

In non-conservative circles, the reaction was very different. Hillary Clinton, appearing on “The Late Show with Steven Colbert,” described Trump’s

address as “very dark, dangerous, not the kind of message that the leader of the greatest nation in the world should be delivering.” Slate’s Fred Kaplan called it the “most hostile, dangerous, and intellectually confused—if not outright dishonest—speech ever delivered by an American president to an international body.” When Vox’s Alex Ward asked Melissa Hanham\*, a researcher at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies, for comment, Hanham sent him an image of “The Scream” by Edvard Munch.

Yet there was a third view, too. The *Washington Post*’s David Ignatius, pointing out that Trump had condemned human-rights abuses in places such as Myanmar and Cuba and promoted international coöperation among sovereign states, wrote that the most surprising thing about the speech was “how conventional it was.” Zachary Peck, a fellow at the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, told Vox, “This was basic American foreign policy with Trumpian characteristics.” The *Wall Street Journal*’s editorial board suggested that “perhaps Mr. Trump’s definition of ‘America First’ is even evolving to recognize the necessity of American global leadership.”

These clashing interpretations were made possible by the many glaring contradictions contained in Trump’s speech. No sooner had the President assured the nations of the world that “making a better life for our people also requires us to work together in close harmony and unity” than he proclaimed that, “as long as I hold this office, I will defend America’s interests above all else.” His assertion that U.N.-led peacekeeping missions have made “invaluable contributions in stabilizing conflicts in Africa” was undercut by his criticism that “too often, the focus of this organization has not been on results but on bureaucracy and process.”

The only thing all this makes clear is that Trump has no coherent foreign-policy stance. He only has instincts, many of which have lately run up against the realities he faces as the leader of the sole global superpower. He assumes that the United States has a divine right to behave as it likes, regardless of its previous commitments. He mistakes belligerence for power. He fetishizes

strongmen. And he is disdainful of problems he views as liberal confections. (Nowhere in his speech did he mention climate change.)

Thus, the search for a Trump doctrine is like the hunt for the Loch Ness monster. Does it have one hump or two? How long is its neck? Is it a mammal or a reptile? Depending on where you look in the library of “Nessie” stories, you can justify many descriptions. Since the monster doesn’t exist, answers to these questions are all equally false and equally true.

Taken over all, it was as if the framework for Trump’s U.N. speech had been laid down by those in the Administration who recognize some fundamental geopolitical imperatives, such as the need to avoid a descent into Hobbesian chaos, and then had its rhetoric turned up by someone like Stephen Miller, Trump’s right-wing nationalist aide, to please the President’s supporters and satisfy his insatiable desire to draw attention to himself. The sound bites produced by this rhetoric only added to the dissonance.

In calling Kim Jong Un “Rocket Man” and threatening to turn North Korea into a radioactive ashtray, Trump was presumably trying to goad the North Korean leader into opening negotiations about an agreement to denuclearize the Korean peninsula. But, immediately after his remarks about North Korea, Trump signalled his intention to tear up the nuclear deal that the Obama Administration reached with Iran—despite the fact that the other countries that signed the agreement—France, Germany, the United Kingdom, China, and Russia—all insist that Tehran is living up to its terms. Not only is Trump “courting a second major nonproliferation crisis, but he is putting a negotiated solution to reduce the North Korean threat even further out of reach,” Kingston Reif, an expert at the Arms Control Association, told Vox. “If Trump unravels the deal, Kim will understandably conclude that the United States can’t be counted on to live up to any agreement he might strike with it.”

We can assume that Trump’s sensible advisers recognize that the President was undercutting his own efforts to deal with Kim. Evidently, they have given

up trying to impose some over-all coherence on his utterances. Trump hates being managed. The best they can do is to inject some reassuring passages into Trump's script and hope that he doesn't veer too far off it, and that nobody takes everything else he says too seriously. This is the man, after all, who during the campaign promised to bring U.S. troops home from Afghanistan, withdraw from NAFTA, and label China a currency manipulator.

It's become a truism with Trump: watch what he does, not what he says. This week at the U.N., many countries have adopted this approach. Among America's allies, the responses to Trump's General Assembly address were muted. The countries Trump referred to as "the wicked few" reacted more pointedly, but on the whole they were dismissive. The North Korean foreign minister, who is in New York, likened the speech to "the sound of a dog barking," adding that if Trump thought he could "scare us . . . that's really a dog's dream."

As a columnist for the *People's Daily*, an official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, noted, the "risky game of chicken" between Trump and Kim continues. On Thursday, Trump, after meeting with President Moon Jae-in of South Korea, announced that he is extending U.S. sanctions on individuals and firms that do business with Pyongyang. This move seemed to indicate that for now, at least, he is sticking to the diplomatic path. But that raised the question of how much of his fiery rhetoric is brinksmanship, and how much of it is real. The scary thing is, nobody knows for sure. Perhaps not even the President himself.

*\*Correction: This post has been updated to correctly identify the expert who sent Vox an image of "The Scream."*



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## Video

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### *Trump's Business of Corruption*

*Adam Davidson follows the money trail in one of the President's past deals all the way to Vladimir Putin.*

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