



## American Exceptionalism from Unilateralism to Decline

## L'exceptionnalisme américain de l'unilatéralisme au déclin

Dr. Amel LAHLOUH

Ali Lounici University-Blida2- (Algeria)

a.lahlouh@blida2.dz

### Résumé:

The present paper deals with American Exceptionalism from unilateralism to decline. After World War II, the rise of the United States to superpower status exaggerated its self-perceived virtuosity in world affairs, which generated more acts of unilateralism in its foreign relations and international law attitudes. Yet, in recent years however many have suggested that the United States might be losing its edge in world affairs. Increasing economic power of China during the recent decades alongside with declining share of the United States in the global production and international trade in the beginning of the 21st century has led to a change in the geopolitical landscape of the world and emergence of the "Group of Two", or simply G2.

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### Abstract :

La présente recherche traite l'exceptionnalisme Américain d'unilatéralisme au déclin. Après la seconde guerre mondiale, la montée des Etats Unis au statut de superpuissance a exagéré sa virtuosité auto-perçue dans les affaires mondiales, ce qui a généré plus d'actes d'unilatéralisme dans ses relations étrangères et ses attitudes en droit international. Pourtant, ces dernières années, beaucoup ont suggéré que les Etats Unis pourraient perdre leur avantage dans les affaires mondiales. La puissance économique croissante de la Chine au cours de ses dernières décennies ainsi que la part décroissante des Etats Unis dans la production mondiale et le commerce international au début du 21e siècle ont conduit à un changement dans le paysage géopolitique du monde et à l'émergence du groupe des deux (G2).

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## Introduction

This article is about of American exceptionalism: from unilateralism to decline. The concept of American exceptionalism has a long history and has been applied to a whole range of features that are unique to US society, particularly its history, identity, and culture (Lipset 1996; Madsen 1998). By American exceptionalism I mean the Americans shared conception of themselves as elect and their representation of America as the chosen nation destined by providence to fulfil the process of history and redeem the world. Such a belief in American exceptionalism has been widespread in the political culture and among the general American population. It is a belief articulated by every American president and held on to by every American citizen. This expression of American exceptionalism has been formulated and re-formulated throughout American history, from John Winthrop's "City upon a Hill" sermon to Abraham Lincoln's "last best hope on earth" to Woodrow Wilson's mission to spread democracy to Ronald Reagan's "shining city on a hill" to nearly every post-September 11 speech of George W. Bush.

In recent years, however, many have suggested that the United States might be losing its edge in world affairs. Thus to recount the evolution of the concept of American exceptionalism and to give a comprehensive account of the diverse meanings it has assumed over time, then to assess direct challenges the idea of American exceptionalism depending on whether these challenges come from competitor countries (e.g., China) is beyond the scope of this article.

### 1. "American Exceptionalism" in the literature

American exceptionalism" is a term used to describe the belief that the United States is an extraordinary nation with a special role to play in human history; a nation that is not only unique but also superior. The term "American exceptionalism" is attributed to Alexis de Toqueville, who noted that the United States held a special place among nations, because it was as a country of immigrants and the first modern democracy (Tocqueville 1954).

Yet the idea of America as an exceptional entity can be traced back to the earliest colonial times. Jack P. Greene's analysis of a wealth of contemporary materials has established that by "the beginning of the nineteenth century the idea of America as an exceptional entity had long been an integral component in the identification of America." Many scholars of the belief in American exceptionalism argue that it forms one of the core elements of American national identity and American nationalism. Deborah Madsen, for example, contends that exceptionalism is "one of the most important concepts underlying modern theories of American cultural identity." It is a central part of the American belief system or what Benedict Anderson calls its "imagined community."

On the most general level, 'American exceptionalism' refers to the belief:

"that the United States differs qualitatively from other developed nations, because of its unique origins, national credo, historical evolution, and distinctive political and religious institutions" (Koh 2005, p. 225).

The phrase has ever since held a firm place in the American collective memory exemplified by its more contemporary resurrection in Presidential speeches. See Kennedy (1961) and Reagan. There have since been numerous variations of this theme, among them America as: mankind's last best hope, beacon on a hill, god's own country.

The idea of America as an exceptional entity dates back to colonial times. Its roots can be found in the thought of Puritan settlers who regarded the North American continent as a promised land where a new Canaan could be built as a model for the rest of the world. The earliest expression of this belief that continues to live on in American public memory comes from John Winthrop, a Puritan leader and first governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony. Winthrop delivered a lay sermon

aboard the Arbella, during its passage to New England in 1630, in which he declared that his fellow settlers “must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us.”

Winthrop’s words were circulated in manuscript form and have since become one of the main formative texts of American self-identity and meaning. Inherent in this notion of the city on a hill is the belief that the American colonists, and those who have followed them, were uniquely blessed by God to pursue His work on Earth and to establish a society that would provide this beacon for the betterment of all humankind.

American exceptionalism, however, has not only religious but also secular roots. The American Revolution and the formative years of the new Republic reinforced the idea that the United States was a chosen nation which would be an experiment in human society. In his influential revolutionary pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776), Thomas Paine argued that it was America’s separateness and difference from the Old World that demanded its independence. Paine saw America as a special land where humankind could “begin the world over again” by establishing a political society built on new, progressive ideas. The framers of the Constitution built on this idea in 1787. Theirs was to be an ambitious political experiment. The United States would be a society based on a republican system of government ensuring the preservation of certain individual rights. Although they were relatively pessimistic about its chances, the framers’ greatest hope was that the constitutional framework they had created would allow the United States to develop over time into the most perfect republican society in the world.

Exceptionalists admit that the United States has a certain moral responsibility for the fate of people living in other countries. As such, they advocate international activism and interventionism in a wide variety of global situations. They do not concede to any clear, universally accepted international code of foreign policy behavior. Their chief belief is that the United States should advance principally American values in its foreign policy. Two main strands of exceptionalist thought have influenced U.S. foreign policy. One is that of the United States as an exemplar nation, as reflected in ideas such as the “city upon a hill,” nonentangling alliances, “anti-imperialism,” “isolationism,” and “Fortress America.” The other, often more dominant strand is that of the missionary nation, as represented by the ideas of “manifest destiny,” “imperialism,” “internationalism,” “leader of the free world,” Both strands have been present throughout the history of U.S. foreign relations.

## **2. Exceptionalism and Unilateralism**

Exceptionalism and unilateralism are both used to describe a specific observable pattern of behavior. To quote Malone and Khong (p. 14):

“U.S. exceptionalism can be seen as a widely held conviction among Americans that the United States, by virtue of its unique attributes, has a special destiny among nations. The U.S. belief in a national mission at the international level is an important impulse for its unilateral action. ”

Malone and Khong describe exceptionalism as one of the causes for unilateralism. Another facet of American exceptionalism arises in the tendency to engage in messianism abroad. American foreign policy sometimes takes up crusadelike causes for ends that are perceived as just and noble. U.S. policymakers conclude that they must bring the benefits of American ideals and institutions to other, less fortunate, peoples. Such feelings blend the traits of the American self-image of political, moral, and ideological superiority to produce within the American political culture a tendency to engage in messianic campaigns.

There emerges a missionary-like compulsion in U.S. foreign policy ambitions to recreate the world in the American image, to establish models of governance grounded in American values and democratic institutions, by force if necessary. Such attitudes can foster a sense of paternalism. More

ominously, they breed resentment from other societies who see the United States as attempting to impose its cultural values and political lifestyle upon them. In the extreme, such a doctrine of internationalized manifest destiny can become the political rationalization for unlawful U.S. intervention. Witness, during the second half of the twentieth century, U.S. involvement in Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Cuba (1961), the Dominican Republic (1965), Chile (1973), Nicaragua (1981–1984), Grenada (1983), Panama (1989), and Serbia (Kosovo) (2000).

The Cold War ended with a whimper, not the civilization-ending “bang” some analysts predicted. The Soviet Union simply chose to withdraw from the superpower competition. With the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union, the United States became incontrovertibly the world’s dominant economic-military power (a title it had actually had for much of the Cold War). Without an apparent foe to challenge its security, the major question confronting U.S. foreign policy was what would succeed the Cold War’s bipolar balance of power. The issue among academics and political commentators was whether the United States should (1) emphasize its dominant position as a “unipolar” global power, or (2) seek a leading role in a tripolar or multipolar system.

The conservative commentator Charles Krauthammer advocated the former. Krauthammer defined “unipolar” as meaning the United States should act unilaterally in resolving international matters that threatened its national interests. Acknowledging that the United States had lost the dominant economic position it had held during the early Cold War years, he nevertheless asserted that America remained the principal center of the world’s economic production. An aggressive, determined U.S. foreign policy, backed by the world’s greatest military prowess, Krauthammer argued, could dominate world politics. Perhaps in the future the United States might become the largest partner in a multipolar world; until then, however, he wanted Washington leaders to continue acting unilaterally. He concluded that “Our best hope for safety is in American strength and will, the strength and will to lead a unipolar world, unashamedly laying down the rules of world order and being prepared to enforce them.” It would be a Pax Americana in which the world would acquiesce in a benign American hegemony.

Other analysts envisioned a multipolar post–Cold War world, probably comprised of three or four power centers, in which the United States would remain the most affluent and powerful but would not be hegemonic. Joseph Nye, for example, suggested that a U.S. long-term unilateral hegemony was “unlikely because of the diffusion of power through transnational interdependence.” Preferring the term “multilevels of power,” Nye endorsed preserving a strong military but predicted that the United States would not be able to dominate or direct the economic and political centers in an interdependent world. Thus, Washington should cooperate with like-minded nations in meeting such international concerns as conflicts between world markets, the acquisition by small nations of unconventional but destructive weapons, the international drug trade, environmental dangers of technological society, and diseases that can spread across continents.

The self-image of the post–Cold War United States rested on the misconception that the disappearance of the Soviet Union left it the same kind of power it had wielded during the Cold War, when the possession of a vast nuclear arsenal was the measure of its special status in a bipolar international system. With the bipolar system gone, however, the U.S. nuclear potential became all but meaningless as a determinant of its status in the world. Instead, America’s power in the new international system derived from its huge economic potential and unmatched cultural influence in addition to its military establishment, supported by defense spending that was greater than that of all other nations combined. America’s new predominance thus was different from the superpower variety, as conveyed in the French-invented term “hyperpower,” implying excess without clear purpose.

Unilateralist tendencies threatened important accomplishments of American diplomacy after the end of the superpower rivalry. The United States took the lead in such achievements of multilateral

diplomacy as the negotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the establishment of the World Trade Organization, the provision of energy assistance to North Korea in return for the abandonment of its nuclear weapons program, and other international agreements recognizing the growing importance of dimensions of security other than military. As evidenced by the repudiation by the United States of the Kyoto Protocol to reverse global warming, of the International Criminal Court designed to deter crimes of genocide, and of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, those achievements proved liable to relapse to the obsolete superpower mentality. The United States had to recognize that, because of the increased relevance of economic and environmental as well as political constraints, the nation was in important ways less powerful than it had been as one of the two superpowers. America's transition from a superpower to the leading "normal" power marked the final demise of superpower diplomacy.

### **3. Exceptionalism in Decline**

In 1975, following the fall of Saigon, the sociologist Daniel Bell declared "The End of American Exceptionalism." He argued that the "American Century . . . foundered on the shoals of Vietnam." Bell concluded:

"Today, the belief in American exceptionalism has vanished with the end of empire, the weakening of power, the loss of faith in the nation's future." The chastening experience of Vietnam had made Americans realize that "We are a nation like all other nations." p. 25-6.

The experience of the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the other "traumas" of the 1960s and early 1970s caused many Americans to doubt or even cease to believe that their nation's actions were consistent with the values and principles upon which their society was supposed to function. Following Vietnam, Americans suffered what was labeled a "crisis of confidence" concerning the future of their nation and its purpose in the world. But the belief in American exceptionalism was not destroyed by the experiences of Vietnam and Watergate. Indeed, each post-Vietnam president consistently attempted to bolster American self-confidence and revive the perceived moral legitimacy of U.S. foreign policy, usually by rhetorically justifying actions in terms consistent with the belief in American exceptionalism.

As critics of American power, expansion, or empire entered the twenty-first century, they were using many of the same arguments that George Washington, John Quincy Adams, Mark Twain, William Borah, and J. William Fulbright put forth in earlier periods. Broadly defined to mean the aggressive use of power, the denial of self-determination abroad, militarism, or actions inconsistent with a republican form of government, American imperialism has a long tradition, but so does its anti-imperial counterpoint. Clearly, antiimperialists, isolationists, doves, and others opposed to the excessive use of power or the extension of U.S. influence have been on the defensive as American leaders have tallied up an impressive array of territorial holdings, military interventions, proxy governments, and economic opportunities. One can ponder, however, how much more expansive the reach of American power or the extent of American militarism would have been without critics at home challenging the establishment and augmentation of "empire" at all steps along the way.

"The price of empire," J. William Fulbright remarked during the Vietnam War, "is America's soul, and that price is too high." Those words could just as easily have been uttered by John Quincy Adams at the turn of the nineteenth century. As America goes abroad in the future, in search of markets, bases, or even monsters to slay, one can be reasonably certain that there will be significant forces at home questioning and protesting against such extension of U.S. power, as there have been for more than two centuries.

Increasingly, many foreign sources have begun to challenge the notion of American exceptionalism. Critics of unilateralism complained that the approach indicated a failure to see the fundamental limits of American power, even in a one-superpower world. The critics achieved a measure of

vindication with the terrorist attack on the United States on 11 September 2001. The assaults on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon exposed America's vulnerability to a new destabilizing force: global terrorism. The Bush administration, while not disavowing its unilateralist inclinations, appeared to recognize the desirability of a "global coalition" to meet a newly recognized challenge that largely ignored the traditional international power structure. There were differences of opinion inside and outside the administration on how best to wage the struggle against terrorism, but on one thing all could agree: The United States could not do it alone.

The Russian president Vladimir Putin wrote:

"It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional whatever the motivation. There are big countries and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions and those still fighting for their way to democracy. Their policies differ, too. We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord's blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal."

Thus, according to Putin, the United States is not exceptional; it is merely one among many equals. Thus, according to Putin, the United States is not exceptional; it is merely one among many equals given that the evolving world order entails constant competition between powerful countries, it is unlikely that the idea of American exceptionalism will ever be without some form of national or international challenge (China, Russia, Iran.)

Increasing economic power of China during the recent decades alongside with declining share of the United States in the global production and international trade in the beginning of the 21st century has led to a change in the geopolitical landscape of the world and emergence of the "Group of Two", or simply G2.

China became the leader in commodity exports in 2015 and became a dominant player in international trade. China's absolute nominal GDP reaches USD 14 092 million (with a share of 16.1% on world GDP, second place behind the US (USD 20 412 million with 23.3% share of world GDP)). The absolute GDP by purchasing power parity is higher in China (USD 23 159 million) compared to the US (USD 19 390 million). (Statistics Times, 2018). The middle class is growing steadily: in 2002 80 million people belonged to the middle class in China, and in 2020 the middle class is expected to reach 700 million citizens of China, which will be about half of the total population. (Ibid, 2019) China is the world's largest exporter with an annual export volume of USD 2,263.33 million, compared to the US exports of USD 1,546.72 million in the second place. (Ibid) According to evaluation by some of the Chinese scientists, China's national economic power had surpassed that of the US in 2014: China has been the world's low-cost manufacturing centre and is becoming an export-oriented global technology hub. (Z. Suisheng, D. Guo, (2019, p. 9-21).

Empirical studies with the use of econometric models have shown that China's economic influence has indeed increased, however, the America still holds leading position in all stock, credit, energy and commodity markets, and the US has remained the dominant power in the global economy. Therefore, there is still no unified understanding of the balance in the scale of the two economies in scientific literature. (Zhang,Lei, Kutan,(2019, p. 47-56).

The vision of its absolute dominance in the global economy in the US has come into conflict with the growing imbalance in bilateral trade with China, increasing competitiveness of high-tech companies based in the PRC, and an increase in China's investments exports. The US officials state that China is pursuing unfair trade policies, exploiting the benefits of trade liberalization and WTO membership, while at the same time keeping its domestic market safeguarded against foreign competition by providing subsidies and facilitating export through currency devaluation. The US accuses China of stealing scientific and technical knowledge and technologies from the American

companies, violating the intellectual property rights and neglecting environmental protection requirements.

At the same time, researchers point out that when trying to “make America great again” D. Trump led the US to a direct violation of international law and multilateral agreements, guided exceedingly only by national interests. The protectionist trade policy of the US has been referred to as the policy of national egoism within the framework of the economic patriotism concept <sup>[6]</sup> and even economic terrorism. (Savinov, Zelenuk, Taranovskaja, Orlova, Skurova, (2019, p. 36-51).

### **Conclusion**

In the present article, we have attempted to demonstrate American exceptionalism from unilateralism to decline. Most historians agree that Americans are not unique in their belief that theirs is an exceptional nation. Many, if not all, countries have shared such national vanity at some time or another in their histories. The French mission civilisatrice, the British Empire, and the Third Reich, for example, were all accompanied by their own versions of exceptionalism. Americans are clearly not alone in holding exceptionalist beliefs. Neither are they unique in pursuing foreign policies that are informed by those cultural beliefs. In all countries policymaking is based to a certain extent on assumptions formed from unique elements of national culture.

Throughout U.S. history the tension between the exemplary and missionary strands of American exceptionalism have been among the defining characteristics of foreign policy. They have survived challenges to their continued acceptance, such as the imperialist debate of the 1890s and the defeat in Vietnam. They form a core element of American national identity, and will continue to provide the cultural and intellectual framework for the making of U.S. foreign policy. Foreign observers in particular often regard with contempt or confusion the use of exceptionalist rhetoric by U.S. policymakers. But if we are to truly understand the ways in which U.S. foreign policy is conducted, it is essential that we take seriously the intellectual and cultural framework in which it is made.

The greatest trade war in economic history can result in a change in the international trade architecture, slow-down of financial markets. The countries can be divided into two blocks supporting the US or China, and at the same time, forming the mega-alliances of economies, as well as regional currency zones. The Asia's role in globalization processes and the development of global supply chains is likely to strengthen. The US strives to weaken its main competitor and maintain dominance in the global arena: in the economy, politics and the national security.

The current foreign trade policy of the US aims to slow down the still rapid economic growth of the PRC and its growing importance in the world economy. The China's government in its turn has a goal to achieve leadership in robotics, biotechnology and artificial intelligence. It will provide financial support to high-tech industries, and will do everything possible not to let the US stop or slow down the modernization and digitalization of the China's economic race.

The current situation in US-Chinese trade relations is referred to as the Cold Trade War. The common economic interests of both countries are more significant than disputes. The mutual interdependence of both economies has led to negotiations that will result in a new "fairer" trade agreement.

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