

The Dispute over Double Standards

The Third Day of the General Debate at the 81st Session of the UN General Assembly

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Gaza Depends on Washington

The address of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was played from a recording, because his delegation had been denied US visas. Abbas spoke of a genocidal war in Gaza, warned that the very existence of the Palestinian people is now under threat, and appealed to Donald Trump to honour his commitment to prevent the annexation of Palestinian land. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took the podium as some delegations were leaving the hall, and called those walking out “moral cowards”. He argued that Israel had not committed genocide but prevented it, described the settlers in the West Bank as peaceful and law-abiding, accused Qatar of shaping the views of young people through Al Jazeera and Turkey of harbouring Hamas, and said that Israel has no greater ally than Trump.

Both speeches showed how much in the Palestinian question now depends on Washington. Abbas could not travel to New York because the United States refused visas to the Palestinian delegation. At the same time, it was to Trump that he addressed his appeal on annexation. Netanyahu stressed his closeness to the American president despite the protest of some delegations. In a dispute that on the first day served many states of the South as a measure of Western credibility, the United States remains the main addressee of expectations. European leaders did not speak with one voice. Irish Taoiseach Micheál Martin said the international community had failed Palestine, while Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis pointed to the need to disarm Hamas.

The Gulf War Seen by Iran’s Neighbours

Kuwait’s Crown Prince, Sheikh Sabah Al-Khalid Al-Sabah, spoke of Iranian missile and drone attacks on the Gulf states and Jordan. He accused Iran of using the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz as an instrument of pressure. Yemen’s representative, for his part, spoke of Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea. The day before, Masoud Pezeshkian had presented Iran as a victim of aggression. These speeches reveal two opposing assessments of the same war. Kuwait thanked Qatar and Pakistan for their mediation, and Yemen thanked the United States for its stance. None of these speakers pointed to Europe as the main mediator.

Portuguese Prime Minister Luís Montenegro described the energy crisis as a kind of “collective masochism”. He proposed a discussion of how oil prices are set, as they react strongly to speculation and swings in futures markets. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis spoke of the importance of freedom of navigation through international straits. This is an area in which the interests of Europe and of import-dependent states can meet. The President of the Comoros, Azali Assoumani, recalled that for the latter, open sea lanes also affect access to food.

Mutual Charges of Selectivity

Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša proposed an independent mechanism that would assess every year whether the international community's responses match the scale, duration and severity of the largest crises. Speaking of the unequal attention paid to victims, he pointed not only to the suffering of civilians in Palestine and Israel but also to mass violence in Nigeria. Barbados's Prime Minister Mia Mottley stressed the importance of rules that protect small states. These speeches show that criticism of the selective application of principles comes from many directions.

On the first day of the debate, some states of the South accused the West of selectivity over Gaza, and on the second Serbia raised a similar charge over Kosovo. Janša used the same argument to draw attention to crises that receive less attention. Each of these states points to a different example, but they raise a similar question about why the response to human suffering depends on location and political alliances. In this debate no one has a monopoly on accusing others of double standards.

Hungary's newly elected President András Baka condemned Russian aggression and invoked the Hungarian uprising of 1956, speaking of Ukrainians' right to freedom. For Poland this is a potentially important change in Budapest's position on the war. Against this background, it is worth returning to Nawrocki's speech of the previous day. The Polish President made accountability for crimes an important theme, but did not mention the International Criminal Court. Poland could speak with a stronger voice among middle powers if it consistently combined the call for accountability with the defence of the institutions of international law.

Africa Wants to Process Its Own Resources

Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa pointed to local production of lithium sulphate as a way of retaining a greater share of the value of mined raw materials. Bolivian President Rodrigo Paz spoke of moving beyond the mere extraction and export of tin. The Congo and Mozambique had made similar demands the day before. Resource-rich states want to build processing plants and jobs at home rather than confine themselves to selling raw materials. Ghanaian President John Mahama called for more equal terms of cooperation with Africa.

The concept of neocolonialism was popularised by Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, in his 1965 book "Neo-Colonialism. The Last Stage of Imperialism". Nawrocki used it the day before against Russia, even though the Soviet Union once presented itself as an ally of African independence movements. This gives Poland a language in which to talk about dependence and sovereignty, but language alone will not be enough. Nkrumah argued that Ghana need not side with either East or West. The Nigerian leader Nnamdi Azikiwe, known as "Zik", recalled in a 1962 speech the right of African states to "equality of sovereignty irrespective of size and population". A similar expectation of independent choice and equal treatment recurs today in the statements of many states of the South.

The President of the Comoros criticised France's policy in Africa and the linking of development aid to curbing migration. Poland may have a certain advantage in these conversations as a country without a colonial past in Africa. Nigerian Vice President Kashim Shettima, however, rejected setting development against climate protection, whereas Nawrocki spoke of the threats that ambitious climate policy poses to industry. The Polish offer will be more convincing if it also responds to expectations regarding financing for adaptation to climate change and access to technology.

The South Caucasus as a Route Between Asia and Europe

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan credited Trump with an important role in the agreement with Azerbaijan and spoke of plans for rail links between China, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Turkey and the European Union. Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze announced infrastructure investment worth \$7 billion. Together with the speeches of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan on the previous days, this outlines a region that wants to develop trade and transport links. For Poland, which has an interest in the development of the Middle Corridor, this is a reason for more active cooperation with the states of the region. The durability of the agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, however, can only be assessed once it has been implemented.

The third day of the debate shows that the charge of applying principles selectively does not divide the participants into one group of accusers and one group of accused. It is raised in relation to Gaza, Kosovo, Nigeria and other conflicts. Poland, which invokes international law in assessing Russian aggression, has good reason to defend these principles consistently, including in matters where the position of its closest allies differs. This would strengthen both its argument against Russia and its credibility in conversations with states beyond Europe.