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Obama, Putin, and World Politics *Exceptionalism Under Fire*

NORMAN POLLACK

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It is now September 20th, ten days after Obama addressed the nation on the administration's Syrian policy. In the preceding run-up to his bombing of Syria's chemical-weapons facilities and installations, an all but certain event, a storm of protest broke out in the US and abroad which necessitated second thoughts on the project. Hence, the speech, in which Obama was found shimmying his way through a minefield of his own creation. His call to war, in which comparatively few came, left him temporarily hung out to dry before going it alone in taking military action against Syria. Perhaps for the first time, the public and Congress raised significant opposition—whether or not for the most cogent reasons—to a policy of intervention, to which otherwise they invariably gave their blessing, in several decades. This was an unexpected ideological slap in the face to the nation itself, fed as it has been on a steady diet of militarism and mesmerized by the bullying mantra, “credibility,” that assuaged all doubts about killing innocent civilians. America's stake in hegemony, a unifying force in the body politic, was abruptly up-ended.

Yet, ten days later, the Obama Team, smarting at the suspension and/or delay of its murderous design (for there is no other way to characterize the unprovoked bombing of another country to which one is not at war), is trying—with the help of the media—to have it both ways. David Sanger's apt phrase in his article, “Quick Turn of Fortunes as Diplomatic Options Open Up With

Syria and Iran,” *New York Times* (Sept. 20), “selective coercion,” is meant to suggest that had not Obama threatened the bombing, Syria and Iran would not have made the accommodations they did. Force wins the day! Obama is the master strategist who deserves credit for resounding diplomatic victories. But what if Team Obama—Kerry, Rhodes, Rice, Power, among them, and the boss himself—don’t want that kind of victory, and instead favor unilateral acts of war to provide certainty for American geopolitical global strategy? Even with the seeming diplomatic triumph—quite premature in Iran’s case, because it expects prior steps, e.g., lifting the embargo and also facilitating Iranian money transfers through the Swift system, as the precondition for fruitful negotiations—Obama still has not surrendered the military option, as he makes clear at every opportunity (basking in the strength-as-virtue limelight), with Kerry, especially, painting a dark cloud of skepticism if not disbelief around the apparent thaw, or non-necessity for military action.

The thaw may ultimately prove deceptive, Obama ever chafing at the bit to prove his militarism and soldierly determination, to the American people, US “friends and allies,” of course, our “adversaries,” and the hordes of terrorists lurking in the wings, indispensable for justifying massive surveillance at home, accompanied by a staggering military budget, and the *usual* drive for global political-economic-ideological dominance, itself receding as the world power system grows more complex and America’s own economic preeminence weakens. Oh, that military option (the term itself fairly hissed these days) he is loath to relinquish. One thing, Obama is persistent. He will not be denied. We saw this in the way he wrecked health insurance, not only rejecting the single payer system, but, that much easier to do, rejecting the public option—meanwhile leaving private insurers riding high in the saddle. In fact, he has determinedly wrecked every single thing he’s touched, or, through omission, left untouched. Banking regulation, job creation, climate change, on and on, all the while strengthening the military, making pals with the intelligence community, deploying naval power to the Mediterranean as a show of force, as much against Russia as Syria, and deploying naval power—as part of his “pivot”—to the Pacific, in what has become a building confrontation with China. Today, Syria; tomorrow, the world. (The reader has to be my age to feel the significance of the thought.)

September 10th, then, is crunch-time for global politics. One wonders, given the text of his speech, why he didn’t wait until the eleventh, so that in pulling out all the emotional-patriotic stops, he would have had more receptive ground—but perhaps that bit of hucksterism was beneath even him and his speech writers. When I recall FDR’s “Fireside Chats,” there is something warm, intimate, when he addressed the nation—for Obama, the opposite, a contrived performance by the committee of the whole, with a cloying appeal for trust and the “that’s who we are as Americans” theme tolling the 9/11 memorial bells for implicit background. Crunch-time because, the following day Putin published an op. ed. article in the *New York Times* that succinctly, and I judge, accurately, called Obama’s bluff (or better, world view) at every point. One freely grants that Putin is not Thomas Jefferson, but that does not invalidate his criticisms of Obama and US foreign policy. Those criticisms must stand on their own, and, as though by delayed reaction, they are being addressed, so to speak, in the week-plus since, by the usual suspects, dismissed out of hand by the defenders of American military virtue, notably, McCain, but even Gates and Panetta, all of whom are not satisfied with “surgical” strikes—nor is Obama, who is reported to have 20,000 soldiers off shore, and, not reportedly, but present and accounted for, an impressive flotilla of four missile-firing destroyers and the carrier Nimitz with its battle

group. Diplomacy notwithstanding, or precisely because of the diplomacy-tack, they remain in the Mediterranean in a state of readiness, with a battleship nearby in the Red Sea.

This sort of “diplomacy,” with presumably the same fate awaiting Iran, our national leaders understand, and see nothing inconsistent with that and an increasingly disapproving if not horrified world, and the violation of international law that such action if carried out portends—to them, as if to say, why all the shouting? America can do no wrong—Exceptionalism in full flower!

Thus, in returning to Putin’s article, as an historian I’m not discomfited by not being up-to-the minute, and besides, September 11th is not that long ago (I’m being facetious), although our lives, and social criticism, seem to be dictated by the 24-hour news cycle. *Putin’s piece is extremely important*, and is deserving of close textual analysis. He had the benefit of Obama’s remarks the previous night, and with that in mind presents a refutation setting forth contrasting views of how their respective countries view the international order and the conduct necessary to avoiding conflict. Whatever his KGB experience, he patently sees through Obama and should be heard.

But first the address to which he is responding. Obama faces a self-imposed predicament of threatening war (crying wolf one too many times), then, finding himself increasingly isolated, hunkering down for the moment, yet still conceding nothing of substance, including the preparation to strike—the repeated phrase, now almost a cliché, keeping all options on the table. Whether to this point, before Putin’s own refutation of US foreign policy, Obama is open to a diplomatic solution (he cannot help his transparent insincerity), remains doubtful. He and the Team, beginning with Axelrod, have proven themselves to be proficient spinmeisters whose themes resonate well with a jaded American public and a now-moribund Left unequal to the task, presently, of answering them or posing alternative pathways. We leave it to Putin to do that for us, here, in words, and regrettably, push comes to shove, in prospective deeds of deterrence—so close are we, by Obama’s actions, to full-throttle Cold War geopolitical tensions.

Yes, only four days later, we find US-Russian agreement, Kerry and Lavrov, embracing in Geneva on the 14th, having laid out a timetable for Syrian chemical-weapons disarmament, as a means of avoiding or at least postponing the promised military attack. The agreement depends on Syria’s compliance with what all but those in the US see as an unreasonable schedule, although conceivably doable. It seems a major breakthrough, even to the point of signaling the possibility of calling an international conference to resolve the wider Syrian crisis of civil war, but I suggest actually settles very little. The fact that Obama has kept in place America’s considerable military presence in striking distance, reveals that he views diplomacy as the application of force and, in reality, is plainly miffed at Russia’s intercession when his own grandiose scheme of putting America’s capacity for inflicting lethal damage on world display has been stalled. How best humiliate Assad and make the compliance terms onerous, in order to sabotage the agreement, are no doubt hot topics among Obama’s circle of advisers. From my textual analysis of his September 10th address to the nation, and Putin’s reply in the *New York Times* the next day, I think one can see fundamental differences toward the structure of global politics between the US and Russia, and behind them the formal alliances and informal groupings supporting each (or for

the latter, sharing a broader vision of international relations), differences, currently dramatized by Syria, but taking in the potential for Great-Powers' rivalry leading to chaos or worse.

There is no point in spelling out a horrific scenario of the collapse of the world system. I suspect that the Russians are more aware of the dangers than the Americans, who, in somewhat reckless pursuit of their national self-interest, as witness the interventions, embargoes, blockades, financial controls, etc., have shown through these activities a disregard bordering on contempt of the UN, international law, and the growing chorus of world opinion. Contrariwise, as evidenced by Putin's remarks, Russia has intervened in the Syrian situation not merely to save Assad's neck or the survival of a client-state, but because of a fear that Obama's militarization of American capitalism, in order to revive its maturity-in-decline gradual implosion, will have, unless checked, catastrophic consequences for all nations. The diagnosis of where America is presently at, is no mystery—to all but perhaps the US itself, judging by its domestic policies.

Most symptomatic of actual or impending decline, as its mature stage gives way to structural-political senescence, capitalism in America can be characterized by a fraying social safety net, the widening of class-differentials as affecting wealth and power, the rapidly deteriorating infrastructure, an inability to sustain economically sound levels of employment (hence bringing on stagnation via underconsumption), and the decline of manufacturing, all pointing to a systemic trend toward financialization at the expense of more rounded, sustained, economic development. Surely, Russia has its own disruptive structural and other effects of capitalism, likewise China, but neither is quite ready to come under the American umbrella (or US-controlled IMF and World Bank dictates), and both, far from being in decline, are still on an ascendant growth curve. Perhaps the world system of international capitalism, with China and Russia as active players, will witness fratricidal conflicts, in which case, the US would still be at a disadvantage in line with its decaying state, compared not only with these powers, but newly industrialized countries of vast potentiality such as Brazil.

What does this have to do with Obama, Putin, and Syria? Everything, and I suspect Putin, not Obama, has a full grasp of the emerging global framework, and that the basis for his analysis of US Middle East policy (for Iran is really the intended target in bombing Syria—as set forth in that detestable phrase, “sending a signal”) runs as follows: Obama seeks US advantage, in light of its own declining fortunes *and* corresponding hegemonic ambitions to offset or forestall that decline, through a belligerent posture in world affairs as the key to maintaining its global position. “Credibility” is a crutch to justify unilateral actions and a sign to others that military solutions are favored as a test of national power and integrity. This means that a no-longer realization of hegemony, except through military means, augurs poorly for international stability. Putin, like Li, hardly the revolutionary, values this above all, and takes seriously the threat to stability from whatever quarter, including repercussions from US counterterrorism and, especially, stirring the cauldron of Islamic fundamentalism. Syria is not a negligible factor in the regional arrangements of power, from that standpoint, but also American establishment of a firmer sphere of influence in the Middle East, thence extending to Southern Europe, North Africa, and producing further pressures eastward on China.

Putin knows the US geostrategic game, crediting American desperation as a function of far-reaching changes in the international system which make US unilateral dominance impractical

and adventurism like threats to Syria and Iran, the latter in conjunction with Israel, more and more likely. *That* calls for an implicit red line of his own, more pacific, I think, in intent, but consistent with Russia's (and China's) view of a multipolar framework of world power that offers greater stability through international law, which he argues, less opportunistically than one suspects, must be taken seriously. International law is not a state of heaven-on-earth, but as we read Putin's text it becomes clear (the same holds for China) that its violation is for him the sign of weakened social systems acting aggressively to hold their own. In turn, for Putin, Chechnya, as a prime example, raises the twin and here related dangers of jihadism and social upheaval. Paradoxically, the US sees itself, or pretends to see itself, as endangered by Islam, a threat far away, while for Putin, Russia, though we discount his fear, regards it as an immediate challenge. (Again, this furnishes an important clue as to why Russia favors Assad, and wants Syria kept out of rebel hands.)

In this multipolar framework of world power, seen in the rise of China, Russia's course of determined autonomy, and emerging Third World industrialization, Putin recognizes that the global system is no longer susceptible to US unilateral dominance, and is resolute—much to Obama's chagrin—about not permitting its continuance. The UN now emerges for Russia as the linchpin for creating global order, not as a hypocritical gesture so that it could maintain its veto power in the Security Council, but as a defense against Great-Powers' rivalries destructive to all concerned (i.e., including the world itself). The US, as in Obama's long-publicized military attack in-the-making on Syria, signified, by definition, its contempt for the UN, that it would summarily bypass that body, while Russia, on which Putin capitalized quickly and I think rightly, became its champion in arraigning the US for the potential violation of international law. The Obama-Putin clash, as here described, overshadows the Kerry-Lavrov pact, so that one should have no illusions that all's well in the world, or that, in the event a solution is found for Syria, there will not be further basic causes of international tension, as the American Project of Global Hegemony, subscribed to by both major political parties, continues in force (pardon the pun).

Obama's address is a superb holding action. It enabled him the opportunity to undermine UN efforts while its investigators were at work (thereby prejudging results of the source of the chemical attacks, a subject still in dispute given that much of the initial analysis was put together by Israeli intelligence) and to allow attention on Congressional discontent over the projected bombing to peter out. Neither the UN nor Congress, or for that matter, "friends and allies," provided him the blind devotion (as did Blair, the puppy dog) that he demands in order to dodge accountability for his decisions. The arguments for targeted assassination—even many of the same national-security advisers pressing for it—have become so ingrained in the Washington mental set that patent lying about what is declared to be humanitarian intervention still governs and can be used for domestic, and until recently, international consumption. Beginning with, "My Fellow Americans," we know what to expect: cramming patriotism down our throats while, oddly, some in America are not acknowledged by him as fellows—the poor, dissidents, whistleblowers in particular, the traitors of our time (for what else is the Espionage Act for?), and, from the way many of them have been treated, blacks, struggling to survive.

We've all seen the passages, "children lying in rows, killed by poison gas, others foaming at the mouth, gasping for breath," to which any person of moral conscience would take profound

offense—no matter which side was responsible—and yet two things are troubling: a) the source of the chemical attack has still not been determined, and b) such descriptions can be multiplied twentyfold in the first-hand accounts of those investigating the results of US armed drone attacks for targeted assassination, except that now the objective description has to do with the *utter vaporizing of victims* or leaving them on the ground or in their homes as *blood spats*. How Obama relates to one and not the other, particularly when it is he who takes a personal hand in the selection of the drone victims, directs the operation, and hence, personally authorizes the murders (I guess Brecht would have said, that's what commanders-in-chief do anyway), is a mystery locked only in the recesses of the psychopathic mind.

Obama's evidence cannot even be dignified as circumstantial—e.g., government troops in the vicinity, message intercepts—presented as it was before the UN completed its work. The attack *was* chemical, clear from the outset. Now, without identifying the source, the UN analysis does appear to point to the Assad government. Yet even if true, one, without apologizing for him, must question the legitimacy of intervention, bombing another country where civilian casualties are bound to occur. Here Obama might as easily be looking in the mirror with respect to his CIA-JSOC operations, his Terror Tuesday gatherings to plan assassinations, his deprivations of civilian populations through punishing effects of embargoes, and his toleration of extreme poverty at home, when he states: “When dictators commit atrocities, they depend upon the world to look the other way until those horrifying pictures fade from memory.” Yes, we tend to forget the countless needless, immoral, illegal deaths done in the name of humanitarian intervention—obviously not all on Obama's watch, as events in Chile, among others, testifies, but he has continued this trajectory of death-through-hegemonic striving, to the extent that he has proven himself no better than his predecessor, and more skillful in rationalizing war crimes as, somehow, defense of the Homeland. “If we fail to act”: Obama here sounds the note of urgency, as though, mine, London Bridge is falling down, but his, Iran is emboldened, Israel is in danger, and “the national security interests of the United States” is at stake. We are transported back to Vietnam and the domino theory. If we don't stop the “gooks” in Vietnam, we'll be fighting on the beaches of San Francisco, perhaps even Santa Monica.

POTUS is flexing his muscles: “That's my judgment as commander-in-chief.” He seeks, more than earlier, to wear the mantle lightly, through close association with the military and intelligence communities. This is followed by hypocrisy carried, unashamedly, to the highest level, as the man who flies solo whenever he can or needs to (what's a surge among friends?), then steps back to test the winds, before plunging forward, still solo: “But I'm also the president of the world's oldest constitutional democracy. So even though *I possessed the authority to order military strikes* [italics, mine], I believed it was right, in the absence of a direct or imminent threat to our society, to take this debate to Congress. I believe our democracy is stronger when the president acts with the support of Congress, and I believe that America acts more effectively abroad when we stand together.” He possesses authority to order military strikes, even in the absence of a direct or imminent threat to our society??? Has the talk of increasing Executive Power been a chimera, a fabrication of mind of disaffected radicals, communists, again, whistleblowers cum traitors, or is Obama now asserting unconstitutional claims and—“we stand together—demanding conformity and silence in the face of usurpation?”

Famous last—or are these first—words: “I will not put American boots on the ground in Syria. I will not pursue an open-ended action like Iraq or Afghanistan. I will not pursue a prolonged air campaign like Libya or Kosovo. This would be a targeted strike to achieve a clear objective: deterring the use of chemical weapons and degrading Assad’s capabilities.” The Pinocchio syndrome, a teeny-weeny police action, to be sure. But, he continues, to those who say I don’t go far enough, “Let me make something clear: The United State military doesn’t do pinpricks.” No, indeed, shock and awe is more like it, as in the “prolonged air campaign” he graciously noted, only to put aside. Obama is all about “send[ing] a message,” in this case, “to Assad that no other nation can deliver.” Why no other nation? Implicitly he here invokes the theme of Exceptionalism, explicitly, he does so as he goes on. As for retaliation, these “are threats we face every day,” and, as for “our ally Israel,” it “can defend itself with overwhelming force” and the “unshakable support” of America. Therefore, all signals go, preferably at the *right* time, for there is nothing to fear (even the Pentagon knows better, with gentle warnings, for it is dangerous to cross POTUS, of unintended consequences).

He continues: But you say, “some of Assad’s opponents are extremists.” And his ready answer is, if the US does not act, al Qaeda [my spelling] will only grow stronger. In fact, right after the attack, the US will build the institutions of peace (why not skip the attack and seek mediation, he of course does not say): “But al-Qaida will only draw strength in a more chaotic Syria if people there see the world doing nothing to prevent innocent civilians from being gassed to death. The majority of the Syrian people and the Syrian opposition *we work with* [my italics] just want to live in peace, with dignity and freedom. And the day after any military action, we would redouble our efforts to achieve a political solution that strengthens those who reject the forces of tyranny and extremism.” If Obama’s concern, however, is a “more chaotic Syria,” as the breeding ground for al-Qaeda, the US military attack there, as already seen in the areas subject to drone strikes, will only turn the population against America, and breed the group faster than rabbits. The missiles of Exceptionalism are poor underwriters of a “political solution,” and the effort to differentiate the good from the bad in “the Syrian opposition” grows more difficult by the day with the revelations of the atrocities committed by the rebels and the right-wing credentials of their lobbyist in Washington (who has just been dropped from the Institute for the Study of War because she lied about having a Georgetown Ph.D.).

Here the address hits its epigonic high point, and I, a stone wall of disbelief, as Obama does and at the same time denies that he does put on his commander-and-chief hat and implied regalia of leadership. To the question he poses, “Finally, many of you have asked, why not leave this to other countries or seek solutions short of force?,” there is no reply, just a change of subject, the old debating trick of anticipating an embarrassing point as though having disposed of it. Instead, more fictive letters immediately follows in the discussion: “And several people wrote to me, we should not be the world’s policeman. I agree. And I have a deeply held preference for peaceful solutions.” To paraphrase Barnum, You can fool the Nobel Peace Prize Committee, but not all of the people, all of the time. This time, despite the destroyers and the Nimitz battle group put in position, the aid to the rebels (whether or not it has arrived), above all perhaps, the propaganda barrage over the months to lay the basis for a military attack, Obama’s claim of “a deeply held preference for peaceful solutions” seems at best fatuous, especially in light of the US global presence of military bases, armed drones, and CIA-JSOC paramilitary operations, not to say a military budget equal to that of the world’s combined: “Over the last two years my

administration has tried diplomacy and sanctions, warnings and negotiations. But chemical weapons were still used by the Assad regime.” A prejudgment, we still don’t know, but the eagerness to follow through, whatever the result, we do know.

Obama acknowledges Russia’s proposal to bring Assad’s chemical-weapons stockpile under international control with a view to its destruction—but before hosannas are sounded, we must recall what followed in the address: “Meanwhile, *I’ve ordered our military to maintain their current posture* [my italics], to keep the pressure on Assad and to be in a position to respond if diplomacy fails. And tonight I give thanks again to our military and their families for their incredible strength and sacrifices.” Pressure on Assad here signifies diplomacy at gun point—not a promising ground for diplomacy to succeed. Also, Obama’s noble-warrior theme hardly conduces to thoughts of peace. Which leads in brilliantly to the glorification of hegemony itself—this with an entirely straight face: “My fellow Americans, for nearly seven decades the United States has been the anchor of global security. This has meant doing more than forging international agreements. It has meant enforcing them. The burdens of leadership are often heavy, but the world’s a better place because we have borne them.” To properly respond to this passage (probably the handiwork of Ben Rhodes, chief escalator of peace rhetoric in Team Obama) would require a volume, beginning with a crash reading program of William Appleman Williams, Gabriel Kolko, and Walter LeFeber, but we see at once (“anchor of global security”) the one-sided view of the Cold War, with the Korean War snugly fit into the early years, while the forging and enforcement of international agreements, such as the IMF and World Bank, nicely tilts monetary and trade advantages toward the US, and “burdens of leadership” brings tears to the eyes of America’s selflessness in pursuit of world peace.

Enough is enough. America the Exceptional—from every hillside, let freedom ring: “Terrible things happen across the globe, and it is beyond our means to right every wrong. But when, with modest effort and risk, we can stop children from being gassed to death and thereby make our own children safer over the long run, I believe we should act. That’s what makes America different. *That’s what makes us exceptional.*” [my italics] We alone are solicitous of the health and welfare of children—as the tally of dead children from our drone strikes abroad, and failure to achieve gun control at home, as well as the effect of disease and malnutrition on children in the families of the poor in America, conversely testify. What perhaps makes America different is endemic intervention, coupled with unrestrained capitalist development, and a Garrison-State (or rather, National-Security State) mentality, now joined with the apparatus of massive surveillance—all currently under the aegis of liberalism. Yet why bother to distinguish, because liberalism itself cannot be distinguished from conservatism, itself dropping its philosophic pretenses of concern over the individual, privacy, and civil liberties, both persuasions acting in unison about armed strength, preeminence, and war?

Obama then bids us good-night: “With humility, but with resolve, let us never lose sight of that essential truth [Exceptionalism]. Thank you. God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.”

Poor Putin, coming after Obama, a hard act to follow, puts his temerity in writing a *Times* op. ed. article in the category of a churlish opponent wiping the chess pieces off the board, except that, rather than churlish, he is quite matter-of-fact, sensible, and in his criticisms of America’s

position, on the mark—and except, as well, this is hardly a game, for as Putin is aware (and Obama appears blithely to ignore or disregard), US military action in Syria could have worldwide, and emphatically, regional, repercussions of a horrifying nature. Titled “A Plea for Caution From Russia,” Putin begins by emphasizing the role of the UN in stabilizing the world system and preserving the standard of international law as applicable to the conduct of nations. Implicitly, unilateralism weakens if not destroys the UN’s authority and integrity, and preeminence likewise. He is all business: “Recent events surrounding Syria have prompted me to speak directly to the American people and their political leaders. It is important to do so at a time of insufficient communication between our societies.”

This is not Cold-War rhetoric; he points to a more overarching record of common pursuit (something everyone needs to be reminded of): “Relations between us have passed through different stages. We stood against each other during the cold war. But we were also allies once, and defeated the Nazis together. The universal international organization—the United Nations—was then established to prevent such devastation from ever happening again.” His grasp of the significance of honoring the UN does not seem opportunistic, for he sees no alternative for the maintenance of international order, and reminds Americans that the Security Council veto was done at US insistence (although he uses the more polite term, “consent”): “The United Nations’ founders understood that decisions affecting war and peace should happen only by consensus, and with America’s consent the veto by Security Council permanent members was enshrined in the United Nations Charter. The profound wisdom of this has underpinned the stability of international relations for decades.” The warning is sounded (appropriately in light of Obama’s actions and the frequently voiced disparagements of the UN in Congress and public opinion—or when the topic of Israel is broached in this country): “No one wants the United Nations to suffer the fate of the League of Nations, which collapsed because it lacked real leverage. This is possible *if influential countries bypass the United Nations and take military action without Security Council authorization.*” [my italics] Obama’s run-up to war is precisely that, a deliberate undermining of the UN. That Putin has to remind Americans of the importance of the UN is somewhat embarrassing, how far we’ve come in conducting interventions, embargoes, and covert operations directed to regime change, all with impunity, none of which he has the grace to mention.

Instead, he comes right to the point, the *present*, in what to me represents a masterful summary (again I speak without apology in agreeing with one we are in the habit of demonizing): “The potential strike by the United States against Syria, despite strong opposition from many countries and major political and religious leaders, including the pope, will result in more innocent victims and escalation, potentially spreading the conflict far beyond Syria’s borders. A strike would increase violence and unleash a new wave of terrorism. It could undermine multilateral efforts to resolve the Iranian nuclear problem and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and further destabilize the Middle East and North Africa. It could throw the entire system of international law and order out of balance.” The words come like hammer-blows, each of the points deserving to be put in italics, and yet daily commentary in America is that of Russian obstructionism, the untenability of the UN, Russia, and China ganging up on America in the Security Council, coded—I submit—for placing checks on whatever seeks to arrest the US’s acting with impunity.

Putin's own analysis is realistic—US intervention in a *civil war* in which, by its reckoning, the opposition has admittedly extremist elements, yet it still shows partiality to them (once more he politely avoids identifying America by name has a source of weapons' support)—an analysis which sees the cry of democracy to be mere cant in justifying intervention: "Syria is not witnessing a battle for democracy, but an armed conflict between government and opposition in a multireligious country. There are few champions of democracy in Syria. But there are more than enough Qaeda fighters and extremists of all stripes battling the government. The United States Department of State has designated Al Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, fighting with the opposition, as terrorist organizations. The internal conflict, fueled by foreign weapons supplied to the opposition, is one of the bloodiest in the world."

Putin does not embellish the image of Assad ("there are few champions of democracy in Syria"), but rather, in the passage, appears motivated—as may be the case of his confronting the Chechen problem which he sees as extremism—by concerns that "there are more than enough Qaeda fighters and extremists of all stripes" in the opposition, in which case, paradoxically, *he is fighting America's problem for it*. Except for one thing. America, although invariably inconsistent in warring against its "enemies," as in the way it assisted the Taliban in Afghanistan against the then Soviets, and even today, refuses to come clean on the degree of extremist infiltration if not leadership of the Syrian rebels, and further, is able to downplay what Putin mentions, the "multireligious" conflict and related sectarian violence, is not simply intelligence-challenged (although 9/11 proved that it is), but that it willfully looks the other way because its attack on Assad goes well beyond either the now-presumed sterling character of the opposition or the use of chemical weapons, whichever side is responsible. Assad must go, because the US wants *in*—a semipermanent base of operations, or even permanent, by which to complete its control of a decisive area of geostrategic importance. Putin mentions the Middle East and North Africa (already replete with drone bases), but, and beyond wanting to stop the spread of extremism, his support of Assad has largely to do with America's potential for direct encroachment, or call it military readiness, on Russia and China, what I termed elsewhere, from that base an enlarging arc of influence, beginning with Southern Europe, and extending as far as the hegemonic vision of the US can carry.

On extremism ("the internal conflict...is one of the bloodiest in the world"), he says as much, concerning Russian fears: "Mercenaries from Arab countries fighting there, and hundreds of militants from Western countries *and even Russia* [my italics], are an issue of deep concern. Might they not return to our countries with experience acquired in Syria? After all, after fighting in Libya, extremists moved on to Mali. This threatens us all." When one looks closely at Obama's invoking national-security interests (killing those babies in Syria may lead next to the killing of ours), Putin has more reason for concern over the consequences for Russia of the Syrian civil war, as his foregoing question captures so well, than does the US. He is emphatic in setting forth an order of priorities: "From the outset, Russia has advocated peaceful dialogue enabling Syrians to develop a compromise plan for their own future. We are not protecting the Syrian government, but international law." And he goes on to explain: "We need to use the United Nations Security Council and believe that preserving law and order in today's complex and turbulent world is one of the few ways to keep international relations from sliding into chaos."

I wish his following words could be carved on the White House portico, or at least hung in the room off the Situation Room, where the Terror Tuesday confabs are held (or better, the Situation Room itself): *“The law is still the law, and we must follow it whether we like it or not. Under current international law, force is permitted only in self-defense or by the decision of the Security Council. Anything else is unacceptable under the United Nations Charter and would constitute an act of aggression.”* [my italics] Savor the words, “act of aggression”—forbidden throughout the length and breadth of the land, for a military attack on Syria is neither in self-defense nor approved by the Security Council. No wonder Obama finds it easier to deal with Cameron and Hollande. They tell him what he wants to hear. Not Putin: “No one doubts that poison gas was used in Syria. But there is every reason to believe it was used not by the Syrian Army, but by opposition forces, to provoke intervention by their powerful foreign patrons, who would be siding with the fundamentalists.” Then, notwithstanding Israel’s harsh criticism of the Russian UN proposal, and anxious for the attack on Syria to come off (primarily as a precedent for a similar attack on Iran), Putin states what should put Netanyahu in a dudgeon, although too hardened for that: “Reports that militants are preparing an attack—this time against Israel—cannot be ignored.” [Addendum to the preceding: Rouhani and Hollande have agreed to meet next week at the UN; Obama still is obsessed with setting preconditions for direct talks, and even then not necessarily at the top level, while Netanyahu throws cold water on anything to do with peace, Syria or Iran.]

In other words, it is Putin, not Obama, who is mindful of the destructive consequences of intervention, and he then states what most needs to be said (I think, for America’s own sake, which is very far from Obama’s position and that of the USG and public opinion): “It is alarming that military intervention in internal conflicts in foreign countries has become commonplace for the United States. Is it in America’s long-term interest? I doubt it. Millions around the world increasingly see America not as a model of democracy but as relying solely on brute force, cobbling together coalitions under the slogan ‘you’re either with us or against us.’” He is on a roll, truth coming like lightning bolts: “But force has proved ineffective and pointless. Afghanistan is reeling, and no one can say what will happen after international forces withdraw. Libya is divided into tribes and clans. In Iraq the civil war continues, with dozens killed each day. In the United States, many draw an analogy between Iraq and Syria, and ask why their government would want to repeat recent mistakes.” And he adds the frosting on the cake, bitter-tasting to Obama, his national-security advisers, most members of Congress, and a large part of the American public: “No matter how targeted the strikes or how sophisticated the weapons, civilian casualties are inevitable, including the elderly and children, *whom the strikes are meant to protect.*” [my italics]

In America, surgical strikes and other Pentagon jargon are a disguise for Nazi-like war plans—my, not his, observation, but Putin captures the drift of such reasoning: “The world reacts by asking: if you cannot count on international law, then you must find other ways to ensure your security. Thus a growing number of countries seek to acquire weapons of mass destruction. This is logical: if you have a bomb, no one will touch you. We are left with talk of the need to strengthen nonproliferation, when in reality this is being eroded.” This is among his most important points. Instead of intervention, global visions of hegemony, surveillance at home to cover violations of international law, how about nonproliferation, and realizing as well the moral vacuum created by contempt for that law, a vacuum filled by weapons of mass destruction? He

then says plaintively, “We must stop using the language of force and return to the path of civilized diplomatic and political settlement.” Hence he urges the need to pursue the path to peace through the Security Council and, optimistically, sees the hope of Obama’s cooperation in “steer[ing] the discussion back toward negotiations.”

What a difference in political-ideological atmosphere, this hope of Putin’s of transcending the Cold War, which I find very much with us, enlivened at every turn by America’s love affair with militarism. Putin is cautious: “If we can avoid force against Syria, this will improve the atmosphere in international affairs and strengthen mutual trust. It will be our shared success and open the door to cooperation on other issues.” Now, rather than the schoolboy slouching in the back row of the schoolroom, as Obama stupidly characterized him, Putin emerges as the *teacher* (in what might be thought a reversal of roles), the one imparting wisdom to an America hiding behind the cloak of Exceptionalism as it forcibly seeks to maintain a unilateral position of political-economic-ideological-military-cultural global dominance. He is speaking with knowledge of Obama’s address—a true joining of issues, which allows one to ascertain the differences in world outlook of the two leaders.

Despite initial courtesies, Putin does not hold back: “My working and personal relationship with President Obama is marked by growing trust. I appreciate this. I carefully studied his address to the nation on Tuesday. And I would rather disagree with a case he made on American exceptionalism, stating that the United States’ policy is ‘what makes America different. It’s what makes us exceptional.’ *It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation.* [my italics] There are big countries and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions and those still finding their way to democracy. Their policies differ, too. We are all different, but when we ask the Lord’s blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal.” Would that Obama understood this lesson, relevant to domestic and international politics alike.

My *New York Times* Comment (Sept. 11) on Michael D. Shears’ article on Obama’s address, “Planned as Call to Act, Obama’s Speech Became a Plea for Time,” follows:

The delaying tactic is not that of the Syrian government, but that of Obama, who, temporarily stymied, is biding his time, hoping that nothing comes of the Russian proposal, so that he can once again revert to form: i.e., bomb Syria. This president’s vision is so suffused in militarism as to make any of his moves, particularly the turn to Congress, calculated. If the UK had not bowed out, we would be up to our neck in war. His national-security advisers, to a person, are committed to so-called humanitarian intervention, as a cover for assuring continued American global preeminence.

If Syria’s chemical weapons are to be placed under international control, what of the US stockpile. Those we deem as enemies are compelled to submit (whether chemical or nuclear weapons), those who are “friends and allies,” including ourselves, no—a double standard laughable, were it not so serious. Iran, on the nuclear issue, No; Israel, of course, Yes.

Also, with the criticism of Syria’s chemical attack (still unproven to have been the Assad government), POTUS with a straight face fails to allude to his own program of armed drones for

targeted assassination. We kill children on a regular basis through collateral damage, signature strikes, and whenever civilian targets are involved. If we had bombed Syria, this would surely happen. The decision to do so, still on the table, is cold-blooded, sadistic, morally nihilistic, all aptly describing our president.

My *New York Times* Comment (Sept. 12) on Vladimir V. Putin's op. ed. article, "A Plea for Caution From Russia," follows:

USG and the American public are unlikely to give Mr. Putin's statement serious consideration. That's deeply regrettable. "We are not protecting the Syrian government, but international law." One may be skeptical, but Russia's position here is unassailable. The US by originally announcing unilateral plans for a military attack has denied even the legitimacy of the UN. We have become in the eyes of the world an outlaw nation. Putin raises serious objections to unilateral action, not least, the obvious point of destabilizing the Middle East, as itself raising the clear possibility of a wider conflagration. This is nowhere evident in Obama's thinking, as the remark on "exceptionalism" indicates.

Putin was too kind to point out that Obama on a regular basis personally authorizes targeted assassination, and in the conduct of interventions should by rights be summoned before the International Criminal Court. America's holier than thou attitude toward international politics is slowly but surely becoming resisted—the UK a straw in the wind; even NATO is not on board. My guess is that Obama will go ahead and take military action, with or without Congressional approval. His self-conceit of speaking for the world, as when he said that not he, but the world, has drawn the red line is maniacal and somewhat frightening, a weak ego clutching for the need to demonstrate strength, as meanwhile—Putin is certainly correct on that—civilian deaths will mount from such an attack. If the Kerry-Lavrov agreement does hold, America still wins in manifesting its hegemonic prowess; neither its own nor Israel's stockpile of chemical weapons is subject to arms control. And Obama will be back for another day; relinquishing the use of force is a hard *habit* to break.