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Counter-Questions on Syria: Obama Brushes Aside International Law

By Stephen Gowans

September 18, 2013

The US state is above international law, according to US president Barack Obama. In an address announcing that he was referring to the US Congress the decision to take military action against Syria, Obama declared that the United States needs to violate international law in order to enforce “the international system” and “international rules.”

The international “system” and “rules” Obama referred to, which he apparently intended his audience to construe as “international law,” is not, in fact, international law, but rules Obama himself has unilaterally drawn up, and through rhetorical sleight of hand, attempted to pass off as international law. Obama has no regard for international law. The very act Obama proposes—waging war on Syria without UN Security Council authorization—is a flagrant violation of the authentic international system Obama deceptively claims he wishes to uphold. Obama has arrogated onto himself the powers and responsibilities of world ruler. He sets the rules, decides when they’re broken, and metes out the punishment.

The US president justified his self-elevation to the post of world emperor on moral grounds, arguing that the United States must punish heinous acts (though only those, real or imagined, of countries that are not US satellites; the heinous acts of satellite countries are allowed to continue with impunity, and often, US assistance.) In his statement, he asked:

- What message will we send if a dictator can gas hundreds of children to death in plain sight and pay no price?
- What's the purpose of the international system that we've built if a prohibition on the use of chemical weapons that has been agreed to by the governments of 98 percent of the world's people...is not enforced?
- If we won't enforce accountability in the face of this heinous act, what does it say about our resolve to stand up to others who flout fundamental international rules? To governments who would choose to build nuclear arms? To terrorists who would spread biological weapons? To armies who carry out genocide?

Laying aside the realities that: there is no hard evidence that the Syrian president was behind the heinous act and that it seems more likely that the opposition, Washington's ally, was; that appointing to itself the moral duty to punish the perpetrator is rather rich coming from a country that has authored multiple heinous acts around the globe—and on an infinitely grander scale; that the agreement of other governments not to use chemical weapons has no relevance to what goes on in Syria, which has not signed onto the Chemical Weapons Convention (and neither have US allies Egypt and Israel); we might put these counter-questions to ourselves:

- What message will we, the world's 99 percent, send if a president can autocratically appoint to himself the right to bomb other countries without justification and without legitimate authority, and pay no price?
- What's the purpose of the international system if a prohibition on the unlawful use of force that has been agreed to by the governments of 100 percent of the world's people (the UN Charter) is ignored with impunity?
- If we, the 99 percent, won't enforce accountability in the face of this act of aggression against Syria, which is to be carried out in brazen defiance of the international system, what does it say about our resolve to stand up to others who flout fundamental international rules? To a country that threatens non-nuclear countries with nuclear arms (as the United States does, reserving the right of first-strike against any country)? To a government which terrorizes civilians through bombing raids, "shock and awe" and drone attacks? To states that carry out genocide through sanctions of mass destruction (as the United States did in Iraq)?

Not only is Washington willing to brush aside international law when the UN Charter gets in the way of its foreign policy interests, it is also willing to toss evidence, reason and logic aside when they threaten its pretexts for war.