

Globalization, the Obama Administration and the Refashioning of US Exceptionalism

Robert G. Patman,
University of Otago,
New Zealand

Laura Southgate,
University of Otago
New Zealand

Not for citation

Professor Robert G. Patman,
Department of Politics,
University of Otago,
Email: robert.patman@otago.ac.nz
Youtube channel:
<http://www.youtube.com/user/RobertPatman/feed>
Twitter: [twitter.com/#!/Robert Patman](https://twitter.com/#!/Robert_Patman)

Globalization, the Obama Administration and the Refashioning of US Exceptionalism

Robert G. Patman and Laura Southgate

ABSTRACT

The Obama leadership has seemingly gone further than previous administrations in recognizing that globalization has fundamentally reshaped the structure of world politics, and made the idea of US unilateralism deeply problematic. In the words of Susan Rice, while US leadership in the world “is necessary it's rarely sufficient”. But the Obama team’s fresh emphasis on diplomacy, its tilt towards multilateralism and its desire to lighten the US’ global military footprint has not led to the abandonment of US exceptionalism. Rather, US exceptionalism has been reframed in terms of the resilience and power of the American democratic and economic example in an interconnected world. History, the Obama administration contends, is on the side of the American democratic political system. In contrast to authoritarian rival states, the US democratic model is not only more prosperous and stable, but is also able to more successfully adapt to the pressures and opportunities of globalization.

Compared with previous post-Cold War era presidents, the Obama leadership has gone much further in acknowledging the constraints of globalization on United States (US) foreign policy. The process of globalization involves the intensification of technologically driven links on a worldwide basis. After two unsuccessful wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, the Obama administration believes ‘the simple truth’ of the 21st Century is that ‘the boundaries between people are overwhelmed by our connections’. A radical reshaping of the international landscape has prompted the administration to rethink the idea of US exceptionalism, an informal ideology that endows Americans with a pervasive faith in the country’s founding liberal principles and the conviction that the US has a special destiny among nations. Convinced America can no longer meet the threats of the 21st Century alone, the Obama administration contends that what makes American global leadership exceptional is its ability to work with international institutions and uphold the rule of law. While this new form of US exceptionalism puts less emphasis on unilateral military force, it differentiates America from less democratic great powers on the international stage.

GLOBALIZATION, STATE SOVEREIGNTY, AND SECURITY

In the last three decades, globalization, a restless and overarching ‘mega-trend’, has been radically reshaping the international landscape. Globalization could be broadly defined as the intensification of technologically driven links between societies, institutions, cultures, and individuals on a worldwide basis. It should be stressed that this process began almost a decade before the end of the Cold War. In the early 1980s, the US and a number of other capitalist states underwent scientific revolutions in micro-electronic and communications technology (Ionescu, 1991, pp. 11-12). But the political impact of these changes in changing the terms of Soviet-American competition was somewhat masked by state-centred explanations for the demise of the Cold War, including the claim the collapse of Soviet communism meant that America had ‘won the Cold War’ (Bush, 1992, p. 73). According to McGraw and Held, the process of globalization has two interrelated dimensions. On the one hand, the concept of globalization represents a set of processes, which generate linkages and interconnections beyond the scope of delineated physical and human borders and therefore contributes to the de-territorialisation of social interaction (Held and McGrew, 1993, p. 292; Hughes, 2002, p. 424). On the other hand, globalization also involves a reinvigoration ‘in the levels of interaction, interconnectedness and interdependence between the states and societies, which constitute the modern world community’ (Held and McGrew, 1993, p. 292). Overall, globalization implies ‘a shift in geography’ whereby borders have become increasingly porous and where distances, either physically or representationally, have been dramatically reduced in the time taken to cross them (Scholte, 2001, p.14). As a consequence, the world is perceived as a smaller place as issues of the environment,

economics, politics and security intersect more deeply at more points than previously was the case (Clark, 1997, p. 15).

However, analysts have been divided on the impact of globalization on the sovereign state in the realm of security. Three rival perspectives are evident. According to the hyperglobalists like Kenichi Ohmae, the growing interconnectedness of national economies through globalization gradually negates the significance of territorial boundaries and paves the way for the demise of the sovereign nation-state (Held and McGrew, 1999, p. 4). The hyperglobalists imply that one of the crucial effects of globalization has been to reduce and eventually eliminate the space for states to manage national security policy. With the emergence of a borderless world, national governments are said to have little choice but to accept that the security agenda is shifting from one centred on the military capability of a state towards that of common or co-operative security. Steps by the international community in the direction of humanitarian intervention in places like Somalia, Bosnia, East Timor, and the Solomon Islands are seen as symptomatic of a move away from the sanctity of the state as the central focus in security concerns. Such a perspective, however, seems to assume that the notion of state sovereignty is a static one and that the constraints of globalization are experienced equally by all states.

In contrast, the skeptics or realists, which include Paul Hirst, Grahame Thompson and John Mearsheimer within their ranks, believe that little has changed in the international arena. Rejecting the hyperglobalist position as politically naïve, the skeptics argue that the impact of globalization on the sovereign state is much exaggerated. On this view, the state is not the victim of this process, but its main architect (Held and McGrew, 1999, p. 4). For one thing, the skeptics argue that the decisions to launch or not to launch United Nations (UN) backed

humanitarian interventions around the globe were largely determined by key states on the Security Council. Furthermore, the 'new wars' of the post-Cold War era marked the reconfiguration of the system of states rather than its demise. Indeed, many of the civil conflicts during this period have involved the use of force to carve out new sovereign states from existing ones. Thus, according to the realists, the norm of statehood remains very real and a key motivation for intra-state conflict. Such a view, however, rests on a number of questionable premises. These include the belief that contemporary levels of interconnectedness are not qualitatively different, that sovereign states retain as much power as they had in the past, and there are few if any aspects of globalization that are not controlled by the most powerful states.

The transformationalists reject the tendency to juxtapose state sovereignty and globalization. According to this perspective, the state is not automatically diminished by globalization nor unaffected by it. For transformationalists like Anthony Giddens, David Held and Anthony McGrew, sovereignty is a dynamic concept that is undergoing a new phase in its evolution. While it would be premature to anticipate the sudden collapse in the security function of the state, transnational pressures on the sovereign state from without and within are promoting a broader and more co-operative approach to security. This new security paradigm emphasizes the importance of pragmatic multilateralism, international law, and the pivotal role of the UN. But it must be pointed out that countries may well differ as to how they perceive the security problems and opportunities created by the process of globalization, and it cannot be readily assumed there will be a general convergence among sovereign states towards a collective or common stance on key security issues, even if it is objectively in their interest to do so. National history, perceived power, and popular values could be obstacles to any

common understanding of how globalization qualifies the security role of the sovereign state. This takes us to the subject of our next section.

THE CONTOURS OF US EXCEPTIONALISM

The idea of US exceptionalism refers to an informal ideology that endows Americans with a pervasive faith in the uniqueness, immutability, and superiority of the country's founding liberal principles, and also the conviction that the United States has a special destiny among nations. The founders of America saw the country as a new form of political community, dedicated to the Enlightenment principles of the rules of law, private property, representative government, freedom of speech and religion, and commercial liberty. This creed is so taken for granted that it is now synonymous with 'the American way of life' (Hartz, 1955). American exceptionalism is a pervasive theme of American politics, and is a core element of American identity and nationalism. The concept has deep roots in American history, 'from John Winthrop's 1630 oration, in which he referred to the new community he was founding in America as a "city upon a hill," to Lincoln's description of the United States, as "the last best hope of earth," the idea of America as a great nation with a unique mission has resonated widely' (Karabel, 2011). According to the late political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset, America's unique ideology 'can be described in five words: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez faire' (Tumulty, 2013). Holsti argues that American exceptionalism in common usage has two different, albeit overlapping, meanings. The first 'refers to the historical view of Americans have had of themselves. The United States and its founding constitution were, in this view, unique experiments in governance and liberty' (Holsti, 2010, p. 382). This unique representation of peace and freedom has, in turn, served to inspire others. The second meaning derives from the first, 'the responsibilities of leadership

require the United States on occasion to transgress prevailing norms in order to provide peace and security and to promote American values' (Holsti, 2010, p. 382).

This American national creed has been shaped by three important influences (Patman, 2006, pp. 964-5). First, America sits in relative geographic isolation. Its geography means that it has been able to avoid European conflicts and major international engagements on its own territory (Patman, 2006, p. 964). Second, America's wealth and self-sufficiency has been an important historical conditioner. Abundant wealth and resources meant that America has never had to be dependent on, or continually interact with the rest of the world. Indeed, America has sometimes behaved as though it could get along perfectly well without the rest of the world, a trait that has reinforced isolationist tendencies. Third, America was founded on a basis that was Christian, largely Protestant and with strong Puritan and Calvinist beliefs. These beliefs have justified America's military conquests through the use of moral or religious principles (Patman, 2006, pp. 964-5). Indeed, America's religious tradition has been a key influence on the country's sense of exceptionalism (Nabers and Patman, 2008, p. 170). The 'notion of manifest destiny is deeply ingrained in American exceptionalism, and reflects the idea that the settlement of the American continent was part of a predestined mission, which was guided by providence' (Nabers and Patman, 2008, p. 171). Arguably, 'the USA has been an exceptional society in terms of its size, its geopolitical and economic position in relation to the outside world, and in terms of its intellectual and ideological history and self-image' (Patman, 2006, p. 965). But it should be emphasized the concept of American exceptionalism goes well beyond uniqueness - a distinction to which many nations could claim. As Daniel Bell (1991, pp. 50-51) has noted, 'the idea of exceptionalism...assumes not only that the United States has been unlike other nations, but that it is exceptional in the sense of being exemplary'. That is, the US sees itself as a beacon of hope for other nations.

A consciousness of being exceptional has certainly helped shape the evolution of American foreign policy (McEvoy-Levy, 2011, p. 23). On the one hand, exceptionalism was used, particularly in the period up to 1941, as a justification for avoiding American involvement in the entangling alliances and quarrels of the so called old world (Hathaway, 2000, pp. 121-133). This 'go it alone' or isolationist stance assumed that the US remained a political model for emulation, but insisted that the US must limit its global responsibilities to safeguard its internal and external freedoms. For instance, the US Senate declined to support US membership of the League of Nations organization in 1919. On the other hand, a sense of exceptionalism inspired the US, especially with the attainment of superpower status after 1945, to embark on a quest to improve the world. By sponsoring and leading multilateral institutions, the US sought to transform an anarchic, conflict-prone world into an open, international community under the rule of law, in which countries could maximize their common security, economic and political interests (Patrick, 2002, p. 7). To be sure, American exceptionalism has not been the only factor shaping the course and conduct of US foreign policy. During the Cold War years, hard-headed realism, based on the overwhelming US desire to avoid a disastrous nuclear war with the Soviet Union, regularly kept exceptionalist impulses at bay.

Not surprisingly, there has been considerable disagreement over the precise impact of US exceptionalism on Washington's foreign policy. According to Stephen Walt (2011), US exceptionalism is 'mostly a myth. Although the United States possesses certain unique qualities – from high levels of religiosity to a political culture that privileges individual freedom – the conduct of US foreign policy has been determined primarily by its relative power and by the inherently competitive nature of international politics'. Similarly, Trevor

McCracken (2003, p. 187) notes that 'US foreign policy is usually driven by strategic, economic, political or other practical interests and only occasionally do notions of exceptionalism provide the key stimulus for policy'. However, he argues that the belief in American exceptionalism 'provides the framework for discourse in US foreign policy making even if it is rarely the main determining factor of policy itself' (McCracken, 2003, p. 185). According to this view 'the ways in which US foreign policy is made and conducted are influenced by the underlying assumptions Americans hold about themselves and the rest of the world...the belief in exceptionalism, since it is a core element of American national identity, has an important underlying influence on foreign policy activity' (McCracken, 2003, pp. 1-2).

At the same time, Stephen Brooks (2013, pp. 16-17) argues that American exceptionalism 'is more than a narrative – a contested narrative - about the character and historical meaning of American society, and much more than a tool that is picked up and used by some politicians, pundits and professors in the constant struggle that goes on in American political life for partisan and ideological advantage. It has been and continues to be real'. For Brooks (2013, pp. 130-131), political use and defense of American exceptionalism has been generated by 'widespread anxiety that the United States was in decline'. According to this view, 'those who lament America's relative economic decline in the world often conclude that American exceptionalism is also much diminished or that it no longer exists' (Brooks, 2013, p. 2). Brooks (2013, pp. 130-131) argues that current challenges include 'globalization and a widened values gap between America and other Western democracies'. Jerome Karabel (2011), professor of sociology at University of California at Berkeley, maintains 'what is new in recent years is that public expressions of belief in "American exceptionalism"...has become something of a required civic ritual for American politicians'. This has coincided

with an increase in public discussion of the term, with references in print media increasing from two in 1980 to 2,580 through November in 2011 (Karabel, 2011). According to a Gallup poll from December 2010, 80 per cent of Americans agree, ‘because of the United States' history and its Constitution...the United States has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world’. 91 per cent of Republicans agreed with this statement, as did at least 73 per cent of Americans in all party groups (Jones, 2010).

The idea that America was different and exemplary thus persisted and became even more explicit with the passing of the Cold War in the late 1980s. As one fervent believer in American exceptionalism claims:

What do we, as American conservatives, want to *conserve*? The answer is simple: the pillars of American exceptionalism. Our country has always been exceptional. It is freer, more individualistic, more democratic, and more open and dynamic than any other nation on earth. These qualities are the bequest of our Founding and of our cultural heritage. They have always marked America as special, with a unique role and mission in the world: as a model of ordered liberty and self-government and as an exemplar of freedom and a vindicator of it, through persuasion when possible and force of arms when absolutely necessary (Ponnuru, 2010).

But a renewed emphasis on US exceptionalism was both a reflection of America’s new sole superpower status and a response to the country’s increasing exposure to a new systemic challenge – globalization.

UNEASY CO-EXISTENCE: US EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE POST-COLD WAR SECURITY ENVIRONMENT IN THE PRE-OBAMA ERA

For much of the post-Cold War era until the advent of the Obama administration, reinvigorated US exceptionalism promoted for the most part a foreign policy outlook that was

close to a realist understanding of globalization. Three discernible phases may be identified in what was a difficult encounter between American national security policy and an international security environment radically reshaped by globalization.

(a) The 'New World Order' Phase 1990-93

During this initial phase, US policy tilted more in the direction of the transformationalists than at any other time during the period until 2009. The crushing military victory of the US-led coalition over Saddam Hussein's Iraq in the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991 seemed to affirm, in the words of President George H. W. Bush, 'a new world order' based on Western values of liberal democracy, market capitalism and international co-operation based on US power and UN authority. But, and this point deserves some emphasis, President Bush's early post-Cold War vision seemed to be based on a reasonably inclusive conception of US exceptionalism that envisaged an expanded US leadership role, albeit one through either partnership with multilateral institutions or in coalitions that enjoyed a wide measure of international support (Patman, 2006, p. 968). Initially, the 'assertive multilateralism' of the subsequent Clinton administration seemed to share many of the core assumptions underpinning the 'new grand strategy' of the George H. W. Bush administration.

(b) The Somalia Syndrome and the Revival of Exclusive US Exceptionalism 1993-2001

The inclusive form of US exceptionalism favored in the early 1990s did not endure. The post-Cold War world did not turn out to be the order that the Bush (senior) and Clinton administrations had envisaged. The American-led victory in the Persian Gulf war, as Michael Mandelbaum pointed out, was not the harbinger of the post-Cold War future but the last gasp

of a morally and politically clearer age when inter-state war was the dominant form of conflict in the international system.

In many ways, the disastrous US-UN humanitarian intervention in Somalia in 1992-1993 was a catalyst for the move towards a more exclusive form of US exceptionalism. The turning point was a savage battle in Mogadishu on 3 October, 1993, between US forces and armed supporters of warlord General Mohammed Aideed, which killed 18 US servicemen and more than 1,000 Somalis. The loss of American lives in Mogadishu was a deeply shocking event for Washington, and like Vietnam, Somalia generated a new foreign policy disposition. It was known as the Somalia Syndrome and involved a deep scepticism of US involvement in multilateral intervention in civil conflict situations. This outlook was codified in Presidential Decision Directive (PDD) 25 in May 1994, which stated the US would only participate in UN peace operations if they were in the national interest.

Convinced that most failed or failing states were not vital to American national security interests, the Clinton administration embraced a more exclusive, realist conception which assumed Washington could selectively respond to the challenges of the new security environment of post-Cold War world (Patman, 2006, p. 982). Thus, the Somalia Syndrome marked the emergence of a dangerous gap between the US's reinvigorated state-centred security outlook and the transformed security environment of the post-Cold War era that was characterized by the rise of intra-state strife and new transnational challengers like al Qaeda.

(c) 9/11 and Bush's Fundamentalist US Exceptionalism

The exclusive conception of American exceptionalism was deepened when President George W. Bush took office (Patman, 2006, p. 982). The new Bush administration, 'strongly rejected the notion of nation building, embraced the traditional view that security was fundamentally determined by the military means of sovereign states, and sought to promote 'a distinctly American internationalism'' (Patman, 2006, p. 971). While the 9/11 terrorist attacks did not come out of a clear blue sky, the Bush administration claimed the world had been suddenly transformed by this 'new' threat and declared an all-out war on what was called global terrorism. According to Gregory Britton (2006, pp. 131-2), the Bush administration interpreted the 9/11 attacks in exceptionalist terms as attacks against America's core political values. On 11 September, Bush declared 'America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world', and that America would 'go on to defend freedom and all that is good and just in the world' (Britton, 2006, pp. 131-132).

The assumption by the Bush administration that it was possible for America to wage war with terrorism led a heavy military focus in the conflict with al Qaeda and strengthened the unilateral orientation of America's foreign policy, particularly in relation to Iraq (Patman, 2006, p. 972). The Bush Administration seemed to rationalize the invasion of Saddam Hussein's Iraq within the exceptionalist understanding of America's special mission to the world. Iraq became 'a defining challenge for President Bush's new brand of exclusive exceptionalism' (Patman, 2006, p. 976). The idea that the US could introduce democracy to Iraq and thereby reform the Middle East region at large represented US exceptionalism 'in its purest – and perhaps most naïve – form' (Patman, 2006, p. 976). The Bush administration approached the war on terror with a reinvigorated idea of American exceptionalism (Patman, 2006, p. 964). In Bush's 2004 State of Union Address, he stated that 'America is a nation with a mission, and that mission comes from our most basic beliefs. We have no desire to

dominate, no ambitions of empire. Our aim is democratic peace - a peace founded upon the dignity and rights of every man and woman. America acts in this cause with friends and allies at our side, yet we understand our special calling: This great republic will lead the cause of freedom' (Bush, 2004). Following September 11, Bush increasingly used religious imagery, and constructed a distinctive rhetoric grounded in 'conservative religious outlook, characterized by absolutism, a divine hand in history and a sense of American manifest destiny' (Nabers and Patman, 2008, p. 169). In an attempt to project American interests, the Bush administration 'emphasized binary conceptions of reality, in starkly black-and-white terms', which juxtaposed good against evil (Nabers and Patman, 2008, p. 170).

Brooks (2013, p. 13) argues that after 9/11, President Bush became:

Both a symbol and spokesperson for what some found to be a particularly antagonizing form of American exceptionalism that stressed America's special mission in the world and the country's religious character...Bush's born-again Christianity; his unapologetic support for policies favored by the religious right; his Wilsonian idealism in world affairs, including a penchant for characterizing conflicts in terms of good and evil and a missionary sense of America's responsibility to spread democracy throughout the world; and his willingness to act alone or with few allies...were attributes of the man and his presidency that embodied this exceptionalism.

Moreover, Bush's exclusive brand of US exceptionalism proved to be both diplomatically and economically costly. Much of the more than \$3 trillion spent on the war on terror was financed through borrowing. A combination of lower tax revenues and massive military spending not only undermined the performance of the economy in the US, but also contributed to conditions that precipitated the global financial crisis of 2008.

“LEADING FROM BEHIND”: OBAMA’S REFASHIONING OF US EXCEPTIONALISM

Barack Obama had campaigned against George W. Bush's ideas and approach to national security, and his election victory in November 2008 brought a foreign policy approach that sought, in Paul Kennedy's terms, to reduce the continuing costs of decline incurred during the Bush era – the worst financial crisis since the 1930s and two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – and accommodate the reality that the world had long ceased to be unipolar in nature if it had ever been so. Compared with previous post-Cold War presidents, Obama went much further in acknowledging the constraints of globalization and positioning his foreign policy outlook in the camp of the transformationalists.

In a piece submitted to *Foreign Affairs* in 2007, then Senator Barack Obama detailed his vision of a new American leadership after the Bush administration. In doing so, he confirmed his belief in a changed global environment. Obama (2007) stated that:

Threats demand a new vision of leadership in the twenty-first century – a vision that draws from the past but is not bound by outdated thinking. The Bush administration responded to the unconventional attacks of 9/11 with conventional thinking of the past, largely viewing problems as state-based and principally amenable to military solutions...but this is a mistake we must not make. America cannot meet the threats of this century alone, and the world cannot meet them without America...We must lead the world, by deed and by example...the mission of the United States is to provide global leadership grounded in the understanding that the world shares a common security and a common humanity.

The notion that America can no longer meet the threats of the post-Cold War era alone is one that Obama has stressed throughout his presidency. In doing so, presidential historian Douglas Brinkley claims that Obama is “our first global president”, a president whose mind was shaped by globalization accelerated after the Cold War, with the Internet and social media serving as engines of transformation’ (Sharma and Gielen, 2014, p. 12).

To all appearances, the new Obama team substantially redefined America's national security interests in the post-Cold War era. In specific terms, the Obama administration jettisoned the 'war on terror' rhetoric, withdrew all US combat troops from Iraq, attempted a more even-handed stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, escalated the ideological battle against Islamic terrorism, intensified the war against al Qaeda and the Taliban in their strongholds of Afghanistan and Pakistan, pledged to reinvigorate diplomacy and, where possible, negotiate directly with potential adversaries like Iran, North Korea, Cuba or Venezuela. More generally, it is possible to identify a number of core themes and strategic convictions that underpin what might be called an Obama doctrine. These include a renewed emphasis on soft power and diplomacy; the tilt towards multilateralism; the desire to lighten the US's global military footprint combined with a focused willingness to employ force in the defense of US national interests; a 'pivot' towards the Asia-Pacific region; and a belief in the necessity of flexibility and adaptability in foreign policy formulation. Above all, the Obama doctrine has substantially revised, or perhaps attempted to modernize, the idea of US exceptionalism.

For Obama, what makes America exceptional is a political model, which combines a free democratic system, dynamic market economy, social diversity, and ability to work with other states and international institutions while upholding the rule of law. In a July 2008 speech in Germany, Obama stated that 'partnership and cooperation among nations is not a choice; it is the one way, the only way, to protect our common security and advance our common humanity...Now is the time to join together, through constant cooperation, strong institutions, shared sacrifice, and a global commitment to progress, to meet the challenges of the 21st Century...this is the moment when we must give hope to those left behind in a globalized world' (Obama, 2008). Furthermore, in remarks made by the president to students in Mumbai in November 2010, Obama asked:

How do we respond to some of the challenges of globalization? I think that there's going to be a tug of war within the United States between those who see globalization as a threat and want to retrench, and those who accept that we live in a open, integrated world which has challenges and opportunities and we've got to manage those challenges and manage those opportunities, but we shouldn't be afraid of them (Obama, 2010).

Similarly, in a March 2011 address to the Nation on Libya, Obama argued that 'we should not be afraid to act -- but the burden of action should not be America's alone. As we have in Libya, our task is instead to mobilize the international community for collective action. Because contrary to the claims of some, American leadership is not simply a matter of going it alone and bearing all of the burden ourselves. Real leadership creates the conditions and coalitions for others to step up as well; to work with allies and partners so that they bear their share of the burden and pay their share of the costs; and to see that the principles of justice and human dignity are upheld by all' (Obama, 2011).

Obama has been explicit in acknowledging the constraints imposed by globalization on US foreign policy. Awareness of these constraints has formed a new, inclusive form of US exceptionalism, far removed from the exclusive conception of American exceptionalism that developed during the Bush administration. Obama has largely eschewed unilateralism for a multilateral approach based on collective action, common security and leading by example.

As Obama informed the US Military Academy at West Point in May 2014:

The world is changing with accelerating speed. This presents opportunity, but also new dangers. We know all too well, after 9/11, just how technology and globalization has put power once reserved for states in the hands of individuals, raising the capacity of terrorists to do harm. Russia's aggression toward former Soviet states unnerves capitals in Europe, while China's economic rise and military reach worries its neighbors...It will be your generation's task to respond to this new world...It is absolutely true that in the 21st century American isolationism is not an option (Obama, 2014).

From the beginning of Obama's presidency, his critics have questioned his commitment to the concept of American exceptionalism. Very quickly, the question of whether Obama wished to see the United States become more like other Western democracies became a controversial matter (Brooks, 2013, p. 13). Obama's victory 'represented, for Western Europeans, the hope that American exceptionalism was over and that the values gap that many believed had widened during the Bush years was being closed...they perceived the election of Barack Obama as an important step toward American values and the US government's policies becoming more like those of Europe' (Brooks, 2013, p. 6). These concerns were reinforced by the Affordable Health Care reform bill that Obama signed into law in 2010, which was 'framed by opponents as guaranteeing an unprecedented increase in the state's presence in the economy and a dramatic decrease in individual choice in matters of health. In short, it was portrayed as a frontal attack on what were argued to be key pillars of American exceptionalism' (Brooks, 2013, p. 14).

Exacerbated by the decision to build a mosque at the site of ground zero in New York, questions arose as to Obama's true nationality, and fixated on Obama's religious sympathies (Brooks, 2013, p. 14). Public opinion polls in 2010 showed that only one-third of Americans believed Obama was Christian (Brooks, 2013, p. 14). One-fifth believed he was Muslim (Brooks, 2013, p. 14). Americans were also asked which presidents believed that 'the United States has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world'. Reagan was highest at 86 per cent, followed by Clinton at 77 per cent, and George W. Bush with 74 per cent; President Obama was a distant fourth at 58 per cent (Jones, 2010). American exceptionalism therefore 'opened up a new political battlefield', in the Obama administration (Tumulty, 2013). As one commentator announced in 2010:

It is perhaps unsurprising that every important aspect of American exceptionalism has been under threat from President Obama and his allies in Washington...already we are catching up to the European norm for government power...Obama is turning his back both on the overarching vision of freedom and on the prudence, and mislabeling his approach “realism.”...Under the sway of Obama’s anti-idealism, the U.S. is less interested in serving as a champion of liberty; his policies will also reduce our power, and thus our effectiveness should we choose to wield it again (Ponnuru, 2010).

The concept of American exceptionalism, and whether Obama subscribes to it, became a key feature in the 2012 presidential election. Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney stated that ‘we have a president now who thinks America is just another nation’ (Karabel, 2011). Romney added that he would ‘never, ever apologize for America’ (Reifowitz, 2012). Newt Gingrich argued that Obama ‘simply does not understand the concept of American exceptionalism’, and claimed that ‘Obama has developed a strong unease with American power’ (Karabel, 2011). Obama also came under fire from conservative columnist Kathleen Parker (2011), who claimed ‘is there something about this country that makes us unique in this world? Of course there is, and Obama has frequently acknowledged those things, including the State of Union. But he seems to avoid the word...on the right, the word exceptional – or exceptionalism – lately has become a litmus test for patriotism’.

But is it true that President Obama does not believe in the concept of American exceptionalism? There is considerable evidence to the contrary. Ian Reifowitz argues that Obama’s ‘American exceptionalism isn’t about chest-thumping and cheerleading. His centres on our ability to show the world that a population of many faiths, cultures, and races can see itself as a single people, diverse yet united’ (Reifowitz, 2012). Jerome Karabel (2011) agrees, arguing that ‘Obama does believe in American exceptionalism, although his version is quite different from the one being promulgated by Gingrich and Romney’. Robert Schlesinger (2011), managing editor for opinion at ‘U.S. News’, found that ‘only one sitting president in

the last 82 years has publicly uttered the magical phrase “American Exceptionalism”...the only president to publicly discuss (and for that matter embrace) “American Exceptionalism” is Barack Obama’. Indeed, if we look at various speeches and addresses made by Barack Obama, we can see plenty of evidence to support this view. In an interview with the *New York Times* in December 2007, shortly before the Iowa caucus, then Senator Obama stated, ‘I believe in American exceptionalism’ (Cohen, 2007). But he argued that this was not an American exceptionalism based on US ‘military prowess or our economic dominance’ (Cohen, 2007). Instead, it was based on the US ‘Constitution, our principles, our values and our ideals. We are at our best when we are speaking in a voice that captures the aspirations of people across the globe’ (Cohen, 2007).

When asked by a reporter at a news conference in Strasbourg in April 2009 whether he believed in American exceptionalism, Obama stated ‘I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism’ (Obama, 2009). This statement was seized upon by Obama’s critics, who used it as evidence of Obama’s lack of belief in American exceptionalism. They did so, despite the sentence having been taken out of context. Obama continued to state that:

The United States remains the largest economy in the world. We have unmatched military capability. And I think that we have a core set of values that are enshrined in our Constitution, in our body of law, in our democratic practices, in our belief in free speech and equality, that, though imperfect, are exceptional...I see no contradiction between believing that America has a continued extraordinary role in leading the world towards peace and prosperity and recognizing that leadership is incumbent, depends on, our ability to create partnerships because we can't solve these problems alone (Obama, 2009).

Obama’s affirmation of American exceptionalism is evident in a number of recent speeches. In his Presidential Address to the Nation on Libya in March 2011, Obama stated that ‘for

generations, the United States of America has played a unique role as an anchor of global security and as an advocate for human freedom...to brush aside America's responsibility as a leader and -- more profoundly -- our responsibilities to our fellow human beings under such circumstances would have been a betrayal of who we are. Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different' (Obama, 2011). In Obama's Commencement Address at the Air Force Academy in May 2012, he stated that:

One of the reasons is that the United States has been, and will always be, the one indispensable nation in world affairs. It's one of the many examples of why America is exceptional. It's why I firmly believe that if we rise to this moment in history, if we meet our responsibilities, then -- just like the 20th century -- the 21st century will be another great American Century...I see an American Century because of the character of our country -- the spirit that has always made us exceptional. That simple yet revolutionary idea -- there at our founding and in our hearts ever since -- that we have it in our power to make the world anew, to make the future what we will. It is that fundamental faith -- that American optimism -- which says no challenge is too great, no mission is too hard. (Obama, 2012).

Similarly, in a speech given at the White House on Syria in September 2013, Obama stated that 'America is not the world's policeman. Terrible things happen across the globe, and it is beyond our means to right every wrong. But when, with modest effort and risk, we can stop children from being gassed to death, and thereby make our own children safer over the long run, I believe we should act. That's what makes America different. That's what makes us exceptional. With humility, but with resolve, let us never lose sight of that essential truth' (Obama, 2013). In his remarks at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony at West Point in May 2014, Obama stated that 'American influence is always stronger when we lead by example. We can't exempt ourselves from the rules that apply to everybody else...I believe in American exceptionalism with every fibre of my being. But what makes us exceptional is not our ability to flout international norms and the rule of law;

it is our willingness to affirm them through our actions' (Obama, 2014). Clearly, a case can be made in support of the argument that Obama does believe in the concept of American exceptionalism.

Yet, what is also apparent is that Obama's understanding of the concept is far removed from that of the Bush and Clinton administrations. And this major departure has left the Obama administration politically vulnerable, at least, in the short-term to domestic criticism that it was 'leading from the rear' in the area of foreign policy. According to Robert Singh (2012, p. 4), Obama's foreign policy can be characterized as adhering to a 'post-American conception of world order', in which 'American primacy is steadily but inexorably ebbing'. For Singh (2012, p. 5), an abiding problem for the Obama administration since 2009 has been the desire to 'alert Americans to the realities of a changing world order – while at the same time sustaining the notion that America can nonetheless maintain its leading position in that order'. The reality of deepening globalization means that 'for both good and ill, even a strong America...cannot go it alone' (Singh, 2012, p. 7). However, this refashioned version of US exceptionalism has not proven to be popular in the US and has been widely conflated with foreign policy weakness. It has also proven unpopular with a number of the United States' traditional allies, such as Israel, Japan and Saudi Arabia. These states have traditionally relied upon strong US support. The redefinition of America's national security interests by the Obama administration has therefore been interpreted quite narrowly by these countries as an erosion of that support rather than an adjustment to a globalizing environment.

Numerous diplomats, academics and politicians have claimed that international crises like Syria (2011-15) and more recently the Ukraine (2013-15) show that President Obama simply does not understand world affairs and geopolitics. They have claimed the policy of the

Obama team in both places is based more on how the president thinks the world should operate rather than the grim reality of the world. According to this view, it was incredibly naïve of the Obama administration to believe that Russia or any other great power would cooperate in a search for diplomatic solutions in Syria or the Ukraine, and that American inaction would inevitably be seen as a sign of weakness and decline internationally. In addition, and not unrelated, critics of Obama's Syria and Ukraine frequently utilized Cold War analogies and Cold War discourse to help illustrate apparent policy shortcomings: 'the fundamental problem is that this president doesn't understand Vladimir Putin... This president believes the cold war was over... Vladimir Putin doesn't believe the cold war is over' (Cohen, 2014). But are such criticisms justified? While the reluctance of the Obama administration to get involved militarily in Syria and the Ukraine may have bolstered Russian and Iranian support for the Assad dictatorship in Syria and emboldened Putin in eastern Ukraine, three constraining factors counter such claims. First, the Obama administration believed with some justification that the key lesson of the Iraq invasion of 2003 was that the unilateral use of military force had had disastrous diplomatic, economic and political consequences for the US internationally and continues to so, particularly in terms of the rise of Islamist militancy. Second, there has been little evidence of much public support for American or NATO military intervention in Syria or the Ukraine during the Obama period in office. Third, unilateral or US-led military intervention in Syria or the Ukraine would be expensive financially and possibly counter-productive in political and strategic terms. Unlike the George W. Bush administration, the Obama team inherited an economy in free-fall with an external debt of more than \$16 trillion. Objectively, that is a foreign policy constraint that cannot but affect the US's capacity to assert itself.

Furthermore, comparing American differences with Russia over Syria and the Ukraine with

the Cold War is basically misleading. Such analogies falsely inflate Russia's international position in the 21st Century. Even with its nuclear arsenal, Russia today is at best a regional power. At the same time, the Cold War analogy blurs fundamental changes that globalization has brought to the international system during the last three decades. If the Putin government insists on arming the Assad dictatorship or the eastern Ukraine rebels, there is little the US or any other great power can do to prevent such actions in the short-term. But such policies are not cost-free for Moscow. By consistently blocking US-UN efforts to stabilize a bloody civil war and generously arming the Assad regime, Moscow has maintained a tenuous foothold in Syria but has done so at some cost to the ailing Russian economy and also helping to inflate Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) presence in Syria and the region. In the Ukraine, the Putin government has overlooked – or at least discounted – the economic, political and diplomat costs of intensifying US and European Union (EU) sanctions. As an upshot, Russia faces a looming economic crisis in 2015. In his State of the Union address in January 2015, President Obama alluded to the misreading of the Ukraine crisis by saying 'it is America that stands strong and united with our allies, while Russia is isolated, with its economy in tatters' (Obama, 2015). The Obama Doctrine may not be popular in the US, but its application to the Syrian crisis is a pragmatic recognition of the increasing constraints that globalization places on all actors, including superpowers. In the words of Jeremy Shapiro: 'The truth is that everybody's critical of the Obama policy in Syria, and nobody has a better alternative' (Shapiro, 2015).

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the Obama administration has attempted to adapt US exceptionalism to what is a globalizing world. As a consequence, US foreign policy has definitely moved toward what

David Held and others have labeled the transformationalist perspective. In a sense, the Obama approach to foreign policy today resembles the ‘New World Order’ vision of the George H. W. Bush administration in the early 1990s. Under President Obama, American exceptionalism has been reaffirmed but expressed in terms of the resilience and dynamism of the US democratic and economic system. The Obama administration believes that history is on America’s side. It is confident that a democratic superpower like the US has the built-in capacity to renew itself and adjust to the challenges and possibilities of a globalizing world. And the Obama administration has not shied from using its power unilaterally whether it be killing the leader of al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden in May 2011 in Pakistan or massively expanding the use of drones to target Islamist militants in places like Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan. However, the process of refashioning the idea of US exceptionalism is incomplete and is likely to become more demanding as globalization deepens. The global context of the 21st Century is fundamentally different from the Cold War era. While the number of national problems requiring international solutions is multiplying, a superpower like the US remains understandably reluctant to acknowledge its diminishing ability to act in an increasing interconnected and interdependent world. As we have seen in this article, the key political challenge for the Obama administration (and its successors) is to build a new political consensus that can sustain a refashioned and more nuanced concept of US exceptionalism in the 21st Century.

REFERENCES

- Bell, D. (1991) The ‘Hegelian Secret’: Civil Society and American Exceptionalism. In: B.E. Shafer (eds.) *Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 46-70.
- Britton, G. (2006). September 11, American ‘Exceptionalism’ and the War in Iraq. *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 25(1): 125-141.
- Brooks, S. (2013) *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Obama*. New York: Routledge.
- Bush, G.H.W. (1992) State of the Union Address. *United States Department of State*

Dispatch 3(1): 73.

- Bush, G.W. (2004) State of the Union Address. United States Congress, 20 January.
- Clark, I. (1997) *Globalization and Fragmentation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cohen, M. (2014) John McCain: Mitt Romney and I were right about Russia. *CBS News*, 4 March, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/john-mccain-mitt-romney-and-i-were-right-about-russia/>, accessed 12 January 2015.
- Cohen, R. (2007) Obama's American Idea. *The New York Times*, 10 December, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/10/opinion/10cohen.html>, accessed 11 January 2015.
- Hartz, L. (1955) *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Hathaway, J.C. (2000) America, Defender of Democratic Legitimacy? *European Journal of International Law* 11(1): 121-134.
- Held, D. and McGrew, A. (1993) Globalisation and the Liberal Democratic State. *Government and Opposition* 28(2): 261-288.
- Held, D. and McGrew, A. (1999) *Global Transformations*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Holsti, K. (2010) Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy: Is it Exceptional? *European Journal of International Relations* 17(3): 381-404.
- Hughes, C.W. (2002) Reflections on Globalisation, Security and 9/11. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 15(3): 421-433.
- Ionescu, G. (1991) *Leadership in an Interdependent World: the Statemanship of Adenauer, De Gaulle, Thatcher, Reagan and Gorbachev*. Harlow: Longman.
- Jones, J. (2010) Americans See U.S. as Exceptional; 37% Doubt Obama Does. *Gallup Poll*, 22 December, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/145358/americans-exceptional-doubt-obama.aspx>, accessed 10 January 2015.
- Karabel, J. (2011) American Exceptionalism and the Battle for the Presidency. *Huffington Post*, 22 December, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jerome-karabel/american-exceptionalism-obama-gingrich_b_1161800.html, accessed 10 January 2015.
- McCrisken, T. (2003) *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam: US Foreign Policy since 1974*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McEvoy-Levy, S. (2011) *American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Nabers, D. and Patman, R. (2008) September 11 and the rise of political fundamentalism in the Bush administration: domestic legitimatization versus international estrangement? *Global Change, Peace & Security* 20(2): 169-183.
- Obama, B. (2007) Renewing American Leadership. *Foreign Affairs*, July/August, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/62636/barack-obama/renewing-american-leadership>, accessed 11 January 2015.
- Obama, B. (2008) A World That Stands as One. Speech at the Strasse des 17 Juni. Berlin, 24 July.
- Obama, B. (2009) News Conference at Palaiz de la Musique et Des Congres. Strasbourg, 04 April.
- Obama, B. (2010) Remarks by the President and the First Lady in Town Hall. Speech to students at St. Xavier College. Mumbai, 07 November.
- Obama, B. (2011) Address to the Nation on Libya. Speech to the National Defense University. Washington, D.C., 28 March.
- Obama, B. (2012) Remarks by the President at the Air Force Academy Commencement. Speech to the Air Force Academy. Colorado Springs, 23 May.
- Obama, B. (2013) Speech on Syria. The White House. Washington, D.C., 10 September.

- Obama, B. (2014) Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony. Speech to U.S. Military Academy. West Point, 28 May.
- Obama, B. (2015) State of the Union Address. The White House. Washington, D.C., 20 January.
- Parker, K. (2011) President Obama and that ‘exceptional’ thing. *The Washington Post*, 30 January, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/28/AR2011012805190.html>, accessed 10 January 2015.
- Patman, R. (2006) Globalisation, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror. *Third World Quarterly* 27(6): 963-986.
- Patrick, S. (2002) Multilateralism and Its Discontents: The Causes and Consequences of US Ambivalence. In: S. Patrick and S. Forman (eds.) *Multilateralism and US Foreign Policy: Ambivalent Engagement*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, pp. 1-44.
- Ponnuru, R. (2010) An Exceptional Debate: The Obama Administration’s Assault on American Identity. *National Review*, 08 March, <https://www.nationalreview.com/nrd/articles/339276/exceptional-debate>, accessed 11 January 2015.
- Reifowitz, I. (2012) Yes, Obama does believe in American exceptionalism. *New York Daily Times*, 10 October, <http://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/yes-obama-american-exceptionalism-article-1.1179394>, accessed 10 January 2015.
- Schlesinger, R. (2011) Obama Has Mentioned ‘American Exceptionalism’ More Than Bush. *U.S. News*, 31 January, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/robert-schlesinger/2011/01/31/obama-has-mentioned-american-exceptionalism-more-than-bush>, accessed 10 January 2015.
- Scholte, J. (2001) The Globalization of World Politics. In: J. Baylis and S. Smith (eds.) *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 13-32.
- Shapiro, J. (2015) The Russians Have Made a Serious Mistake: How Putin’s Syria Gambit Will Backfire. Interview with Amanda Taub. *Vox World*, 01 October, <http://www.vox.com/2015/10/1/9434365/putin-syria-russia-mistake>, accessed 03 October 2015.
- Sharma, D. and Gielen, U.P. (eds.) (2014) *The Global Obama: Crossroads of Leadership in the 21st Century*. New York: Routledge.
- Singh, R. (2012) *Barack Obama’s Post American Foreign Policy: The Limits of Engagement*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Tumulty, K. (2013) American Exceptionalism, Explained. *The Washington Post*, 12 September, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2013/09/12/american-exceptionalism-explained/>, accessed 10 January 2015.
- Walt, S. (2011) The Myth of American Exceptionalism. *Foreign Policy*, 11 October, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/the-myth-of-american-exceptionalism/>, accessed 11 January 2015.