



The Bush Doctrine redux: changes and continuities in American grand strategy since '9/11'

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Abstract

This article examines the ideational dimension and political performance of American grand strategy since '9/11' and explores to what extent the strategic assumptions, ideological dispositions, and security practices of the Bush Doctrine have endured since the 2001 terrorist attacks. It advances a constructivist understanding of American grand strategy as a nexus of national identity discourses and security practices. The article will first explore the significance of American exceptionalism in the ideational dimension of the Bush Doctrine and its practical impact in the pursuit of US national security. The article will then focus on the Obama Doctrine, arguing that its embrace of cooperative engagement and multilateralism represented a limited strategic course correction within the paradigm of liberal hegemony. Finally, the article will contrast grand strategy discourses under Bush and Donald Trump, exploring their shared foundations in Jacksonian nationalism and unilateralism that demonstrate the continued relevance of Bush's strategic vision of US primacy.

Keywords Grand strategy · US foreign policy · National security · Bush doctrine · Obama doctrine · America first

Introduction

At the height of the US 'unipolar moment' (Krauthammer 2002), the Bush Doctrine formulated a neo-imperial vision of national security marked by unilateralism, the pre-emptive use of force, and a strategy of active military interventionism to remove the threat of terrorist organisations and 'rogue regimes' armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMD), aiming to engineer democratic transformation in the Greater Middle East using force (Cox 2004; Dalby 2005; Owens 2009). 20 years later, the geopolitical legacy and political reputation of this vision of American grand strategy

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as unilateral primacy seem to lie in tatters. US-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have failed to achieve their long-term political objectives. Regional instability, terrorist attacks, civil wars and violent unrest continue to plague the Middle East region, while Donald Trump made the nationalist-populist slogan of America First the lodestar of US foreign policy during his presidency from 2017–2021 (MacDonald 2018). Both the Obama and Trump administrations seemingly repudiated the imperial overreach of the Bush Doctrine and its geopolitical focus on the Middle East, from President Obama pivoting to the Asia–Pacific and repeatedly emphasising ‘nation-building at home’ and ‘burden sharing’ (Löfflmann 2017), to President Trump’s populist attacks on a ‘corrupt’ Washington foreign policy establishment responsible for a dismal record of ‘failed policies’ and ‘endless wars’ (Trump 2016a). In April 2021, President Joe Biden finally announced the complete withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan by 11 September, 2021 ending America’s ‘forever war’ begun when George W. Bush announced retaliatory military strikes against the Taliban regime and al-Qaeda bases in October 2001 (Wertheim 2021).

Yet, many of the Bush administration’s strategic imperatives and associated policies have endured over the last two decades. These continuities include the pursuit of an aggressive counterterrorism policy under both Obama and Trump (Jackson 2011), highlighted in the Obama administration’s signature policy of drone strikes, as well as the successful commando raid that killed Osama bin Laden in 2011 under violation of Pakistani sovereignty. The United States also continued to oppose nuclear proliferation and remained focused on curbing the associated nuclear weapons ambitions of Iran and North Korea, with the Trump administration opting for a strategy of ‘maximum pressure’ to counter Teheran’s designs for regional hegemony, and risking military confrontation with Pyongyang during Trump’s first two years in office (Baker and Sang-Hun, 2017). The need to respond to the challenge of a revisionist Russia and rising China, on the other hand, was prioritised to a much greater degree by Bush’s successors, heralding a new era of great power competition and strategic rivalry (White House 2017; CRS 2021). All this begs the question to what extent a strategic vision of national security formulated in the wake of the ‘9/11’ terrorist attacks still holds political relevance for US foreign and security policy, and if, despite significant fluctuations in personal temperament, political-ideological outlook and communicative and behavioural style between George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden, structural policy continuities outweigh rhetorical and ideational changes in American grand strategy discourse. To this effect, this article will proceed as follows: First, it will apply an analytical framework to the study of grand strategy as a nexus of national identity discourses and corresponding security practices that is conceptually located at the intersection of constructivist approaches in International Relations (IR) and critical security studies (CSS), which focus on the significance of national identity discourses for informing and legitimating foreign and security policy (Campbell 1992; Hansen 2006; Williams 1998). The article will then focus on the ideological significance of the identity construct of American exceptionalism and the political influence of a coalition of neoconservative intellectuals, national security hawks and American nationalists in the Bush administration for establishing the core tenets of the Bush Doctrine and its strategic vision of unilateral primacy. It will go on to examine to what extent the Obama



Doctrine and its pragmatic emphasis on cooperative engagement and restraint was a deliberate repudiation of Obama's predecessor, arguing that Obama modified American hegemony, curtailing its overall geopolitical ambition, but not replacing it with a fundamentally different grand strategy alternative.

Finally, the article will contrast the Bush Doctrine with the America First stance propagated by Donald Trump, demonstrating that in their shared ideational foundations of Jacksonian nationalism, unilateralism, and militarism, the strategic visions of the last two Republican presidents had more in common than is generally assumed by observers who stress the unprecedented nature of Trump's populist approach to foreign policy (Foreign Affairs 2021). The article will conclude with a brief consideration of President Joe Biden's time in office, arguing that the onset of his presidency both indicates a formal conclusion to the post- 9/11 era in American grand strategy discourse and a renewed emphasis on liberal hegemony as the central guideline for US foreign policy.

The identity-security nexus of American grand strategy

Grand strategy has been described as the 'highest form of statecraft' (Brands 2014, p. 1). Its lasting intellectual allure is that an overarching strategic vision is supposed to clearly identify and prioritise external threats, allocate resources towards the pursuit of the national interest, and integrate and coordinate all means of national power into a coherent and consistent framework of thought and action (Gaddis 2019). Without a grand strategy, on the other hand, it is claimed that 'the nation, its leaders, and people will experience a sense of drift and confusion' (Martell, 2014). At its core then, a grand strategy envisions how a state can best combine and utilise all the resources of power at its disposal—from diplomatic efforts, to applying economic pressure or offering commercial incentives, and finally the threat or the use of force—to pursue the national interest (Art 2013).

Depending on how unilaterally or multilaterally, actively or passively, US power is to be deployed and how expansive or limited national security goals are defined politically, American grand strategy choices and alternatives range from the pursuit of unipolar primacy and global hegemony to cooperative security, selective engagement and offshore balancing, to neo-isolationism (Posen and Ross 1996). Given grand strategy's conceptual focus on national security and material resources of power, especially military power, the academic literature on the subject in IR is heavily influenced by the theoretical assumptions of neo-realism regarding an international system defined by structural anarchy and the functional equivalence of states seeking to guarantee their survival against external threats (Posen 2014; Walt 2018). Scholars following neorealist approaches therefore tend to emphasise the materialist determinants of American grand strategy as analytical categories, in particular changes and continuities in the global military and economic balance of power, as systemic explanatory variables for Washington's strategic decision-making (Green 2017). Prominent realist scholars have, at the same time, become notable critics in recent years of what they identified as a misguided bipartisan elite consensus on liberal hegemony in the United States. Liberal hegemony is seen here as a



failed grand strategy unifying Republican and Democratic administrations since the end of the Cold War, fuelled by the myth of American exceptionalism and the erroneous belief in the permanence of structural unipolarity, as well as naïve convictions of military near-omnipotence and technological superiority that supposedly allowed the United States to structurally change the socio-political fabric of other nations and entire regions. To these realist critics, a quasi-imperial strategic paradigm over-extended US commitments, squandered financial and military resources, fostered regional instability and overall hastened the dynamic of relative American decline in the international system through embroiling the United States in costly and unwinnable military engagements fought for lofty ideals but not vital national interests: most notably the 20-year long US engagement in Afghanistan, begun under George W. Bush (Porter 2018; Posen 2014; Layne 2017; Walt 2018).

To critics of the very concept itself, American grand strategy, on the other hand, represents an abstract, purely intellectual exercise for academic theorists and the policy wonks populating Washington DC think tanks, without much practical use for political decision-making, since the realities of world politics are deemed too complex and variegated as to be subsumed under one coherent and consistent national plan for action. These critical voices frequently include American presidents themselves, from George H.W. Bush, who openly admitted to having a problem with the ‘vision thing’ (Washington Post, 2018) to Bill Clinton claiming that ‘strategic coherence, was largely imposed after the fact by scholars, memoirists and the chattering classes’ (Talbot 2002, p. 113). For Barack Obama, having a visionary strategist like George F. Kennan, the *spiritus rector* of Containment, on his team mattered less than having the right partners to execute his policy priorities for cooperative engagement (Remnick 2014). Yet, even presidents like Clinton and Obama who were accused of lacking a coherent or discernible grand strategy by their critics (Drezner 2011; Boys 2015), or who publicly clashed with a Washington foreign policy establishment derisively labelled ‘the Blob’, as Obama and his Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes had done (Goldberg 2018; Rhodes 2018), provided in their speeches, interviews and policy documents a sense of how their Administrations defined the US role and position in the world. Their policy decisions, on the other hand, especially their use of force, reflected on how these presidents sought to execute that envisioned role in the international system. Presidential legitimization for military action thus frequently invoked in the public realm ideas of American exceptionalism and the United States as an ‘indispensable nation’ acting in defence of liberal democracy and American values, as Clinton’s Secretary of State Madeleine Albright had famously done when justifying US air strikes against Iraq in 1998 (McCrisken 2003; Restad 2014; Löfflmann 2015).

As the Joint Doctrine of the United States Armed Forces unequivocally states: ‘At the grand strategic level, the ways and means to achieve US core national interests are based on the national leadership’s strategic vision of America’s role in the world’ (JDN, 2018, p. vi). In emphasising the ideational and discursive dimension that informs presidential doctrines, geopolitical visions and national worldviews, the analysis of grand strategy in this article therefore extends beyond a materialist equation of means, ends and ways. Specifically, this article builds on research on the role of strategic narratives and national identity constructs in legitimating security



policy (Holland 2012; Homolar 2012; Krebs 2015; Löffmann 2017) and identifies grand strategy as a nexus of national identity discourses and security practices. Discursive approaches in critical security studies treat perceptions of security and threat as resulting from processes of social construction and culturally contextualised worldviews (Huysmans 1998; Katzenstein 1996; Krause and Williams 2002). These ideational categories differ according to the political communities and social and cultural contexts in which they are articulated. The interplay of these discourses in the realms of political decision-making and intellectual expertise and their co-constitution as commonly shared understandings and references of national policy and world politics in mainstream media and popular culture results in the production of dominant representations of national security that shape US foreign policy outcomes and legitimate political and military action in the public realm. Political practices from military intervention to defence spending and overseas troop deployments are legitimated through this ideational dimension of grand strategy and its underlying national identity constructs, which in turn reconfirm the political validity and common-sense status of a dominant strategic vision, such as liberal hegemony.

Before the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House, the foreign policy establishment in the United States, consisting of a networked elite of politicians, think tank experts, media pundits, diplomats, IR scholars, and military and intelligence professionals, thereby predominantly equated formulating and executing a coherent and consistent grand strategy to guarantee national security with maintaining the US's dominant place and singular leadership role within and atop a liberal international order marked by democracy, economic openness, great power peace and the international rule of law (Friedman and Logan 2016; Kagan 2012).

The identity-security nexus of American grand strategy thus both informs political decision-making at the highest level and it reverberates in the wider debates surrounding US national security and the country's role and position in world politics in the Washington foreign policy establishment, between defenders (e.g. Kagan 2014) and critics (e.g. Bacevich 2016) of the prevailing dominant discourse (Layne 2017); or what President Obama would refer to as the 'Washington playbook' (Goldberg 2018). Empirically, any analysis of American grand strategy, understood here as the 'national leadership's strategic vision', should then pay special attention to the role of the President of the United States and key texts produced under a presidential administration, such as the National Security Strategy (NSS) issued by the White House, or the national defence strategy documents published by the Pentagon, as well as key presidential addresses, speeches and interviews, such as the annual State of the Union addresses, positioning the American role in world politics and legitimating presidential decision-making.

Documents like the NSS can seem like largely pointless box-ticking exercises, devoid of actual political-operational relevance and strategic coherence, due to the specific nature of actual events shaping US policy responses to a large extent, and enduring structural and operational national security realities that are irrespective of any particular Administration being in power, as well as the sheer vastness of the bureaucratic effort involved in their production across multiple agencies and departments (Dombrowski and Reich 2017). These documents nonetheless give an impression of the basic ideational parameters, geopolitical priorities and core ideological



convictions under which a presidential Administration and the national security establishment operate. In tracing the legacy of the Bush Doctrine over the course of the last 20 years of US foreign and security policy it is therefore paramount to first identify the core tenets that informed Bush's strategic vision of American hegemony in response to the '9/11' attacks and to examine how these strategic imperatives were operationalised and executed, in particular in respect to the Bush administration's identification of existential threats to US national security and the use of force to counter them.

The Bush Doctrine: American exceptionalism unbound

The terrorist attacks on 11 September, 2001 that claimed almost 3000 lives in Washington DC, New York, and Pennsylvania and which had occurred at the zenith of the US's post-Cold War military, economic, and cultural global pre-eminence triggered a sudden and profound sense of American vulnerability and insecurity to which the Bush Doctrine responded by refocusing US national security efforts on counterterrorism and regime change in identified 'rogue' states as key strategic priorities. The Bush administration thereby established an all-encompassing Global War on Terror as the central discursive framing device through which retaliatory US actions in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere would be legitimated, and which, at the same time, ushered in a significant expansion of US intelligence and surveillance activities, at both home and abroad, to protect the American homeland at all cost from the unprecedented terrorist threat, including by infringing on the civil liberties of US citizens through illegal warrantless wiretaps by the National Security Agency (NSA) (Croft 2006; Hodges 2011; Ralph 2013).

The Authorization to Use Military Force (AUMF) that was passed virtually unanimously by Congress on 14 September, 2001, allowed the president to use all 'necessary and appropriate force' against those whom he determined to have 'planned, authorized, committed or aided' the '9/11' attacks (Grimmett 2006). This would remain in place over the duration of the subsequent administrations of Barack Obama and Donald Trump and still be in force at the onset of the Biden presidency in early 2021. This legislative *carte blanche* for the execution of an aggressive military-led and globe-spanning counterterrorism campaign would provide the justification for US military operations in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—specifically in the Philippines, Yemen, Djibouti, Kenya, Ethiopia, Libya, Syria, Eritrea, and Somalia (CRS, 2018)—as well as the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, beginning an era of seemingly unending 'forever wars', most notably in Afghanistan, that would dominate US foreign policy over the next two decades and define the historical legacy of the Bush presidency (Leffler 2013; Woodward 2012).

Strategically at the centre of the Bush Doctrine was the pairing of realist means—material resources of military power as the key determinant in shaping the structure of the international system—with liberal-internationalist ends: the active promotion of freedom and democracy globally, and in particular in the Greater Middle East (GME) region in order to guarantee the safety of the United States and its interests. Democracy promotion was directly linked to the active removal of the existential



threat seen in the combination of rogue regimes like Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Islamist terrorist organisations, such as Al-Qaeda, and their potential use of WMD against the United States, its allies and partners through pre-emptive war (Dalby 2009; Singh 2006). Geopolitically, the strategy was aimed at the members of President Bush's infamous 'axis of evil', within which he had grouped the countries of Iraq, Iran and North Korea, identifying them as national security priorities during his 2002 State of the Union Address:

By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic (Bush 2002a).

On an ideational level, the Bush Doctrine drew a sharp Manichean distinction between the universal values of freedom and democracy represented by the US, and totalitarian ideologies, such as Nazism, Soviet Communism and radical Islamism, described as manifestations of tyranny and evil (Kennedy 2013). The 2002 NSS accordingly defined the US's just cause as that of mankind itself: 'The United States must defend liberty and justice because these principles are right and true for all people everywhere' (White House 2002, p. 1). The strategic aim, as President Bush would reiterate during his Second Inaugural Address in 2005 was 'to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world' (Bush 2005).

Under the Bush administration, American primacy thus not only sought to prevent the rise of any rival great power achieving a position of hegemony in the principal geo-strategic regions of Western Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East as an end in itself, according to the grand strategy precepts of realism. For offensive realists like John Mearsheimer (2001), the maximisation of power is the means to ensure the strategic ends of national security and survival. As such, the United States has to defend its own position of regional hegemony in the Western hemisphere and also intervene militarily to thwart the aspirations of would-be hegemonies in their respective regions. For realists, countering the existential threat of German hegemony in Europe in World War I, fighting to halt and then reverse the expansion of the Axis powers in Europe and Asia in World War II, and checking the geopolitical aspirations of the Soviet Union during the Cold War was an acceptable use of American power. Fighting a costly war against the structurally relatively negligible threat of terrorism or having US troops act as engineers for socio-political transformation in, for example, Afghanistan was not.

Neoconservatives, on the other hand, were centrally influenced by Hegelian ideas of the singular path of historical progress and held fundamental convictions about the necessity of a morally-guided US foreign policy. The Bush Doctrine echoed these sentiments to a significant degree, articulating a special responsibility of the United States to use its unipolar position of global hegemony to maintain and expand the global reach of freedom and democracy (Donnelly 2003; Jervis 2003; Krauthammer 2001; Owens 2009; Thayer 2006). The strategic aim was to remake parts of the world in the US's own self-image (Nayak and Malone 2009; Tomes



2014, pp. 42–43). The ideational foundation that underwrote the Bush Doctrine's strategic vision of unilateral American primacy was thus a neoconservative belief in and articulation of American exceptionalism as the guiding principle for US policy, primarily executed via the unilateral and pre-emptive use of force. The basic tenets of American exceptionalism thereby not only established the United States as geographically separate, constitutionally unique and politically, culturally, and socioeconomically different from other countries (Lipset 1996), but also as a uniquely powerful entity and 'chosen nation' with a special role to play in world history (Ceaser 2012; McCrisken 2003).

As such, the Bush Doctrine both reflected and reinforced a prevailing sense of the uniqueness, superiority and ordained mission of the United States that was widely shared across the bipartisan foreign policy establishment (Zenko 2014; Walt 2011), as well as among the American population at large (Rosentiel 2006). The missionary, liberal-interventionist strand of American exceptionalism that informed the Bush Doctrine, however, not only characterised the United States as the greatest representative of the superiority and universal validity of the Jeffersonian ideals of liberty and democratic government, acting as an exemplary 'shining city upon a hill' in the words of Ronald Reagan. It also cast the United States in the role of a liberal crusader, tasked with enforcing these sacrosanct American values militarily against those tyrannical regimes and 'evil-doers', in the words of Bush, that violated them and whose existence was perceived as no longer tolerable in a post- '9/11' environment.

The colossal intelligence failure to detect and prevent the '9/11' attacks, and the reduced validity of strategic deterrence against opponents perceived to act not in accordance with political rationales but fanatical ideologies, thus worked together in informing the pre-emptive and interventionist logic of the Bush Doctrine, while at the same time, injecting its exceptionalist ethos with a new-found sense of urgency to rid the world of 'evil'. As President Bush would put it, the 'smoking gun' to prove the existence of WMD in Iraq could not come in the form of a 'mushroom cloud' over the United States of America (Bush 2002c). To this end, the Bush Doctrine was focused on the preservation of the dominant military, economic and geopolitical position of the United States in the international system (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008). As Bush declared during his graduation speech at the United States Military Academy at West Point in 2002: 'America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge, thereby making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace' (Bush 2002b).

The Bush Doctrine, in short, formulated its own version of Francis Fukuyama's famous 'end of history' thesis and actively sought to perpetuate the structural conditions of unipolarity under which it operated, and which allowed the United States to project its exceptional military power capabilities in pursuit of its national security interests and strategic goals virtually unhindered around the globe (Fukuyama 2005). The pursuit of global hegemony, and the nationalism and neo-imperialism the Bush Doctrine expressed, however, were genuinely perceived as serving the interest of mankind at large. American primacy was thus framed as acting in support of a universalist vision of democratic peace, freedom and progress that would



politically, socially and economically benefit the populations liberated by US forces. The democratic, peaceful, and prosperous post-war development of Germany and Japan would serve as preferred historical reference points to underwrite the validity of these ideological assumptions (Fiala 2007).

The indefinite perpetuation of unipolarity to underwrite a triumphant 'New American Century' under Washington's undisputed global leadership, and the dissuasion of any near-peer rivals to even attempt to match the power projection capabilities and military resources of the United States had long been a strategic priority in Republican circles in the United States following the end of the Cold War, especially among neoconservative thinkers and political practitioners. An early draft of the Pentagon's 1992 Defense Planning Guidance principally authored by Paul Wolfowitz, who later served as Deputy Secretary of Defense under George W. Bush and Donald Rumsfeld, presaged a neoconservative strategic vision of 'benevolent global hegemony' and 'strategic and ideological predominance' (Tyler 1992; Kagan and Kristol, 1996). The United States was seen by neoconservatives as the sole undisputed leader of the international system and paramount guarantor of the liberal world order its singular military and economic power and diplomatic leverage sustained (Kagan 2012). Neoconservative intellectuals and pundits, like William Kristol, Charles Krauthammer, Max Boot and Robert Kagan, and political practitioners, like Wolfowitz, John Bolton and Richard Perle, formed part of a larger network of Republican national security hawks and conservative American nationalists that decisively shaped the foreign and security policy of the Bush administration during its first term in particular, with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice-President Dick Cheney standing out as key influential figures in the practical implementation of the Bush Doctrine and its strategic vision of unilateral primacy (Robison 2006; Woodward 2004).

The so-called Vulcans amongst the president's foreign policy advisers (Mann 2004), named after the militarist alien race in the *Star Trek* science-fiction franchise, were unified in their support of massive defence budgets to perpetuate the US's technological and military supremacy, a profound distrust of international organisations and multilateral institutions for infringing on American sovereignty, and a strong ideological conviction in the moral righteousness, superiority and universal validity of core American values of freedom, liberty and democracy (Kagan and Kristol, 1996; Schmidt and Williams 2008). This included the fundamental conviction that the United States had the right to act unilaterally and pre-emptively if its national security was threatened. These were all key Republican and neoconservative primacist tenets that would be codified in the 2002 NSS, which might therefore be regarded as the foundational text of the Bush Doctrine (Krauthammer 2001). '9/11' therefore served as a catalyst that would allow the transformation of US foreign and security policy according to long-established conservative talking points, moral convictions, and key assumptions of strategic thinking that had guided politicians like Rumsfeld and Cheney since the 'second Cold War' under the Reagan administration in the early 1980s and their involvement with the 1970s-era Committee on the Present Danger (CPD) that had opposed *détente* with the Soviet Union and stressed the winnability of nuclear war (Dalby 2016).



The American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a leading conservative think tank and intellectual home for many neoconservatives, would enjoy particular prominence under the George W. Bush administration, where several of its members occupied significant positions in the national security establishment (Flynn, 2013).¹ Wolfowitz, Bolton, Perle, Kagan, and Cheney also were all signatories of Project for a New American Century (PNAC) statements and declarations, which had promoted a strategic vision of unilateral primacy as both functional necessity and moral obligation for the United States from the late 1990s. The assorted national security and foreign policy experts of AEI, PNAC, and other conservative think tanks, such as the Heritage Foundation and the Hoover Institute, were also major supporters of the geopolitical narrative of a Global War on Terror in response to the events of '9/11' (Croft 2006), a framing that was reinforced in leading media outlets such as the *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *New York Times* and major television (ABC, CBS, NBC) and cable news networks in the United States, in particular Fox News (Kull et al 2003; Steuter and Wills 2009).

This mutual discursive reinforcement of the Bush Doctrine's basic geopolitical, ideological and strategic rationales in the public sphere was most prominent in the run-up to the Iraq War in 2003, which was widely endorsed in mainstream US media and supported by a broad coalition of both liberal and conservative foreign policy experts and pundits as both morally justified and politically prudent (Boot 2001; Ignatieff, 2002). The many supporters of the Bush Doctrine in politics, think tanks, the media, and elsewhere were unified in their belief that 'imperialism with American characteristics was the only real answer to the kind of dangers that now threatened the peace' (Cox 2004, p. 590).

The apex of the Bush Doctrine's triumphalism and conviction in the moral righteousness and military might of the United States was probably reached when President Bush announced the end of major combat operations in Iraq, standing before a banner declaring 'Mission Accomplished' onboard the aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln* on 1 May, 2003. However, swift victory following the initial invasion and removal of the Saddam regime soon gave way to a lengthy occupation period, with Iraq for years teetering on the brink of civil war (Fearon 2007). Widespread sectarian violence between Sunni and Shiite armed groups, the rise of al-Qaeda in Iraq with a slew of terrorist attacks in the country, the strengthening of Iran's strategic position in the region, and the failure to find any trace of Iraqi WMD called into question the legitimacy of the Bush Doctrine's original rationale for pre-emptive war (Jervis 2005).

The unpreparedness of the Bush administration for the post-conflict situation in Iraq, repeated displays of political incompetence, graft and corruption in reorganising the country (Chandrasekaran 2010), and the rising number of dead and wounded US soldiers, as well as the high number of Iraqi casualties and refugees, and the

¹ These included: John R. Bolton, Under-Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs (2001–2005) and US Ambassador to the United Nations (2005–2006); Richard Perle, Chairman of the Defense Policy Board Advisory Committee (2001–2003); Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Secretary of Defense (2001–2005) and John Yoo, Deputy Assistant Attorney General (2001–2003).



escalating financial costs of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars undermined support for US-led military interventions as a tool for socio-political transformation and democracy promotion, at both home and abroad (Pew, 2008). The ‘surge’ of US troop numbers in 2007–2008, combined with an increased operational focus of American forces to protect civilian populations in line with a new counter-insurgency manual, and cooperation with Sunni militias (the ‘Anbar Awakening’) would provide a temporary stabilisation of the deteriorating Iraqi security situation (Biddle 2008). Dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the failure of US ambitions in Iraq were nonetheless substantial, and directly propelled the successful candidacy of Barack Obama, who had made his opposition to the Iraq War a centrepiece of his presidential campaign in 2008. Obama contrasted his critical stance with those of both his rival for the Democratic nomination Hillary Clinton and his eventual Republican opponent John McCain, both long-standing members of the Washington establishment who had supported Bush’s decision for war. Obama made it clear from the onset of his presidency that his strategic vision for the US role in the world was to depart significantly from that of his predecessor and a simplistic Manichean rhetoric of ‘you are either with us or against us’.

Against the overt display of unilateral American primacy under Bush, Obama contrasted a geopolitical vision of engagement, mutual respect, multilateralism and diplomacy that included strengthening traditional alliances and partnerships (Homolar 2012), as well as reaching out to long-standing adversaries and rivals, including the president’s announcement of a ‘new beginning’ with the Muslim world in a prominent speech in Cairo (Obama 2009a). The attempt to ‘reset’ relations with Russia followed (Deyermond 2013), and diplomatic overtures towards the Islamic Republic of Iran culminated in a nuclear deal in 2015, seen by his supporters as a singular achievement of Obama’s emphasis on cooperative engagement instead of pre-emptive military solutions to the problem of nuclear proliferation (Sterio 2016).

From the Bush Doctrine to the Obama Doctrine: *plus ça change*

Obama’s conciliatory rhetoric and open invitation to dialogue with a member of Bush’s ‘axis of evil’ underlined his Administration’s initial promise of a lasting policy change in Washington away from the unilateralism of the Bush Doctrine. In his first State of the Union Address, Obama accordingly announced a profound shift of perspective for US foreign policy: ‘In words and deeds, we are showing the world that a new era of engagement has begun. For we know that America cannot meet the threats of this century alone, but the world cannot meet them without America’ (Obama 2009a). A key point of this Obama Doctrine was to restore American soft power—the credibility and international legitimacy of the United States—which had reached a dramatic low point in many parts of the world in response to the Bush presidency (Pew 2008). During his speech before the United Nations General Assembly on 23 September, 2009, Obama denounced both neoconservative conceptions of unipolar dominance and a realist balance-of-power worldview of international relations, declaring that ‘power is no longer a zero-sum game. No one nation can or should try to dominate another nation. No world order that elevates one



nation or group of people over another will succeed. No balance of power among nations will hold' (Obama 2009b). A central point in Obama's speeches and statements was that the United States was strongest when it was able to lead through the power of its example, not alone through the example of its power. As his 2010 National Security Strategy would reiterate: 'Our moral leadership is grounded principally in the power of our example – not through an effort to impose our system on other peoples' (White House 2010).

However, cooperative engagement and calls for greater 'burden sharing' with allies and partners did not translate into a geopolitical vision of equally-shared partnership, or collective decision-making that would imply an acceptance of declining American power and influence by the President of the United States. As Obama would reiterate during his 2012 State of the Union address, directly referencing an article written by the eminent neoconservative scholar Robert Kagan: 'Anyone who tells you that America is in decline or that our influence has waned, doesn't know what they are talking about' (Obama 2012). Obama's emphasis on engagement, cooperative security, multilateralism and the joint benefits of a liberal world order under US stewardship were, taken together, *not* a radical departure from American statecraft, presidential rhetoric or US foreign policy traditions. Rather, he reiterated a prominent strand of liberal hegemony that was firmly rooted in the Wilsonian idealism of the Democratic Party and which combined a basic conviction in the virtues of American exceptionalism with a preference for American power to operate multilaterally and in accordance with and in support of the liberal international order at large, including in concert with the United Nations and NATO (Parmar 2018). Obama's emphasis on cooperative engagement was, at the same time, reflecting a tacit, realist-inspired acknowledgment of the structural demographic, economic and geopolitical shifts and changing power dynamics in a post-American world, most notably the emergence of China as an influential world power, which were eroding American unipolarity (Zakaria 2008).

These dynamics were also acknowledged in the long-term strategic forecasts of the national intelligence community (NIC, 2012). Politically however, Obama would at best hint at such geopolitical and geoeconomic realities that questioned the hegemonic premise of American self-identity and challenged its ontological security (Steele 2008). His introduction to the 2015 National Security Strategy revealed this tension between contradictory impulses. While the US global leadership role was described as 'indispensable', the document declared that the United States should not 'attempt to dictate the trajectory of all unfolding events around the world' (White House 2015). Obama also declared on several occasions that the United States was objectively exceptional in several respects, singling out the size of its economy, unmatched military capability, and constitutionally enshrined democratic values, and he reiterated that, if necessary, he was willing and able to act unilaterally, including with the use of force, to pursue the national interest. According to Obama: 'Strong and sustained American leadership is essential to a rules-based international order.....The question is not whether America should lead, but how we lead' (White House 2015).

The Obama Doctrine thus reconfirmed the dominant identity-security nexus that had underwritten the Bush Doctrine—the fusion of American exceptionalism and



global military pre-eminence—yet, at the same time it linked this ideational dimension to a pragmatic policy course meant to reduce the financial and military costs of American hegemony. As President Obama would explain at West Point in 2014:

America must always lead on the world stage. If we don't, no one else will. The military ...is, and always will be, the backbone of that leadership. But U.S. military action cannot be the only, or even primary, component of our leadership in every instance. Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail (Obama 2014).

Significant continuities between Bush and Obama, however, not only prevailed on the ideational level of hegemony as dominant strategic paradigm, but also in practical terms, most prominently in Obama's pursuit of an aggressive counterterrorism policy. Rhetorically, President Obama had indicated a significant change in US counterterrorism strategy, aiming to manage a threat that was downgraded from existential to existing. Obama thus finally retired the War on Terror terminology that had become synonymous with the Bush Doctrine's imperial overreach, and replaced it with the prosaic bureaucratic terminology of 'overseas contingency operations'. Obama's speech at the National Defense University in 2013, at the same time, reiterated that his Administration would continue to primarily rely on military means to combat terrorism abroad, exemplified in the president's signature policy tool of using drone strikes to eliminate suspected terrorist targets, which far exceeded the total number of such attacks carried out under Bush (Obama 2013, Porkiss and Serle 2017). The Trump administration would subsequently continue on Obama's course, replacing the former's centralised authorisation process in the White House with one managed by the Pentagon and further escalating the number of attacks (Cupp 2019).

Through drones, special forces and other covert operations like the deployment of the Stuxnet computer virus against Iranian nuclear facilities, the Obama presidency did not replace the Bush administration's military-led counterterrorism approach altogether, nor refute its pre-emptive logic in responding to the threat of WMD and terrorism. The Obama Doctrine, however, opted for a less militarily and financially costly 'light footprint' approach in the execution of American primacy to underpin US national security in line with Obama's post-American vision of hegemony (Brands 2014: 144–189, Sanger 2012). According to this strategic vision, the United States would still have a special responsibility for supporting international security and engage in global governance on issues ranging from climate change to management of the global economy, but it would act as *primus inter pares* and the preeminent networking power, rather than a singular global hegemon (Slaughter 2009). When President Obama announced a temporary troop increase in Afghanistan in 2009, his belief in ultimate American victory and overall commitment to the Pentagon's expansive counter-insurgency strategy, as supported by Generals David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal, was thus, at best, lacklustre. A more modest course of 'good enough' for Afghanistan (Gates 2014), employing military means to rule out future terrorist attacks on the United States from Afghan territory and to maintain pressure on the Taliban to come to the negotiating table, would therefore replace the enduring and costly statebuilding paradigm, corresponding to Obama's



strategic vision of hegemony. This was also evident in the president's announcement to begin the withdrawal of US troops from 2011 onwards:

We will not try to make Afghanistan a perfect place. We will not police its streets or patrol its mountains indefinitely.....Like generations before, we must embrace America's singular role in the course of human events. But we must be as pragmatic as we are passionate; as strategic as we are resolute. When threatened, we must respond with force – but when that force can be targeted, we need not deploy large armies overseas. (Obama 2011).

The Obama administration's limited military intervention in Libya in 2011 and Obama's ultimate refusal to enforce American credibility and the president's own 'red lines' against the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons in Syria in 2013 through air strikes (after initially mobilising the rhetoric of American exceptionalism to legitimate possible intervention before the American public in a televised address) were further prominent examples of the Obama Doctrine's challenges in reconciling the gap between identity discourse and security practice (Löfflmann 2015).

Donald Trump and America First

Where Obama had merely sought to modify American grand strategy in practice, while still fundamentally basing its underlying identity discourse on the ideational tenets of American exceptionalism and liberal hegemony that had centrally informed the Bush Doctrine, Donald Trump would frontally attack a 'failed and misguided strategic vision of globalism'. According to Trump, the corrupt establishment of the Washington 'swamp' had betrayed the American people. In prioritising the interests of international organisations, global corporations, and a bi-coastal liberal elite in the United States, foreign policy under both Republicans and Democrats had supposedly weakened the US through ruinous free trade deals, unchecked immigration, and costly military interventions (Trump 2016b). Trump's nationalist-populist vision of America First was framed as instead prioritising the direct political and economic benefit of the United States, endorsing foreign policy transactionalism, immigration restrictions, enhanced border security, and trade protectionism (Löfflmann 2019). The Trump administration's emphasis on 'principled realism' characterised the international system as a zero-sum arena of vigorous economic competition, strategic rivalry, and existential threats in which the United States had to prevail against democratic competitors and authoritarian regimes alike (McMaster and Cohn 2017). Hostility towards the liberal international order and resistance to the US role as its primary guarantor resulted from the fusion of nationalist anti-globalism and populist anti-elitism that was at the heart of Trump's America First credo (Daalder and Lindsay 2019).²

² During an extensive briefing in the Pentagon by Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in 2017, meant to convey to the president the inherent value and concrete benefits of a rules-based international order maintained by American leadership, Trump accordingly explained 'this is what I don't want' (Daalder and Lindsay 2019, p. 20).



The most significant departure from Bush and Obama at the level of grand strategy discourse was thus Trump's repudiation of American exceptionalism as a guiding principle for US foreign policy and ideational foundation of American liberal hegemony. Democracy promotion and human rights issues essentially ceased to be US foreign policy priorities under the Trump administration. In response to the 2018 assassination of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul, for example, which US and western intelligence services agreed had been carried out at the behest of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Trump ostentatiously prioritised US weapons sales over human rights concerns: 'I don't like stopping massive amounts of money that are being poured into our country..... they're spending \$110 billion on military equipment and on things that create jobs' (Borger et al 2018). During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump had already declared himself uncomfortable with the concept of American exceptionalism, viewing it as inaccurate and unhelpful given US relative economic weakness and continued 'exploitation' by countries like Germany and Japan (Sargent 2016). On Fox News, Trump also denied any moral superiority of the United States *vis-à-vis* the Russia of Vladimir Putin, claiming that the US was not innocent either of killing others (Phillip 2017).

On an ideational level, Trump's populist iconoclasm rejected the basic convictions and rhetorical staples of the Washington foreign policy establishment about the virtue and inherent ideological superiority of the US as a singular global beacon for freedom and liberty that had united Republican neoconservatives and Democratic liberal internationalists in support of an American grand strategy of liberal hegemony for decades.

Due to Trump's overall lack of coherence and consistency, poor attention to policy detail, an, at times, dysfunctional White House administration, and substantial resistance in the wider US national security establishment, however, there would emerge no recognizable Trump Doctrine that would systematically translate the nationalist-populist impulses of America First into structural policy changes, such as US withdrawal from NATO, or strategic realignment with Putin's Russia. In re-emphasising American global military primacy and the threat of nuclear-armed 'rogue regimes', in particular North Korea and Iran, Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy in fact revived key conceptual elements of the Bush Doctrine. The Trump administration's renewed strategic focus on great power competition with near-peer rivals such as Russia and China in a more hostile international environment, had some antecedents in the Bush administration's early focus on China as a strategic competitor (as well as the Obama administration's vaunted 'pivot to Asia'). Prominent members of the Trump administration, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton, were staunch neoconservatives and outspoken national security hawks, in particular in endorsing military action against Iran. Ideologically, the populist anti-globalism of the America First

Footnote 2 (continued)

<https://chicago.suntimes.com/news/2019/5/8/18619206/under-donald-trump-drone-strikes-far-exceed-obama-s-numbers>, accessed 19 May 2021.



framework was thereby compatible with a long-standing Republican foreign policy tradition of Jacksonian unilateralism and militarism that stressed the decisive and overwhelming use of force against threats to the United States, and which prioritised the country's national sovereignty and freedom of action in foreign affairs over the supra-national legal and institutional architecture of a liberal world order (Jones and Koo, 2017).

Strategic rationales for unilateralism, the pre-emptive use of military power against perceived threats to US national security, and global military supremacy were therefore significant elements of continuity that linked the strategic visions of the Bush and Trump administrations (White House 2017). Trump, for example, had vowed to 'rebuild' the US military after budget cuts under the Obama presidency that were framed as disastrous, and repeatedly celebrated the unmatched military might of the United States in public (Bowman 2021). However, as commander-in-chief, and despite bellicose rhetoric on Iran and North Korea in particular, Trump seemed particularly averse to risking American losses, and ultimately did not start new military engagements beyond the existing ones he had inherited in office. As President he repeatedly questioned the presence of US troops in places like Syria and Afghanistan and called off air strikes against Iran in 2019, citing concerns over civilian casualties for his decision. Trump seemed to perceive military power primarily as a preeminent status symbol of the United States in the world, and as providing political leverage to demand economic concessions from US allies and partners like Germany and South Korea, but not as an instrument to pursue wider strategic or geopolitical objectives as the Bush Doctrine had done.

The unilateralism of America First thereby manifested itself in the withdrawal of the United States from a series of international agreements, including the Paris climate change agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement (TPP), and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (i.e. the 'Iran Nuclear deal'), echoing the Bush administration's unilateral termination of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty and removal of the US from the Kyoto Protocol. Trump also promoted several policies in line with neoconservative priorities, including staunch support for Israel and recognition of Jerusalem as its capital, relatively high levels of defence spending and budget increases after the Obama-era sequester, and vigorous opposition to the supposed anti-American bias of parts of the United Nations, withdrawing the United States from the UN Human Rights Council. America First, however, was not merely a populist reimagination of neoconservatism. Central to Trump's nationalist-populist rhetoric was a narrative of American weakness and decline, through which he targeted the foreign policy orthodoxies of both Republicans and Democrats. Trump questioned key elements of the bipartisan elite consensus on American grand strategy, including through his sustained criticism of the NATO alliance and the US global network of alliances and partnerships in general, which had traditionally been viewed as the bedrock of US national security and its hegemonic role and position since the Second World War.

Trump also vehemently opposed US military interventions for the purposes of democracy promotion, having already declared in 2016 that 'in a Trump Administration, our actions in the Middle East will be tempered by realism. The current strategy of toppling regimes, with no plan for what to do the day after, only produces



power vacuums that are filled by terrorists' (Trump 2016a). This resulted in reconfiguring the dominant Republican discourse on grand strategy, reducing liberal hegemony and American exceptionalism to an emphasis on enduring military and economic supremacy for its own sake (Posen 2018). Trump's anti-interventionist and anti-NATO stance would be reined in by the US national security establishment to a considerable degree, yet they would nonetheless shape policy outcomes, most notably in the sudden announcement of the withdrawal of US troops from Syria in 2018 that triggered the resignation of James Mattis as Secretary of Defence, as well as in the continued drawdown of forces from Afghanistan, which Trump sought to accelerate against the wishes of the Pentagon. Trump's populist attacks on the US foreign policy establishment and its 'failed' policies, did thereby resonate positively with Republican voters, while a clear majority of Americans endorsed a more restrained and less interventionist foreign policy course in general (Bremmer 2019; Smeltz et al 2017).

This strong popular support forced many establishment conservatives to endorse America First positions over traditional Republican and neoconservative foreign policy priorities, such as an interventionist stance in support of the global spread of freedom and democracy that had actively guided the George W. Bush administration and its pursuit of a Global War on Terror and that had ushered in the post- '9/11' era of 'forever war'. Trump's populist agitation against endless wars and military interventionism contributed to an overall shifting of popular attitudes, reframing the terms of the foreign policy debate in Washington between advocates of restraint and supporters of military engagement in favour of the former.

Conclusions

The Bush Doctrine's linkage of American exceptionalism and military pre-eminence to a policy course of active interventionism and the pre-emptive use of force followed an internally consistent logic, even if it failed to achieve its stated ambitions. For the Obama Doctrine, American hegemony remained the predominant strategic paradigm on the level of policy legitimating discourse, but it was plagued by an inherent tension and contradiction. Obama's strategic vision of liberal hegemony for a post-American world was challenged by the countervailing impulses of 'nation-building at home' and 'leading from behind', which would frequently guide US policy choices in practice, calling into question the overall credibility of the US global leadership role as a result. Trump's America First stance, on the other hand, would negate the basic convictions of American exceptionalism among the Washington establishment, forcing Republicans to either go into inner exile as 'Never Trumpers', or to prioritise American nationalism over the activist promotion of human rights, liberal democracy and free trade.

The Trump presidency thereby exploited a long-standing gap between American public opinion and the US foreign policy establishment's preferences for the US role and position in world politics. It also mounted an unprecedented challenge to the political legitimacy and discursive dominance of the bipartisan elite consensus on liberal hegemony. Yet, while Obama sought to modify the practice of American



grand strategy, and Trump attacked its ideational foundations, both presidents were also fundamentally committed to preserving American power and influence and its singular global status, with neither the Obama Doctrine nor America First developing and implementing a fundamental strategic alternative, such as offshore balancing, or even neo-isolationism. After the Bush Doctrine, American grand strategy was still defined by the identity-security nexus of hegemony, oscillating between multi-lateral and unilateral manifestations of the exercise of American military power, and competing neoconservative, liberal-internationalist, and nationalist-populist articulations of primacy, which competed over definition of the national interest.

Joe Biden's decision for final withdrawal from Afghanistan has thereby symbolically ended the post- '9/11'-era in American grand strategy discourse. A strategic focus on great power rivalry, long-term political, economic, and military competition with China, and a renewed emphasis on American global leadership and Washington's commitment to human rights, freedom and alliances, as outlined in President Biden's Joint Address to Congress (Biden 2021) and the National Security Strategy released in 2022 suggest a revival of liberal hegemony as the predominant strategic paradigm in Washington DC. This return to strategic continuity, however, has to be gauged against the enduring popularity of Trump and his nationalist-populist vision among millions of Republican voters and an overall shift in American public opinion and elite attitudes in both parties away from the Bush Doctrine's emphasis on military interventionism, democracy export and nation-building that has shaped US foreign and security policy so decisively over the last twenty years.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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