

On the Rhetoric of the United Nations and the United States

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Commentary

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Sitting in the back of the room as the UN's member states negotiate the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) is a disorientating experience. That's partly because it's not a negotiation as Americans understand the term: it's a series of more or less unconnected national interventions on particular points of interest, while the actual drafting happens out of sight. It's also because Iran and North Korea are treated with at least as much formal respect as the United States and South Korea. Before last summer's ATT negotiations, I had naively expected that the North Korean diplomats, for example, would be just a touch embarrassed to be representing their regime, and that as a result they would try to fade into background. On the contrary—it's the U.S. that intervenes as little as possible, while the totalitarians speak up loud, proud, and often.

But it's mostly because of the sleep-inducing effect of UN-style rhetoric, which only a few nations have failed to master. Phrases like “colonial and alien domination” (meaning, of course, Israel and the United States), “right of resistance” (meaning Palestinian and Islamist terrorism), “balanced and objective criteria” (meaning that nothing should inconvenience human rights abusers), “open and inclusive negotiations” (meaning that the conference has to work entirely in plenary, because Iran and the other dictatorships do not want anything happening out of their sight), and the “disproportionate effect of armed violence on women, children, the elderly, and the disabled” (meaning that the speaker is very eager to sound progressive, either because they are Norway or because they are speaking on behalf of a Third World autocracy) roll off tongue after tongue.

It's disconcerting that the dictatorial nations are among the most effective dispellers of this nearly impenetrable fog of code words. UN press [releases](#) are surprisingly good at capturing the substance of what is said, but they cannot capture discordant tones. That is because every speaker gets a summary of about the same length, which diminishes the impact of the longer and more dictatorial rants. (Syria clearly does the best crazy act—if act it is—in the room, though Algeria also has much to be proud of in this regard.) But it also diminishes the impact of plain speaking, even when it's hypocritical. When

Venezuela spoke yesterday morning, for example, it disconcertingly pointed out that the draft ATT would prevent a nation under massive foreign attack from importing arms if there was a likelihood that the victim nation would commit any human rights violations in the course of defending itself. It was the sharpest point made in the debate, and Liechtenstein's response—which echoed David Bosco's foolish argument that I [summarized](#) on Monday—only made the democracies look even more woolly-headed.

Curiously, the other nation that does not use the UN style is the United States. When the U.S. delegation—normally, Assistant Secretary of State Tom Countryman—speaks, it is short and to the point. There are no code words, and while Countryman is far from discourteous, U.S. statements conspicuously lack the flowers and genuflections of many other delegations. The U.S. approach conveys the attitude that the purpose of negotiations is actually to negotiate something, and that the purpose of speech is to say something that will move the negotiations forward. It's the mentality of a very competent engineer, or of a nation with the presentational style of Jack Webb: just the facts, ma'am. True, the U.S. doesn't use code words partly because at the UN those code words stand for ideas of which it profoundly disapproves. But it's more than that.

At bottom, I'm convinced, the U.S. still retains something of its founding ambivalence toward the stylistic formalities of professional diplomacy, which is as much about concealing meaning as revealing it. American diplomacy, like America itself, is exceptional and individualistic, unwilling to adopt the conventions that others find simple and convenient. That is who we are, and it is a good thing—but only up to a point, because the engineer's mentality can all too easily lead to the belief that everything can be fixed through negotiations, if only you try hard enough. The [example](#) of our nuclear negotiations with Iran should be enough to dispel that belief, but national myths die very hard. We are far too slow to recognize that for many nations, the point of negotiations is to spend a pleasant few weeks in New York, to be ranked as an equal to the U.S., to waste time, or just to show up.

No one believes in American [exceptionalism](#) more than I do, but inherent in exceptionalism, after all, is recognizing that the other guy may have an utterly different reason for sitting down at the table than you do. Right now, we have the worst of both worlds: an administration that doesn't believe in exceptionalism, and a diplomacy that too often embodies exceptionalism's most unreflective and self-absorbed aspects. If it didn't, I wouldn't be sitting here at the United Nations listening to Syria rant about the need to control the supply of arms to terrorists.

