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Obama's State of the Union Address: Top Five Commitments for a Free, Secure, and Prosperous America

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When President Barack Obama takes the podium to deliver his State of the Union address on January 25, he has an opportunity to turn the page on a foreign policy and national security agenda. The Obama Doctrine, which guided the first two years of his Administration, put a premium on downplaying American sovereignty, peddling the virtues of “soft power,” and cheerleading for a more restrained and humbled America.

The President's approach has proven to be far short of what is needed to keep the nation safe, free, and prosperous. It is time for a new doctrine—and new priorities. Here are the top five that should be in the President's speech.

1. A Commitment to Peace and Prosperity Through Strength. Transnational threats, rampant anti-Americanism, nuclear proliferation, and regional conflict are dangers to American security, liberties, and prosperity. To meet them, America should actively defend its interests by actively defending itself.

Soft power is not enough. The U.S. needs a strong military; anything less puts its troops at risk and leaves Americans vulnerable. Obama should call for defense budgets that average \$720 billion per year (adjusted for inflation) for each of the next five fiscal years in addition to the funding needed for ongoing contingency operations. He should also pledge to make the defense budget as efficient as

possible and reinvest dollars saved from reforms in the military to offset the cost of modernizing and developing next-generation equipment.

Likewise, maintaining adequate defense spending does not relieve the President of his responsibility to get runaway federal spending under control. He should pledge to reduce the overall budget by at least \$170 billion in fiscal year (FY) 2012.

2. A Renewed Commitment to Protect and Defend the American People. The President ought to acknowledge that the U.S. gained nothing from the New START nuclear agreement. Speaking to the Russian Duma, Russian Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov reportedly stated that “Russia today has fewer nuclear warheads and delivery systems than the quantity set by the new Russian–American treaty.”

All New START achieves is unilateral U.S. cuts. At the same time, the Duma has proposed asserting that the treaty limits missile defenses and U.S. conventional strategic strike capabilities—in direct contradiction to the U.S. interpretation of the treaty.

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Since Moscow does not agree on what the treaty says, Obama should declare that he will not exchange the instruments of ratification that would put the treaty in force. Instead, he should commit to a “protect and defend” strategy that emphasizes missile defense, nuclear modernization, strong conventional strike forces, and aggressive counterproliferation. This should include a commitment to deploy a multilayered missile defense, an urgent national priority; deploying 44 ground-based interceptors; and funding missile defense activities in FY 2012 at no less than \$11 billion.

3. A Commitment to End Iran’s Nuclear Weapons Ambitions Once and for All. Even the White House now acknowledges that its “charm offensive” with Iran failed. While the Administration now talks tough on Iran sanctions, it has not followed through with tough action in actually applying sanctions against foreign companies, especially if such sanctions ruffle diplomatic feathers in China.

For example, in July 2010, President Obama signed the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Disinvestment Act, which helped to put more teeth into Iran sanctions by authorizing penalties against companies that sell gasoline to Iran or invest in Iran’s oil and gas industry. Yet many foreign energy firms, particularly Chinese firms, continue to make deals with Iran without being sanctioned.

The Administration should back up its rhetoric on Iran sanctions with concrete actions against these firms. Effective sanctions are a critical part of the comprehensive action that is needed to bring down the regime, bring freedom to Iran, and end the threat of nuclear proliferation from Tehran once and for all.

4. An Unshakable Commitment to Finish the Job in Afghanistan. The Administration’s equivocal commitments and premature discussion of significant force reductions in Afghanistan in 2011 sent mixed signals to America’s friends and enemies. Winning in Afghanistan—preventing a Taliban takeover and ensuring that the country can govern and defend itself—is vital to U.S. interests. Preventing a resurgent al-Qaeda and the next 9/11 and thwarting the spread of violent Islamist extremism in an important part of the world are essential to reducing terrorist threats to U.S. national security.

The White House review on Afghanistan released last December demonstrates that additional U.S. troops deployed to Afghanistan this year are beginning to make a difference in the direction of the war. The President should unequivocally commit sufficient U.S. combat forces until the job is done and empower his military commanders to calibrate the level of U.S. forces according to conditions on the ground, not arbitrary dates on the calendar.

5. A Real Commitment to Free Trade. The President should admit that current trade policies are “protectionist,” but they don’t protect Americans. They restrict the freedom to buy or sell in the world marketplace for goods and services. They raise the prices Americans pay for everything from the cars they drive to the sugar in their coffee. They hurt Americans through taxes that subsidize those who are better connected or more powerful politically. These policies in turn destroy jobs rather than protecting them.

Obama should commit to a new course, submitting to Congress for immediate ratification the already-negotiated free trade agreements with South Korea, Colombia, and Panama. These agreements are not perfect; they will still leave in place many restrictions on Americans’ freedom. But they are better than the status quo.

Obama should direct U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk to take immediate steps to revitalize negotiations within the World Trade Organization aimed at concluding the Doha Round of multilateral trade talks by the end of 2011. The President should also announce a bold free trade vision for the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Dump the Obama Doctrine. These five actions are the right first step in dumping the Obama Doctrine in favor of a doctrine that makes more sense for America—a doctrine grounded in the likes of George Washington’s first State of the Union address, which reminded: “To be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace.”

This set of policies is consistent with the ideals of the Monroe Doctrine and committed to the principles of republican self-government as well as Ronald Reagan’s mantra “peace through strength”—

the strategy that revitalized both the U.S. military and the U.S. economy. Announcing steps that shift the Administration from managing America's decline to leading America's renaissance would turn just another State of the Union address into a truly historic moment.

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