

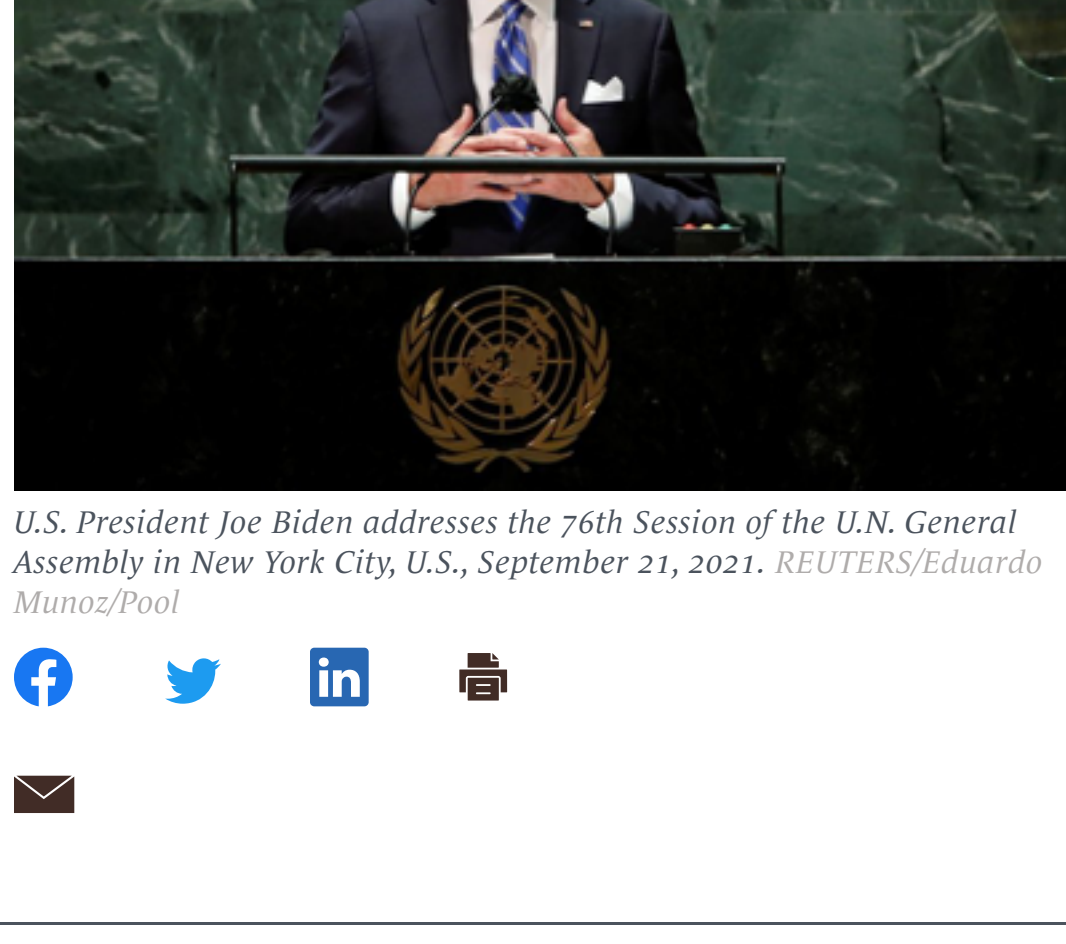
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Biden's Forceful UN Address: Let's Get to Work

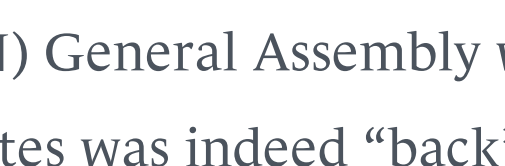
U.S. President Joe Biden made his first address before the UN General Assembly on Tuesday, September 21, 2021. His message, both to his domestic and foreign audiences, was clear: The United States is back and at the ready.

Blog Post by **Stewart M. Patrick**

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U.S. President Joe Biden addresses the 76th Session of the U.N. General Assembly in New York City, U.S., September 21, 2021. REUTERS/Eduardo Munoz/Pool



U.S. President Joe Biden's challenge in speaking to the seventy-sixth session of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly was to persuade the world that the United States was indeed “back” at the United Nations and committed to the path of constructive multilateralism. That image had been shaken by the precipitous U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan without international consultation and a growing suspicion that President Biden's “foreign policy for the [U.S.] middle class” was just “America First” in nicer wrapping. The president's [powerful address](#) should help reassure his global audience of his administration's commitment to multilateralism.

“We stand...at an inflection point in history,” Biden declared, a “decisive decade” that will determine the future of the twenty-first century. The “clear and urgent choice” before UN member states is whether they will collaborate to take the necessary steps on which their shared future depends, including in the battle against the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) and future pandemics, on the environmental calamity of climate change, and in the defense of dignity and human rights. “[I]nstead of continuing to fight the wars of the past”—an obvious allusion to Afghanistan—the Biden administration would collaborate with other countries on “the challenges that hold the keys to our collective future.” This U.S. commitment to multilateralism reflects a “fundamental truth of the twenty-first century,” namely “that our success is bound up in others succeeding as well.” Indeed, “our security, our prosperity, and our very freedoms are interconnected...as never before.”

Acting on these multilateral convictions, the Biden administration had reaffirmed the United States' commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization; elevated the Quad partnership (with Japan, Australia, and India); and strengthened partnerships with regional institutions like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the African Union, the European Union, and the Organization of American States. It had rejoined multilateral forums like the World Health Organization and treaties like the Paris Climate Agreement, and planned to run for a seat on the UN Human Rights Council. The United States is committed to lead, but it would do so less through the “example of our power” rather than through “the power of our example.” The United States would also always defend its vital interests; however, “U.S. military power must be [the country's] tool of last resort.” More to the point, military strength was often irrelevant to modern global problems: “Bombs and bullets cannot defend against COVID-19.”

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As [expected](#), the president highlighted three main themes: global health security, climate change, and human freedom. The United States has already devoted \$15 billion to pandemic response efforts and delivered 160 million of its promised 500 million vaccine doses to one hundred different countries, all with “no strings attached” (a veiled criticism of China's nakedly nationalistic vaccine diplomacy). Tomorrow, the president will host a global pandemic summit, focused on “saving lives now, vaccinating the world, and building back better.” Beyond seeking to strengthen COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX), the multilateral framework intended to ensure equitable global distribution of vaccines, President Biden promised to seek multilateral support for a standing Global Health Threats Council, so that the world would be prepared for when the next pandemic strikes.

The president also promised to lead on the existential threat of climate change, which he described—echoing UN Secretary-General António Guterres—as a “code red for humanity.” Biden appealed to all member states to “bring their highest possible ambitions” to the critical Glasgow climate change conference in November, touting his administration's April commitment to reduce U.S. greenhouse gas emissions by 50 to 52 percent from 2005 levels by 2030 (and to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050). Aware that he was also speaking to a domestic audience, including skeptical U.S. legislators on Capitol Hill where his climate-related legislation hangs in the balance, Biden insisted that his ambitious commitments presented an “enormous opportunity” to “invest in ourselves and our own futures,” promising “to create good, well-paying jobs for workers.” He also promised representatives of developing countries that he would double U.S. foreign aid to help them meet their climate needs, including adaptation, as part of the U.S. contribution to the agreed global target of mobilizing \$100 billion a year in climate finance.

Biden's third main theme, scattered throughout the speech, was the defense of fundamental human rights and democracy, including at the United Nations, where authoritarian powers like China are seeking to marginalize such concerns. “I am not agnostic about the future we want,” Biden declared. “The future will belong to those who embrace human dignity, not trample it.” Autocracies may crow that they have momentum on their side, he continued, but “the truth is, the democratic world is everywhere.” Its ideals continue to inspire activists struggling for freedom from Belarus to Myanmar, Cuba to Venezuela. No democracy, including the United States, is perfect. Despite these inevitable frustrations, “democracy remains the best tool we have to unleash full human potential,” and the Biden administration will continue to defend it—without apology. The defense and promotion of democracy, the president stressed, ought to include both a global effort to combat the cancer of corruption and cooperation among democratic states to ensure that miraculous technological breakthroughs in fields like biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing “are a force to empower people” rather than one to “deepen repression.”

The most intriguing portion of Biden's speech, arguably, was his nuanced discussion of relations between the United States and its main strategic adversaries (implicitly, China and Russia). “All of the major powers of the world have a duty, in my view, to carefully manage their relationships so [that] we do not tip from responsible competition to conflict.” The United States would continue to support weaker nations against the threat of aggression, but Biden stressed that “we are not seeking, say it again, we are not seeking a new Cold War or a world divided into rigid blocs.” Regardless of its “intense disagreements” on some issues with certain countries, the Biden administration is prepared to cooperate with any nation on shared challenges. This statement was both a riposte to China, which seems intent on conditioning cooperation on global issues (like climate change) to a softer U.S. geopolitical stance, and a reassuring signal to third countries worried about a new bipolar confrontation.

Biden closed his speech with a promise that the United States was back in the fold and with a forceful plea for bold multilateral action. “As we look ahead, we will lead,” he declared. “But we will not go it alone.” To his fellow leaders, he implored: “We cannot waste any more time. Let's get to work.”

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