The purpose of American strategic culture

A study of American exceptionalism and its implications for U.S. grand strategy and America’s global role

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to reconsider the current position of American exceptionalism in American society and its influence on U.S. grand strategy with regard to the future direction of U.S. world leadership. It offers an introduction to the debate on American exceptionalism, and argues that American exceptionalism has a profound impact on the formulation of strategy. Thus any adjustments in Americans sense of self may lead to great changes in its national interests and significantly alter its role in the world.

The thesis analyses whether there has been a shift in the American population’s beliefs, values and self-understanding the past decades. In order to provide answers, trends in American society such as religiosity, economic mobility and patriotism are examined, and the continued influence of American exceptionalism on American grand strategy is discussed.

The main findings of this thesis are as follows; the American public is turning away from core pillars of American exceptionalism which has led to a more sober and pragmatic self-image. This, in addition to the current security environment, has led to ambivalent views on the appropriate global strategy for the United States as it faces its future. The uncertainty about the future role of the United States in the world has already caused erosions in the international system. As such, this thesis also discusses the implications for the liberal world order if the declined belief in America as an exceptional nation leads the United States toward abandonment of some of its idealistic foundations.

This thesis proposes a hybrid strategy which corresponds with the current international and domestic setting. A strategy based on a continued leadership role for the United States, but at a lower cost due to higher levels of burden-sharing between America’s allies and partners. In addition, a combination of balance of power realism and discriminate intervention, with focus on multilateral institutions of liberal internationalism, represents fundamental aspects of American strategic culture and the ebb and flow between interests and ideals in American foreign policy.
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All remaining errors in this thesis are solely my own responsibility.

Cathrine Sneberg

Sandnes, October 19. 2015

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1 Introduction

Throughout the nation’s history, Americans have debated how to balance their priorities at home with their involvement in international affairs. The pendulum has fluctuated between greater and lesser willingness to engage in the world which, in part, is due to the unique dynamics that shape America’s role in the world. Traditionally, American grand strategy reflects a tension between idealism on one side, and realism on the other. While realist systemic and material principles represent the basis for U.S. grand strategy, the deep roots of idealism in American society connects the ends and means of its strategy to its liberal and democratic political system and values.

Ideals and national interests are often presented as mutually exclusive principles in international relations, but some scholars, among them Robert E. Osgood (1953: 1-23), emphasize that to comprehend American foreign policy it is necessary to understand the reconciliation of the two. He argued that the sole focus on national interest proved inaccurate in strategic analyses of America after World War II, and stated that idealism was «an indispensable spur to reason in leading men to perceive and act upon the real imperatives of power politics» (ibid: 448). Accordingly, any study of U.S. grand strategy must consider the special and complex synthesis between idealism and realism which represents a guiding principle for policy formulation in the United States.

The objective of this thesis is to further elaborate on a fundamental element of this idealism; the belief in American exceptionalism which relates to the domestic idea about the nature of the country the United States and entails deep-rooted American beliefs about its political system, its national identity, and its ideals, values and interests. In order to understand the complex nature of the American world order, it is necessary to understand the complex character of the American people which endorses contradictory impulses in foreign policy and ambivalent views on what role, if any, the United States should play in the world.

The premise of this thesis is that American exceptionalism profoundly affects how the United States acts and justifies its behavior in the world. The unique American sense of self and the special reconciliation between idealism and realism in U.S. strategic culture, in
addition to a clear operational concept, has provided stability, continuity and predictability in American grand strategy over time. Idealism has a uniquely important role for the formulation of U.S. grand strategy, and the continued importance of idealistic values and ideals in the nation’s grand strategic course is dependent on the preservation of the exceptional American self-understanding (Melby 1995: 34).

1.1 Backdrop on American Exceptionalism

Louis J. Halle (1960: 1) asserts that there has been one constant theme defining the history of American foreign policy. It is a theme of such importance that it dominates virtually every foreign policy debate and every significant decision. He argues that this theme takes the «form of a tension, a polarity in our thinking, a conflict in our national desires or attitudes which at critical moments in history has divided our people». The tension between active participation in world politics and withdrawal, or aloofness or abstinence; between involvement and isolation, between alignment and neutrality, has shaped U.S. foreign policy behavior throughout the history of the nation.

When explaining state behavior in the international system some scholars focus on domestic characteristics such as norms, ideas and strategic culture, while others focus on international pressures, the global distribution of power and national interests. While the concepts of power and culture are often presented as entirely incompatible, and ideals and national interest as mutually exclusive principles, several realist scholars try to bridge that gap by including domestic-level factors when explaining foreign policy behavior. These neoclassical realist scholars highlight the fact that even though state behavior first and foremost is explained by systemic factors, these factors must be interpreted through intervening variables at the domestic level to have explanatory power (Dueck 2006).

International pressures and events have led to transitions in the history of American grand strategy, and adjustments in American national identity and its self-image have had a
profound effect and acted as a contributing factor to the change in the nation’s foreign policy course. In the United States this self-understanding can be understood as the phenomenon American exceptionalism. The upcoming sections will further highlight the importance of this phenomenon and underline this thesis’ decision to focus on the nature of America’s self-image as grounds for adjustment in grand strategy.

Ever since the Founding of the American Republic this exceptional sense of self has influenced how the United States interacts with the rest of the world. It was represented in Washington’s Farewell Address, and in the Monroe Doctrine, in both the imperialism of Theodore Roosevelt and the internationalism of Woodrow Wilson, in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s mission to spread his «Four Freedoms», through the doctrines of the Cold War and the Reagan presidency, and in the Bush Doctrine after the attacks on 9/11 (McDougall 1997: 5; Kissinger 1994: 18). Still today it remains reflected in the core mission of the United States:

As Americans, we will always have our differences, but what unites us is the national consensus that American global leadership remains indispensable. We embrace our exceptional role and responsibilities at a time when our unique contributions and capabilities are needed most, and when the choices we make today can mean greater security and prosperity for our Nation for decades to come (Obama 2015a).

However, as soon as the United States suffers an economic, social or political setback, the belief in American exceptionalism is challenged and discussions on its future commence. K. J. Holsti (2011: 381) holds that the neoconservative turn during the Bush administration revived «discussion about exceptionalism as a theme in American foreign policy». Among others, Jonathan Monten (2005) highlighted the close relationship between the Bush Doctrine and the old tradition of American exceptionalism. Yet, the discussion did not end with the Bush presidency.

From his first presidential campaign, Barack H. Obama has been presented by conservatives as a threat to the American way of life. He has been characterized as “anti-American”.

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1 The Monroe doctrine can be summarized as U.S. foreign policy regarding the Latin American colonies in 1823. It stated that the independent countries on the American continents were not to be considered subjects for future colonization by European powers, and that any further efforts by any European power to colonize or interfere on the continents would be viewed as a threat to American peace and security which would require American intervention. Source: U.S. Department of State (n.d.) Milestones: Monroe Doctrine 1823. Retrieved from: https://history.state.gov/milestones/1801-1829/monroe.
described as lacking American roots, and even being accused of not being born in the United States. Since entering the White House, conservatives started challenging President Obama’s belief in American exceptionalism as a more subtle way of expressing his anti-Americanism (Restad 2015). This assertion was strengthened by Obama’s response to a question of whether he believed in American exceptionalism at a G20 press conference in Strasbourg. He stated that he believes in American exceptionalism, but then added: «just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism» an answer which created great controversy at home. The fact that he continued by saying: «I’m enormously proud of my country and its role and history in the world» did not seem to appease or reassure the American people that Obama indeed shares this belief (Obama 2009).

According to Terrence McCoy (2012), the term American exceptionalism appeared in U.S. publications 457 times from 1980 to 2000, while the next decade had it 2,558 times, before it dramatically leapt to 4,172 times between 2010 and 2012. The term became a central part of the 2012 presidential election, and campaign books emphasizing “American greatness” and criticizing Obama’s “disloyalty” were published by major Republican presidential candidates, including No Apology: The Case for American Greatness (2010) and Believe in America (2011) by Mitt Romney, and To Save America: Stopping Obama’s Secular- Socialist Machine (2011) and A Nation Like No Other: Why American Exceptionalism Matters (2011) by Newt Gingrich.

The term was widely used during Romney’s campaign to highlight his love for America and to accuse Obama for not having «the same feelings about American exceptionalism that we do» (Beinart 2014). Former mayor of New York, Rudy Giuliani (2015a) revived the debate when he, earlier this year, stated: «I know this is a horrible thing to say, but I do not believe that the president loves America... He doesn’t love you. And he doesn’t love me». In efforts to clarify his opinion he told Fox News that «I don’t hear from him what I heard from Harry Truman, what I heard from Bill Clinton, what I heard from Jimmy Carter, which is these wonderful words about what a great country we are, what an exceptional country we are» (Giuliani 2015b).

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2 Article published in National Journal without page numbers.
Against this political backdrop, several academic journals have published special issues related to the importance of American exceptionalism. For instance the topic of the inaugural volume of *American Political Thought* in Spring 2012 was “American Exceptionalism: Is It Real, Is It Good?” and Review of Faith and International Affairs’ Summer 2012 issue focused on “Religion and American Exceptionalism”. “Is America Still Exceptional?” was the main subject of *The American Interest’s* Spring 2013 issue. These publications discussed the various sources of American exceptionalism, and some attempted to reformulate the relationship between this belief and current U.S foreign policy (Cha 2015: 2).

The current debate on American exceptionalism can be understood as a symptom of the U.S. identity crisis that has formed in the wake of the erosion of the unipolar world order. The identity crisis is caused, in part, by the setbacks of the Bush administration. Taesuh Cha (2015:2) argues that: «reconsidering the meaning of American exceptional identity is not only a scholastic exercise, but an urgent practical problem regarding the future direction of U.S. world leadership». Therefore, the domestic idea about the nature of the country the United States will be decisive for future U.S. grand strategy and American leadership in the world.

With reference to the neoclassical realist framework, the premise of this thesis is that American exceptionalism, defined as the national identity of the American people, has profound influence on American strategic thinking and the formulation of U.S. grand strategy. It justifies how the United States behaves in the world, and acts as a filter through which material and systemic factors are translated into strategic choice. The unique American sense of self and the synthesis between idealism and realism in American strategic culture, represents a guiding principle for policy formulation in the United States and endorses contradictory approaches to grand strategy. Accordingly, the preservation of American exceptionalism in American society will determine the nation's strategic course for years ahead.
1.2 Research design

According to Hilde Restad (2012: 70), the question of whether the era of American exceptionalism is ending is irrelevant, and she argues that: «the United States is exceptional as long as Americans believe it to be exceptional». It is, therefore, essential to examine the current importance and presence of American exceptionalism in the United States, and the relationship between this old idea and current U.S. grand strategy. This will be studied by investigating contemporary trends in American society, and adjustments in American people’s values and beliefs. It will investigate empirically and systematically whether there has been a shift in the United States towards a more pragmatic attitude to America’s role in the world. Adjustments in this self-understanding may lead to great changes in America’s national interests and significantly alter its role in the world. Accordingly, the analysis will be structured around two questions in order to examine the current conditions of American exceptionalism.

I. To what extent are the sources of American exceptionalism still present in American society today?

II. What consequences might an adjustment in American exceptionalism have on America’s global role and strategy?

In order to measure the theoretical concept American exceptionalism, it will be operationalized by clarifying the indicators through which one might examine its existence. Seymour M. Lipset (1996: 26) notes that America «is the most religious, optimistic, patriotic, rights-oriented, and individualistic» country in the world. And according to Peter Beinart (2014), the characteristics that constitutes American exceptionalism can be summarized in three attributes — religiosity, patriotism and mobility. These indicators are assumed to significantly shape and influence the way the United States conducts itself in the world and will be further examined in Chapter 4.
1.3 Thesis outline

The first chapter has offered a short overview of the current debate on American exceptionalism, and provided the background for the need to examine whether there has been an adjustment in the American population’s beliefs, values and self-understanding. Chapter 2 provides the analytical and theoretical framework for this thesis. First, it gives a conceptual introduction of the term grand strategy, and secondly it presents the neoclassical realist model for explaining strategic adjustments. Chapter 3 defines the term American exceptionalism, offers an overview of the foundations of American exceptionalism and examines its impact on American foreign policy. In Chapter 4 a brief summary of the methodological framework for this research will be given and the indicators applied in the analysis will be discussed. Chapters 5 and 6 contains a two-part analysis seeking to answer the aforementioned questions on the continued role of American exceptionalism on American grand strategy. In order to provide answers to the first question, whether the conditions for American exceptionalism still apply today, trends in American society such as religiosity, economic and social mobility and patriotism will be examined. The second part of the analysis will provide a discussion on potential consequences for the formulation of grand strategy and America’s global role if these conditions are permanently changed. Chapter 7 will assess the overall findings; provide a summary of the thesis and a concluding discussion on key findings.
2 The importance of domestic characteristics on American grand strategy

This chapter will provide the analytical framework for the study of American grand strategy, and the theoretical approach that serves as the foundation of the central premise of this thesis; that American exceptionalism profoundly affects how the United States formulates its grand strategy, and that adjustments in this self-understanding may lead to great changes in America’s national interests and significantly alter its role in the world.

2.1 Analytical framework

In order to guide the subsequent analysis of the effects of American exceptionalism on grand strategic choice, this section will offer a definition of the term grand strategy and a clarification of the strategic alternatives available to American leaders and policymakers.

2.1.1 Grand Strategy

Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War*, offers the following definition of grand strategy: «Strategy [is] the use of engagements for the object of the war» (Clausewitz as quoted in Gray 1999: 17). The Clausewitzian definition and his distinction between tactical means and strategic ends still remain at the core of this term today. The concept of grand strategy was first used to describe what British military theorist Sir Basil Liddell Hart called the “higher level” of wartime strategy. This higher level coordinates all of a state’s available resources, be it military or non-military instruments of power, toward the political ends of a given war (Gray 1999:
In recent years, the concept of grand strategy has expanded to incorporate both tactical means and political ends. The term is no longer limited to achieving political ends only in circumstances of war; it also comprises periods of peace and a range of peacetime goals.

Colin Dueck (2006: 9-10) puts forward the following limits to the definition of grand strategy:

1. Grand Strategy is understood as the calculated relationship of ends and means in the face of one or more potential opponents. The essence of strategy and the process of formulating one involve the identification and reconciliation of national goals and resources, and setting priorities in the face of potential resistance. In a world of uncertainty and limited resources, in which states may or may not cooperate,
strategic decisions are necessary to further one’s interests in the face of conflicting and opposing views.

2. Grand strategy seems only to exist when there is the possibility of the use of force externally. Strategy also refers to the balancing on the part of states in the face of potential armed conflict with other international entities: states, terrorists and so on. This indicates that the military policy instrument is an essential part of grand strategy.

3. The pursuit of political, economic or ideological interests, ends, and objectives, is also an important part of grand strategy as it includes the use of non-military means such as diplomacy and foreign aid.

Accordingly, any grand strategy will involve the identification and prioritization of national interests, goals and objectives, as well as any potential threats to such interests and the resources and means with which a state will meet threats to protect its interests. In the words of John Lewis Gaddis (1982: viii), it is «the process by which ends are related to means, intentions to capabilities, objectives to resources».

To have a coherent grand strategy is imperative for nations as it provides an overarching sense of purpose in international affairs. In addition, strategic doctrines help build domestic support for the nation’s policies abroad. Dueck (2006: 11) adds that a grand strategy is a conceptual road map that describes how to combine identified resources to the promotion of identified interests, and it contributes in the process of how to rank interests, assess threats, and adapt resources. It can also be seen as a set of policy prescriptions, as any grand strategy provides clear guidelines to the use of policy instruments such as: the form and level of defense spending, the nature and extent of strategic commitments abroad, the deployment of military forces abroad, the use of foreign aid, the use of diplomacy with current or potential allies, and the diplomatic stance taken toward real or potential adversaries.
2.1.2 American Grand Strategy

Thomas Wright (2013) divides the debate on grand strategy into two camps, ‘restrainers’ and ‘shapers’, that contrast each other in their views about how the United States should engage in the world. For restrainers, solving domestic challenges should be of higher priority than international commitments. Meanwhile, shapers focus on the United States’ role as a global power and believe that it cannot «take a sabbatical to tend to the home front» as developments in the Middle East, East Asia or Europe could damage American interests in the world. While restrainers prefer a light footprint in the use of force to avoid the slippery slope into the messes of sustained involvements. Shapers believe the United States must remain a global leader and influence developments all over the world, and particularly in conflict-prone regions. Different interpretations of the challenges to American power lead to different approaches to grand strategy. In sum, restrainers seek to limit U.S. engagement in international events, while shapers seek to influence them.

Categories of U.S. Grand Strategy

The division of grand strategy into alternative categories is a good premise for an analysis of a country’s grand strategy. The different categories represent a given country’s emphasis on certain key elements of strategy, and the necessary strategic decisions and trade-offs in its formulation to further one’s interests in the international system. Accordingly, they indicate a given country’s interests, values, priorities and preferences in relation to national security.

These categories should be understood as “ideal types” of strategy, meaning sets of ideas shared by policymakers about how to maximize state security. A country’s actual grand strategy will often be a hybrid of one or two such ideal types (Kreps 2009: 634). Different approaches to grand strategy can be distinguished on the basis of several factors, according to their foreign policy objectives and means, their basic premises about the international

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3 Article published by Foreign Policy without page numbers.
politics, their preferred political and military instruments, and their preference between the use of national or international collective means (Miller 2010: 28-29; Melby 2009: 8-9).

One might consider the possible strategic options for the United States as a spectrum of ideal types from restraint (complete political and economic isolation) to assertiveness (coercive hegemony). While the extremes of the spectrum are not considered viable options, the distance that separates the other strategies from the respective ends of the spectrum is of interest. These five options will be discussed further, and they will contribute to the analytical framework for the upcoming analysis.

Figure 2.2 Spectrum of U.S strategic options

**Neo-isolationism.** This is the least ambitious and most restrained category of grand strategy as it largely focuses on the defense of the American homeland. It emphasizes a narrow definition of interests as national defense, and subscribes to a minimal or defensive realist view of international politics. Neo-isolationists hold that national defense will seldom justify interventions abroad. However, while seeking to avoid entanglements in foreign policy and political conflicts, this strategy opens for economic and diplomatic relations (Posen and Ross 1996/97: 7-14, Hoffman 2013: 23)

**Offshore Balancing.** Presented as a variant of restraint in grand strategy, this is a more classical strategy whose main ambition is to secure vital national interests and balance against geopolitical challenges. This approach advocates a significant reduction in U.S. strategic commitments as its financial and economic constraints highlight the need for the United States to set clear strategic priorities, including a transformation of the military into a smaller force and a pullback of American forces abroad (Posen 2013: 118, Hoffman 2013:
Selective engagement. This approach emerges from the realist tradition of foreign policy and it shares its focus on the balance of power (Art 2003). It is more assertive than the two previous options, more discriminate in the use of force, and more selective as to where U.S. interests are defined and protected. This approach calls for a more restrained strategy without humanitarian interventions or an American role as world police. Its main objective is the application of U.S. power in order to maintain regional balances and great power peace, but allows for long-term alliances, foreign military bases and commitments under a number of possible scenarios. However, the United States should, according to this strategy, be concerned with maintaining military commitments in Europe and Asia, as well as a presence in the Persian Gulf to forestall competition to its national interests (Posen and Ross 1996/97: 17-23).

Cooperative security. This strategy is more assertive as it encourages alliances and commitments abroad regardless of economic or geopolitical position, given that the United States receives support from the international system. It provides a guideline for an American global role founded on liberal principles and humanitarianism, with the use of collective institutional means, and the prohibition of armed aggression. It holds high potential for institutions like NATO and the UN to coordinate the deterrence and defeat of aggression, and for arms control and confidence-building measures to minimize security dilemmas. This strategy involves an emphasis on multilateralism and is connected to the notion of human security. This highlights the pressing need for the United States and its allies to build credibility and to increase their willingness to undertake humanitarian interventions (Posen and Ross 1996/97: 23-32; McDonough 2009: 9).

Primacy. Grand strategies following this approach are the most assertive ones, based on the belief that the United States’ preeminent position of material power in the international system is the key to ensuring peace. The main objective is the preservation of American supremacy which is achieved by further increasing its military capabilities, by containing any

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4 A condition of relative peace, meaning the absence of armed conflict or any major confrontation between great powers or important actors in the international system.
serious competitor to the hegemonic world order, and by disciplining misbehaviors all over
the world without relying on outside approval or support (Posen and Ross 1996/97: 32).
Accordingly, this approach involves a greater amount of military power, unilateralism and
willingness to use military forces than the other options, and it seeks to dissuade
competitors from challenging U.S. interests. It emphasizes the use of military means to
promote democracy and state-building efforts. Because of this, it is also the most expensive
strategic option (Hoffman 2013: 23).

Table 2.1 Summary of U.S. Grand Strategic Options

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Neo-isolationism</th>
<th>Offshore balancing</th>
<th>Selective engagement</th>
<th>Cooperative security</th>
<th>Primacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Premise</td>
<td>Minimal/defensive realism</td>
<td>Realism</td>
<td>Traditional realism</td>
<td>Liberalism, human security</td>
<td>Maximal/offensive realism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign policy</td>
<td>Strategic restraint, deterrence</td>
<td>Balancing regional competitor</td>
<td>Preparation for major peers</td>
<td>Assertive provided support and legitimacy</td>
<td>Assertive interventionist, democracy promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World order</td>
<td>Distant balance of power</td>
<td>Balance of power</td>
<td>Balance of power</td>
<td>Inter-dependence</td>
<td>Hegemonic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of alliances</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>Ad-hoc basis</td>
<td>Focus on key alliances</td>
<td>Heavy reliance</td>
<td>More unilateral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to use force</td>
<td>Lowest</td>
<td>Low Self-defense</td>
<td>More discriminate based on interests</td>
<td>Nearly indiscriminate, humanitarian interventions</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2 Theoretical framework

This section will outline the theoretical framework and highlight the importance of domestic characteristics in formulation of grand strategy. When explaining state behavior in the international system some scholars focus on domestic characteristics such as norms, ideas and strategic culture, while others focus on international pressures, the global distribution of power and national interests.

While the ideas of power and culture often get presented as entirely incompatible, and ideals and national interest as mutually exclusive principles, several realist scholars try to bridge that gap by including domestic-level factors when explaining foreign policy behavior. Therefore, the utility of a neoclassical realist approach when seeking to explain why states behave and act the way they do in the international system, as well as underlining its contribution when applied to the subject of grand strategy, will be presented. Specifically, it provides a more precise model for understanding how international and cultural variables interact to shape and determine patterns of strategic choice (Dueck 2006: 20).

2.2.1 The impact of ideas on politics

[...] the most important things to know about a society and its politics are its prevailing assumptions. Understanding how these assumptions become dominant, what role they play in determining policy while ascendant, and why they are replaced by other sets of assumptions should be at the heart of political science (Mehta 2011: 45-46)

Daniel Béland and Robert H. Cox (2011: 3-4) argue that across social science, ideas are increasingly seen as a primary source of political behavior. Ideas can either be defined descriptively as “causal beliefs”, meaning assumptions about the world around us and about how things are connected (ibid.), or as normative ideas; that is values and beliefs about how
the world should be. Jal Mehta’s (2011: 27-42) typology distinguishes between three different levels of ideas: ideas as policy solutions, as problem definitions, and as public philosophies or zeitgeist. This division contributes to our understanding of how each idea affects politics, and the interaction among the different levels. Public philosophies, meaning broader sets of assumptions about government and society, «are meta-problem definitions that shape how more specific problems are defined, which, in turn, affects which specific policy ideas seem to be viable solutions to the problem» (ibid: 43).

In terms of foreign policy, Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane (1993: 12-24) suggest that under conditions of uncertainty, ideas hold the potential of influencing policy outcomes as they “serve as road maps” and “focal points” that affect strategic choice and give definition to goals, means and ends. Ideas, once institutionalized in the society, constrain public policy as they shape the solutions to problems. The role of ideas on politics as explained by Goldstein and Keohane is criticized by Vivian A. Schmidt (2011: 52) for its focus on objective interests over subjective ideas and beliefs about these interests.

Instead, she argues that «institutions are better understood as the carriers of ideas or “collective memories”» making them connected to the national political discourse. In addition, she believes that subjective interests should replace objective ones, «as ideas about interests [...] bring in a much wider range of strategic ideas and social norms» (ibid.), and that institutions serve both as structures that constrain actions and as constructs created and changed by actors through a discursive process. By viewing politics in such a manner, ideas which are generated among policy actors and spread to the public by political actors through discourse and ideational exchange, are key to explaining both institutional change and continuity (ibid: 55).

2.2.2 Power and culture as decisive factors for strategic choice

The view that the international system is anarchic and that the distribution of power regulates a given state’s behavior and the policies it leads toward the rest of the world is
fundamental to realist theory of international relations. As the world consists of states with opposing interest, each state always faces the threat of conflict, violence and war which, in order to survive, makes it reliant upon its material capabilities and its relative position in the international system. This fact underlines the realist premise that changes in grand strategy are shaped by material or structural pressures at the international level, and that domestic-level differences tend to lose any explanatory power when faced with the pervasive pressures of international competition (Dueck 2006: 16-18).

Meanwhile, constructivist scholars who focus on cultural factors to explain changes in strategy argue that international pressures must be interpreted and represented subjectively, through a cultural process, to have any effect on strategic choice. The revived legitimacy of cultural variables after the unexpected end of the Cold war coincides with revived scholarly interest in ideas and domestic politics (Katzenstein 1996: 4-5). It is possible to trace the idea that culture could influence strategic outcomes back to classic works, including the writings of Thucydides, Sun Tzu and Carl von Clausewitz. But it was not until 1977, when Jack Snyder developed a theory of ‘strategic culture’ to understand Soviet nuclear doctrine, that culture was connected to modern security studies (Lantis and Howlett 2007: 84-85).

Individuals are socialized into a distinctively Soviet mode of strategic thinking. As a result of this socialization process, a set of general beliefs, attitudes and behavioral patterns with regard to nuclear strategy has achieved a state of semi-permanence that places them on the level of ‘culture’ rather than mere ‘policy’. Of course, attitudes may change as a result of changes in technology and the international environment. However, new problems are not assessed objectively. Rather, they are seen through the perceptual lens provided by the strategic culture (Snyder 1977: v).

Since Jack Snyder introduced the term of ‘strategic culture’ it has grown to become an integral part of the international relations vocabulary (Toje 2009: 3). The past decades have seen an increased interest in the study of culture and strategy, and according to Alistair Iain Johnston (1995a: 36), the conceptual debate on strategic culture can be divided into three generations, separated in time and main focus. The first generation, which emerged in the early 1980s, mainly focused on the differences between the United States and the Soviet
Union in terms of nuclear strategy. They argued that differences in strategic culture were caused by unique variations in macro environmental variables such as history, political culture, and geography. Colin Gray (1986: 37) contended that: «strategic culture and national style have very deep roots within a particular stream of historical experience».

The premise of rhetoric and intent, the difference between what leaders claim they are doing and the motives behind these actions, was the main focus of the second generation (Johnston 1995a: 39). One example is Bradley Klein (1988) who distinguished between declaratory and operational policies, where the first policy was used as a cover to justify the actual operational policy and American strategic culture of power projection. The third generation started in the early 1990s with a more narrow definition of strategic culture that, for the most part, excluded behavior as an element. The literature rather focused on particular strategic decisions as dependent variables with a wide range of research focuses as the independent variable, for example military culture, political-military culture, or organizational culture (Katzenstein 1996; Desch 1998: 142).

After the Cold War, the study of strategic culture developed to include other nations and other security affairs than those of the previous era. Classic examples include Alastair Iain Johnston’s (1995b) exploration of the strategic culture of “cultural realism” in Chinese security policy during the Ming dynasty; in his study of Anglo-German dynamics during World War II, Jeffrey Legro (1995) contends that militaries have different organizational cultures that will lead them use different strategies; Thomas Berger’s (1998) coverage of the unique antimilitarist strategic culture that became deeply rooted in German and Japanese security policy in the post-Cold War era; Elizabeth Kier’s (1995) study of France between the two World Wars which shows the importance of organizational culture in the development of military doctrine; and Samuel P. Huntington’s (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* in which he contends that the new patterns of conflict are between nations and groups of different civilizations. The current security environment also presents opportunities for further studies of strategic culture considering the erosion in the
unipolar world order and the emergence of the European Union and China as important actors in the system (Toje 2009: 7)

Table 2.2. Potential sources of strategic culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Political</th>
<th>Social/cultural</th>
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<td>Geography</td>
<td>Historical experience</td>
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<td>Climate</td>
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<td>Technology</td>
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Source: Lantis and Howlett (2007: 86)

Considering the value of American exceptionalism in the formulation of grand strategy in the United States, this thesis will utilize the following definition of strategic culture: a set of interlocking values, beliefs and assumptions that are held collectively by the people of a given state that relate to political and military strategic affairs, and that are passed on through socialization (Dueck 2006: 14-15). Culture is a factor of great significance as it can shape strategic choice in several ways; it affects the manner in which international events, pressures, and conditions are perceived (Berger 1998: 9, 12), it provides a set of causal beliefs regarding the efficient pursuit of national interests (Goldstein and Keohane 1993: 13-17), and it helps determine the definition of those interests by providing prescriptive foreign policy goals (Berger 1998: 16-19).

The closeness between strategic culture and a sense of national self-image or identity, makes it likely that any infringement of accepted norms or any abandonment of culturally

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prescribed national goals will provoke domestic opposition that is both strong and emotional since such norms and goals are closely linked to a basic sense of national identity (Berger 1998: 21). Culture also dictates strategic behavior in the international system by shaping the preferences, perceptions and beliefs of a given nation’s citizens. By adhering to a state’s unique, deep-rooted cultural assumptions, each state is predisposed toward certain strategic choices and policies while rendering others inconsiderable (Dueck 2006: 15-16). Once institutionalized in the society, strategic culture constrains and limits the range of options, tactics, and policies that are accessible to policymakers as they shape the solutions to problems (Goldstein and Keohane 1993: 20-24).

Theories that favor domestic variables argue that internal factors such as political and economic ideology, national character, partisan politics, or socioeconomic structure decide state behavior, and foreign policy is to be interpreted as a product of these internal dynamics. Following this perspective, the preferences and structures of key domestic actors should be reviewed to understand why a particular state is behaving in a particular way. The main obstacle to this approach is that it does not offer an explanation for divergent behavior from states with similar domestic structures, or similar behavior from dissimilar states. Realist theories on the other hand, have a clear emphasis on the international level where security is scarce and states try to secure their own interests by maximizing their relative advantage (Rose 1998: 148-149).

John Mearsheimer (as quoted in Rose 1998: 149) and other offensive realist note that states pursuing security often are forced to take actions to expand their relative power which can lead to conflict with other states because of the structure of the international system. Realists do not pay much attention to the internal differences between states. They argue that an examination of a state’s relative capabilities and its external environment will explain its foreign policy behavior as these factors shape how the state chooses to advance its interests. While they assume the pressure from the international system to be strong enough to make states in similar situations behave alike regardless of their domestic characteristics, realist theories are often oversimplified as states with similar structure do not always behave similarly (Rose 1998: 148-149).
2.2.3 Neoclassical realism

An alternative to cultural and power-based theories of strategic adjustment can be found in neoclassical realism. In recent years, several realists have sought to reduce the gap between power and culture, and the tendency to include domestic-level factors when explaining foreign policy behavior has increased. This neoclassical realist approach is based on the classical realist assumption that state behavior first and foremost is explained by systemic factors such as its position in the international system, its relative material power capabilities, or international pressures or threats. But what separates them from classical realists is the notion that international systemic factors have an indirect impact on foreign policy and it is important to examine the contexts within which foreign policies are formulated and implemented.

In other words, intervening domestic-level factors are included to produce greater predictive and empirical precision in foreign policy analysis. Because the formulation of foreign policy lies in the hands of political leaders, state institutions and elites within a society, it is their perceptions of relative power that are emphasized rather than simply the actual quantities of resources or forces. Gideon Rose (1998: 147) also points out that policymakers do not always have the opportunity to allocate resources according to their wishes because the strength and structure of states relative to their societies may affect the proportion of national resources that can be used for foreign policy purposes (Rose 1998: 146-147; Dueck 2006: 18).

How can the neoclassical realist approach be useful when explaining changes in grand strategy? First, it begins with the fact that the international system is the most important overall cause of strategic behavior and that the dominant factor shaping foreign policies over time is a state’s relative material power compared with the rest of the international system. This would suggest that change in grand strategy is motivated by changes in the international distribution of power and/or changes in a state’s perceived level of external threat. If a state achieves more power or face greater threats from abroad, neoclassical realists assume that states will respond by seeking to control and shape their external
environment and seek more influence abroad through a more costly and expansive grand strategy. Accordingly, if a state face a relative decline in power and fewer threats, their actions and ambitions will be scaled back and they will adopt a less costly and less expansive grand strategy (Rose 1998: 150-152; Dueck 2006: 18-19).

Second, the neoclassical realist approach will argue that one cannot rely solely on systemic factors in foreign policy analysis. To comprehend the manner in which states interpret and respond to their external environment, it is important to understand how the systemic factors are translated through a cultural process by intervening variables at the domestic level. As mentioned earlier, neoclassical realists finds systemic factors to have an indirect impact on foreign policy and considers that, it must be filtered through the perceptions and preferences of a state’s policymakers to have explanatory power. This proposes that culture can predispose a state toward certain strategic choices, thus limiting the range of acceptable policy alternatives in a given situation. According to this approach, the international system and the global distribution of power can only guide foreign policy by affecting decisions taken by policymakers. This makes it important to explore how each state’s officials perceive their current situation in order to understand how cultural factors can help specify and explain the final choices they make (Rose 1998: 152, 157-160; Dueck 2006: 19).

The second intervening variable is the strength of a country’s state apparatus and the relation it has to its society and citizens. Governments and national leaders may not have easy access to the nation’s total material power resources; foreign policy analysis must therefore take into account the need for new domestic support to allocate necessary resources and for any new departures in grand strategy. As such, how ideas are generated, debated, adopted, communicated by policymakers and political leaders to their public through a discursive political process, is key to understanding both change and continuity in policy choice (Schmidt 2011: 57-58).

Colin Dueck (2006: 19) also highlights the importance of domestic support considering that such changes must be politically feasible and legitimate at home before they can be implemented abroad. The concept of national political power, which Thomas Christensen (as cited in Rose 1998: 163) has defined as «the ability of state leaders to mobilize their nation’s human and material resources behind security policy initiatives», acts as an important
intervening variable between the challenges states face from the international system and the strategies they follow in order to meet them (Rose 1998: 161-164).

Policymakers, who in some way violate cultural preferences and expectations when formulating a country’s grand strategy, risk their own political support, as well as the success of their chosen policies. Anticipating potential reactions creates strong political incentives to frame choices and new strategic initiatives in terms that are culturally acceptable and in accordance with cultural preferences. In fact, policymakers may also share, come to share, or even shape the cultural preferences and perceptions held by their constituents, especially if they are closely linked to a sense of national identity (Dueck 2006: 19).

The theoretical framework presented by neoclassical realist thus integrates insights from both constructivism (ideas/culture) and discursive institutionalism (national discourse) to the realm of realism to include domestic-level factors when explaining adjustment in policy choice. This can be summarized as in the following figure, showing how domestic-level factors act as filters through which the systemic factors are translated into strategic choice.

![Figure 2.3. The neoclassical realist framework of strategic choice](image-url)
3 American exceptionism and U.S. grand strategy

When applying the neoclassical realist framework to the case of the United States, Colin Dueck (2006: 21) argues that features that are unique for the United States and American society represent an important part of the structural basis for the formulation of U.S. grand strategy.

Any study of change in American grand strategy that incorporates cultural factors is required to specify the cultural traits that are unique to the United States. Accordingly, the factors that are related to an American national identity and strategic culture have to be examined to understand its decisive influence on how changes in grand strategy are expressed politically. Hilde Restad (2012: 53) asserts that the domestic idea about the nature of the country the United States has a profound effect on its foreign policy, and that in the United States this predominant idea can be summarized in the phenomenon American exceptionism. Svein Melby (1995: 20) also notes that this exceptionalism contains elements that are of great importance to the United States and its choice of strategy as it underlies the American perception of its external environment.

3.1 American strategic culture

The idea of an American national style is derivative from the idea of American strategic culture, suggesting that there is a distinctively American way in strategic matters (Gray 1981: 22).

American foreign policy reflects a long tradition of tension between idealism and realism. The synthesis of realism and idealism has historically manifested itself in the foreign policy
traditions of the United States, and led to an ebb and flow between strategies of restraint
and assertiveness. Therefore, it is necessary to comprehend the nature of this synthesis in
order to understand the formulation of American foreign policy (Osgood 1953).

Halle (1960: 110) summarizes this view by stating that the juxtaposition between ideals and
national interests «appears to epitomize the dilemma and the paradox of American foreign
policy». Condoleezza Rice’s (2007) use of the term American realism when describing the
Bush administration’s foreign policy can be seen as a concrete example of this reconciliation.
She further characterized this term with the following phrase: «[w]e will never bring our
day-to-day interests into perfect harmony with our ideals. But that is a challenge for policy,
not a license to ignore our principles».

Colin Dueck (2006: 21) distinguishes between two dominant features of the United States’
traditional strategic culture; the first being the relative weight of classical liberal
assumptions within American strategic thinking, and the second, a historical and intense
preference for limited liability in strategic affairs. The history of American grand strategy is a
history of reluctant crusaders. These two features of American strategic culture have
operated cyclically as well as simultaneously between the promotion of a more liberal
international order and the reluctance to admit the full costs of promoting this liberal vision
(ibid: 3).

Americans define their national identity according to a classic liberal set of beliefs that
accentuate individual freedom, equality of right, majority rule, progress, enterprise, the rule
of law, and the strict limits of the state. The importance of liberalism in the United States is
most likely connected to material conditions such as plentiful land, a predominant middle
class, and the recurrent need to integrate new immigrants from a variety of backgrounds
(Hartz 1955: 4-11; Lipset 1996: 31-52). It has been reinterpreted over time, but the liberal
tradition has remained important in shaping American strategic culture. This tradition
assumes that progress in international affairs is possible, and does not simply understand
international relations as a cycle of conflict, war and balance-of-power politics (Dueck 2006:
21).

The second characteristic of American strategic culture is the assumptions of limited liability which can be defined as «a culturally shaped preference for avoiding costs and commitments in grand strategy, to an extent that is actually inconsistent with stated and established international goals» (Dueck 2006: 26). This has affected U.S. grand strategy in two ways throughout history. First, it has meant that the United States often takes on a smaller role in international affairs than expected considering its position in the world and its considerable material power. Secondly, it encourages a disjunction between ends and means in its foreign policy as it seeks to pursue foreign policy goals with limited means.

This feature seems to be rooted in a combination of historical, geopolitical, institutional, and cultural factors. The preference for limited liability was eventually overturned by immense international pressures when the United States entered World War II, but it still has a strong and independent effect on U.S strategic behavior today. Historically, strategies of non-entanglement and disengagement have been favored by Americans, and the country’s unique geopolitical position, the separation from any other major military power by two great oceans, has created a mindset that does not see the necessity for costly, long-term commitments overseas.

The American political system also tends to act as a constraint to a more expansive grand strategy. It was created to resist dramatic policy changes and the challenge to mobilize public and legislative support for costly international initiatives is hard to overcome as the United States’ federal government is fragmented, decentralized and constrained by the power division between the president and Congress. Finally, assumptions of limited liability are implicit within the classical liberal tradition that informs American strategic culture. While liberal ideas can encourage the use of military force to achieve strategic goals, the tendency is toward a peaceful, democratic international system. Even though short-term military intervention sometimes may be necessary to meet international threats, economic and diplomatic means are preferred by liberals (Dueck 2006: 27-30).

The classical liberal assumptions have acted as a filter on potential policy options in the United States, allowing certain strategic alternatives while rendering others unthinkable. At the same time, the tradition of limited liability in matters of grand strategy has influenced Americans to limit costs of overseas commitments. The first part of American strategic
culture will often encourage U.S. officials to define American goals in idealistic, expansive, and global terms, whilst the other will discourage Americans from making concrete sacrifices toward that liberal vision. Former Secretary of State George Shultz (as quoted in Kissinger 2014: 329):

Americans, being a moral people, want their foreign policy to reflect the values we espouse as a nation. But Americans, being a practical people, also want their foreign policy to be effective.

Domestic cultural forces tend to constrain U.S. strategic behavior abroad and pull it in a more liberal direction, while international conditions tend to stimulate American involvement overseas often leading to unwanted compromise on its liberal principles. The result is a persistent tug of war between international pressures and American strategic culture (Dueck 2006; Schmidt 2011). The fundamental goals of U.S. foreign policy, the promotion and protection of democracy and liberal values to build a more peaceful world order and the maintenance of global stability to protect national interests and domestic security are deeply rooted in American history and in its national identity. To achieve these goals, the ideals and national interests of the United States has to be reconciled in a manner that makes it in America’s national interest to protect the idealistic values it represents (Osgood 1953; Melby 1995).

### 3.2 The sources of American Exceptionalism

According to Jonathan Monten (2005: 119), the American political identity is expressed in foreign policy primarily through the idea of American exceptionalism. Deborah Madsen’s (1998: 1-3) main argument is that American exceptionalism affects every period of American history and «is the single most powerful agent in a series of arguments that have been fought down through the centuries concerning the identity of America and Americans».
3.2.1 An exceptional national identity

The question “who are we?” is important for the American people. Since the nation is composed of people from every corner of the world, the issue of roots, origins and national identity becomes an essential and complex one for most Americans (Moen 2005: 11). Political scientist Samuel Huntington (1997: 28) argued in *Foreign Affairs* that: «national interests derive from national identity. We have to know who we are before we know what our interests are». Sociologist Anthony Smith (2003: 24-25) further defines national identity as the «maintenance and continual re-interpretation of the pattern of values, symbols, memories, myths, and traditions that form the distinctive heritage of the nation and the identification of individuals with that heritage and its pattern».

Even though the history of the United States is quite short, Americans are highly aware of their unique past and the nation regards itself as different, exceptional and unlike any other nation. The American national identity is not grounded in ethnicity, language, race, skin color, or a long common history as is the traditional sense of belonging in the Old World (Moen 2005: 11-16). Americans rather define themselves and their unity based on a shared belief in a set of universal ideas and principles dating back to the Founding of America: liberty, equality, democracy, constitutionalism, liberalism, individualism, and limited government. These ideas and principles represent the American Creed, and are, by foreign observers of the United States from Crèvecoeur to Tocqueville and Bryce⁷, to the present, widely viewed as a fundamental basis of American identity. In the words of President Barack Obama (2011):

> We may have differences in policy, but we all believe in the rights enshrined in our Constitution. We may have different opinions, but we believe in the same promise that says this is a place where you can make it if you try. We may have different backgrounds, but we believe in the same dream that says this is a country where anything is possible. No matter who you are. No matter where you come from.

Hilde Restad (2015: 2-3) argues that American exceptionalism is a meaningful way of defining the elusive category of American identity. By doing this, exceptionalism is treated as a subjective self-understanding that is made up of three important ideas that explain America’s role in the world. Each idea represents a different aspect of the perceived historic significance of the United States and inspires a certain kind of foreign policy. First is the idea that the United States is distinct from the Old World; second, that it has a special and unique role to play in world history; and third, that the United States will resist the historic notion that all great powers eventually fall. These three aspects have important consequences for how the United States relates to the rest of the world (McCrisken 2003: 8-10).

The first aspect of American exceptionalism is classified by Restad (2015: 3) as “the distinction” and summarized by Byron Shafer (1991: v) as: «the notion that the United States was created differently, developed differently, and thus has to be understood differently — essentially on its own terms and within its own context». The United States of America was founded upon and developed from a set of ideas and beliefs from the Age of Enlightenment. Accordingly, American exceptionalism as a national identity is not an objective truth, it rather represents a self-understanding or a self-image that is so special that it not only makes Americans different from the rest of the world, and it makes them better and more unique (McCrisken 2003: 8).

The American identity reflects a strong belief in the ideas of «life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness» (Declaration of Independence 1776), and it believes that the United States is freer, more individualistic, more democratic, and more open and dynamic than any other nation. It represents a society based on openness where Americans are equal and have the same opportunities, unlike the Old Europe and its class-based system where you are born into your destiny (Halle 1960: 7-8). These exceptional qualities of the United States have roots that date back to the British Puritans’ arrival to the American colonies in 1620 and the Founding of the United States of America.

According to Restad (2015: 4): «if one does not believe that American exceptionalism means better rather than different, one’s Americanness is open to questioning». This is partly due to the cultural heritage, the nation’s history and the unique way the American national identity has developed over time. As expressed in Thomas Paine’s (as quoted in Monten
dedication of The Rights of Man where he wrote that the United States was
founded to see «the New World regenerate the Old», American exceptionalism involves the
belief that the founding of the United States inaugurated a new era in world history, where a
completely new and different political entity entered the world stage. This belief in U.S.
distinction from the rest of the world is powerful, persistent, pervasive and as alive today as
it was in early U.S. history (Madsen 1998; Deneen 2012: 30).

The second aspect can be defined as “the mission”, or the premise that American
exceptionalism endows the United States with a unique role to play in world history.
Jonathan Monten (2005: 119) argues that American identity «has been organized around a
particular conception of the national purpose, expressed in foreign policy as the belief that
Americans are “a chosen people”, an elect nation guided by a “special providence” to
demonstrate the viability and spread the democratic institutions and values that inform the
American experiment». The mission to advance American ideals and values has been fairly
constant in U.S. grand strategy and has helped frame presidential discourse on foreign policy
projects from the 1776 Revolution to President Obama’s case for military intervention in
Syria. This special role involves two tasks for the United States; the advancement of America
as a model for the rest of the world and the promotion of American leadership (McCrisken
2003: 8; Kristol 2013: 100; Restad 2015: 5-6).

The resistance of America’s great power status is a powerful idea in the United States, and
represents the third aspect of American exceptionalism. The belief that the United States
can surpass the historic notion and avoid the same fate as other great empires of the past,
that is a fall into ruin, links exceptionalism to the continued growth of the country
(McCrisken 2003: 10). This aspect of American exceptionalism has seemingly been
vindicated, and according to Restad (2015: 6): «the United States had proven itself to be that
special nation that shall lead all other nationals toward the “end of history” after the Cold
War».

American exceptionalism represents an idealized self-understanding of the United States.
Because of its strong presence in American society, the maintenance of an active
international role and foreign policy course over time will be determined by the extent to
which this self-image can be preserved. Changes in the American self-understanding can
cause considerable reactions and even lead to a restructuring and adjustment of the nation’s grand strategy. This makes American exceptionalism crucial to the general course of U.S. foreign policy, and it represents a distinctive characteristic that separates the formulation of American grand strategy from other states. It also contributes to a degree of uncertainty when it comes to American commitment in international affairs. This is emphasized when examining the deeper foundations of American exceptionalism and its two principal approaches to foreign policy (Melby 1995: 21-22).

3.2.2 The varieties of American exceptionalism

The exceptional national identity that Americans have ascribed themselves is, in both classic as well as contemporary literature on U.S. foreign policy, said to have produced two divergent foreign policy approaches⁸. Henry Kissinger (1994: 18) finds two contradictory attitudes in how the United States conceives its international role: «America as beacon and America as crusader». While both attitudes are products of the American experience and envision an international world order based on democracy, free commerce and international law, their perspective on how America should behave in the world.

The first attitude is an exemplary approach in which America as a “Promised Land” serves its values best by perfecting democracy at home and acting as a beacon for the rest of the world. Meanwhile, the second holds that America as a “Crusader State” is called upon to save the world, and that America’s values impose on it an obligation to crusade for these values around the world (Kissinger 1994: 18; McDougall 1997: 5). Anthony Smith (2003: 93) identifies the same dichotomy, distinguishing between “covenanted peoples” who «turn inward away from the profane world» and “missionary peoples” who «seek to expand into and transform the world». Accordingly, the exemplary and the missionary approach are

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bound together by the concept of American exceptionalism as both have roots in the same political and religious sources (McCrisken 2002: 64–65).

**An exemplary identity**

Since the arrival of the British Puritans to the American colonies with the Mayflower in 1620, the United States has represented a haven for the deserving, a new beginning for the persecuted of the Old World, and for people seeking the social and economic mobility that the United States can offer. To them, the United States represented a sanctuary from the Old World and its restrained political, economic and religious systems — the United States offered the “sense of escape” (Halle 1960: 13-15).

The United States was founded in separation from the politics of the Old World and its balance-of-power system. The overall goal was to build a new societal system and to protect this unique experiment from the ideas and influences of the Old World. In order to ensure this, U.S. participation in world affairs had to be kept at a minimum. Any entanglement with the Old World and its great power politics could jeopardize American core values. Alexander Hamilton encouraged this approach to America’s role in the world, arguing that the United States should not take on the burden of other people’s problems considering their own domestic troubles (Brands 1998: 3). The approach contends that the United States can «better serve the cause of universal democracy by setting an example rather than by imposing a model» (Mead 2002: 182).

Keeping the rest of the world at an arm’s length and appearing as “a city upon a hill” entailed that American institutions and values should be perfected and preserved, and that the United States should exert influence on the world through the force of its example. The United States should shine its example throughout the Old World, but not engage directly with it (Brands 1998: viii, 3-4). According to this view, the United States should remain somewhat detached from international politics and alliances, and follow a non-interventionist strategy regarding military conflicts overseas, to best serve and secure American interests and promote political change internationally. The exemplary aspect of
exceptionalism sets strict limitations to the level of engagement in American foreign policy. While it may contain an element of active engagement in the world, it only does so after the spread of American values has contributed to significant change in the international order (Dueck 2006: 23).

Even if the sense of escape approach was most prominent in early periods of American history, and its explanatory power weakened since World War II, it still represents an important part of American foreign policy debate. The reluctance and misalignment that has characterized the American role as a superpower gives credit to the continued existence of this perspective. While traditional great powers would naturally take a leadership role and exploit its position in the system, the United States has on several occasions seemed reluctant and unwilling to participate to its fullest potential, allowing allies to contribute and lead to a larger extent than the actual power balance would suggest. This has actually contributed to a stronger international position for the United States than clear power politics would have, because this approach to foreign policy has given them more credibility and a higher level of trust in the international system than any other traditional great power (Melby 1995: 23-24).

A missionary identity

The second perspective shares the “city on a hill” identity, but argues that the United States must move beyond example and undertake active measures to spread its universal political values and institutions to the world (Brands 1998: viii, 6). While the exemplary approach is introverted and defensive in its origin, the missionary perspective is built on the belief that the United States can only uphold the demands and expectations of exceptionalism through an outward-looking and offensive foreign policy. Engagement in world affairs and an active foreign policy is key to securing American overall foreign policy goals and protecting the American idealistic societal system.

Followers of this perspective see it as «an American duty to remake the world in its image» (Mead 2002: 147). Through an active American foreign policy, the international system shall
find ideological harmonization in the American image which, following classic idealist theory represents the path toward an international system without conflict. This perspective is seen as interventionist in its strategy, but to classical liberal ends. The main goal is to remove authoritarian governments throughout the world, and remake the international system in America’s image to secure the American experiment (Dueck 2006: 23).

The “manifest destiny” approach has played a major role in American foreign policy history, and it created the ideological and legitimizing basis for the territorial expansion of the United States in the 1800s (Brands 1998: 9-11). The journalist John L. Sullivan is said to have coined the term *manifest destiny* in 1845, and described its goal as «to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions» (Sullivan as quoted in Restad 2015: 38). According to Sullivan, Providence had designated North America as the stage for demonstrating the larger course of history, and armed with this divine mandate, the United States could legitimize their territorial expansion as a manifest of their destiny. Clearly, the connection between religion and idealism is an important one for the American people and their exceptional national identity. This is substantiated by the fact that although the term manifest destiny was coined in 1845, the mindset leads back to the Puritan tradition.

### 3.2.3 The influence of American exceptionalism on U.S. foreign policy

As scholars agree that each of the approaches are connected to a foreign policy dichotomy between isolationism and internationalism, American exceptionalism involves a substantial potential for adjustments, fluctuations and inner conflict with regard to the nature and extent of international engagement in American foreign policy. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (1994: 17) states in *Diplomacy* that American foreign policy and its accompanying rhetoric has always had at its heart a tension between those who would argue that: «America serves its values best by perfecting democracy at home, thereby acting as a beacon for the rest of mankind» with those that maintain that: «America’s values
impose on it an obligation to crusade for them around the world». Proponents of these two divergent approaches to U.S. foreign policy are known as exemplarists and internationalists.

The exemplary identity is said to inspire an isolationist foreign policy which entails that the United States should be reluctant to involve itself with the outside world, and nurture its own political experiment. Meanwhile, the internationalist foreign policy, inspired by the missionary approach, means an active engagement in world affairs, acting out the world historic mission Americans has been given (Restad 2015: 7). This issue has taken a variety of shapes and forms throughout the years; from whether the United States should remain neutral in war times, to whether the United States should or should not become an imperialistic power with colonial possessions overseas. It also takes the form of a question as to whether or not the United States has a duty to liberate the enslaved or oppressed peoples of the world — a question that remains as relevant in the current world order. In addition, this issue has shaped the direction of American foreign policy — whether to look across the Atlantic to Europe or across the Pacific, look south toward Latin America or to find strategic allies in the Middle East (Halle 1960: 2).

One can find several illustrations of the tension between these two approaches throughout the course of American history. One example can be found in the foreign policies of Thomas Jefferson. His extension to the Pacific is seen as reflecting an expansionist impulse, while his deployment of marines to battle Barbary pirates in Tripoli is often connected with unilateralism and militarism; his reluctance to build stronger diplomatic ties with Europe is sometimes linked with isolationism; and his attempts to create an international commercial system favorable to the U.S. economy is associated with liberal internationalism (Tomes 2014: 33).

Another example is Woodrow Wilson’s turnaround in U.S. policy toward World War I, from a strict exemplary argument in 1915 to advocating a greater international role and U.S. engagement two years later. Parts of the Wilsonian presidential period can be regarded as a peak for the missionary perspective’s influence on foreign policy. His mission to make the world “safe for democracy” and to create a more peaceful world order, were key objectives for Wilsonian grand strategy. Both his arguments for American engagement in World War I in 1917 and his commitment to the League of Nations after the war was largely based on
core elements of the missionary approach: that the United States through active engagement in the world would end the dominating position of classic power politics and lead the way towards an international system rooted in self-determination and American values (Mead 2002: 162-167).

The idealism of the missionary approach has been prominent in the internationalization of American foreign policy since the 1940s. America emerged from World War II as the most powerful nation — militarily, economically and politically. As such, it created a new world order and a system of political and economic institutions in its own image. American exceptionalism also created the foundation for a variety of foreign policy doctrines: from the containment policy of the Cold War, via U.S. engagement in Vietnam, to the idealistic policies during Reagan’s presidency. Reagan was among the most successful presidents in combining a sense of American exceptionalism with a duty to lead (Tomes 2014: 40). This strain of exceptionalism dominated American thinking until the end of the Cold War.

The end of the Cold War provided an opportunity for a complete reorientation of America’s role in the world. However, the overall grand strategy of the United States has remained relatively stable since, albeit with significant adjustments by each of the past three administrations. Some version of primacy has guided American grand strategy since the 1940s (Mayer 2014: 6). With the fall of the Soviet Union and the lack of a peer competitor in the international system, the United States could, for instance, have attempted a strategic disengagement. Either by reducing their commitments to alliances and partners overseas and pulling back military forces abroad or by turning to an approach based on balancing powers in Europe and Asia by maintaining a military presence in strategic regions.

Instead, the Clinton administration decided to follow a grand strategy of “liberal internationalism” based on democratic enlargement, multilateralism, humanitarian intervention, democracy promotion. As a result, there has been broad bipartisan domestic support for an active and military focused grand strategy since the 1990s and any strategic alternatives seeking to reduce the American hegemony and presence in the world were not taken into consideration. George W. Bush came to power in 2001 with a strategic vision based on less liberal internationalist assumptions than Clinton. He wanted to be more selective concerning military interventions overseas. But then the 9/11 terrorist attacks
created the foundation for another, more assertive, shift in grand strategy towards the neoconservative doctrine of democracy promotion. George W. Bush (2004) defended this policy by describing it as a «deep desire to spread liberty around the world as a way to help secure our country in the long run».

Accordingly, one can ascertain that American exceptionalism provides the idealistic foundation for two fundamentally different formulations of foreign policy. It also contains a latent instability issue since policies can change relatively quickly from a version of isolationism to missionary internationalism. This highlights the potential of American exceptionalism to influence and/or change foreign policy course, and the polarization this exceptionalism creates remains an important issue in American foreign policy debate. The prominent role of American exceptionalism in the 2012 presidential election clearly illustrates this point. As Scott Wilson (2012) of The Washington Post notes, both President Obama and Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney shared the belief that: «American political and economic values should triumph in the world». However, Romney, a clear proponent of American exceptionalism, consistently called for a tougher approach to the world, emphasizing «rewarding traditional allies while punishing rather than cultivating difficult nations». While Obama, on the other hand, emphasized diplomacy and partnerships, and «American assistance where wanted without heavy-handed demands from the top».

While the manner in which this liberal international order has been promoted has changed as the world changes, the core concept still endures. America’s role in the world and its responsibility is to promote and defend freedom and democracy. This is the grand liberal vision of US foreign policy, and it is present in both of the aforementioned approaches. Even though they differ in choice of strategy and tactics, they both contain strong elements of idealism and are founded in the classic liberal assumptions.
4 Methodological framework

The previous two chapters constitute the analytical, theoretical and conceptual underpinning for this study. However, before conducting the analysis, it is also of importance to discuss some methodological considerations and present the framework through which the research question will be examined.

4.1 Indicators of American exceptionalism

The previous chapter offered a theoretical and conceptual definition of American exceptionalism as a sense of self based on a shared belief in a set of universal, liberal-democratic values and ideas. It constitutes a distinct belief that the United States is unique, if not superior to other nations. Because of its national credo, historical development and remarkable origins, America is seen as a special nation with a special role to play in the world throughout history. The belief in American exceptionalism is a fundamental, perhaps even primary, characteristic of both American strategic culture and national identity. In order to examine the research question of this thesis, the concept of American exceptionalism must be operationalized (Adcock and Collier 2001: 531).

Seymour M. Lipset (1996: 26) stated that America «is the most religious, optimistic, patriotic, rights-oriented, and individualistic» country in the world. It is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed, as reflected in the U.S. Constitution and The Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness (Declaration of Independence 1776)
This was further highlighted by President Obama (2015b) in his remarks at the 50th Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery Marches:

For we were born of change. We broke the old aristocracies, declaring ourselves entitled not by bloodline, but endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights. We secure our rights and responsibilities through a system of self-government, of and by and for the people. That's why we argue and fight with so much passion and conviction -- because we know our efforts matter. We know America is what we make of it.

These quotes represent the religious, political, and secular sources of American exceptionalism. The United States was founded in separation from the anciens régimes of Europe, and it combined two powerful ideas of exceptionalism: the Reformation idea of America as a religious exemplar and the Enlightenment idea of America as a political harbinger for the rest of the world (Restad 2015: 28). These two ideas are bound together by the concept of American exceptionalism and share the same roots (McCriskin 2002). These roots can be traced back to the British settlers who traveled to the American colonies to establish a new societal system. The settlers mostly came from lower-middle-class England, and left the Old World to escape its restrained political, economic and religious systems, and to embrace the opportunities that America could offer.

Samuel Huntington (2004) contends that these Anglo-Protestant roots are at the core of mainstream culture in the United States, and argues that almost all the central ideas of the American identity have their origins in dissenting Protestant culture. He further states that:

Protestant emphasis on the individual conscience and the responsibility of individuals to learn God’s truths directly from the Bible promoted American commitment to individualism, equality, and the rights to freedom of religion and opinion. Protestantism stressed the work ethic and the responsibility of the individual for his own success or failure in life. With its congregational forms of church organization, Protestantism fostered opposition to hierarchy and the assumption that similar democratic forms should be employed in government (ibid: 68)

The Anglo-Protestant culture constitutes the foundation of America’s liberal ideas, values and beliefs that informs the concept of American exceptionalism. One might, therefore,
extract different attributes of the American society and its national identity as indicators of this greater phenomenon. The value of Protestantism on American identity creates grounds for a deeper examination of the current importance of religion in America, thus religiosity is selected as a pillar of exceptionalism. Religion has prominently shaped American views of its place in the world due to the belief that the United States was endowed with a special blessing from God. The sense of uniqueness in America's self-image also reflected a belief that the natural rights and blessings Americans enjoyed were God-given. The exceptional narrative provides the United States with a unique duty and special mission to transform the world, which makes America, inherently, a force for good.

Social and economic mobility is also considered an important aspect of American exceptionalism with reference to the strong belief in individualism, equality of rights and opportunities, and the value of meritocratic factors such as ability, effort and ambition. The final indicator chosen for this thesis is patriotism. It represents the outward manifestation of the domestic foundation of American exceptionalism and Americans views on the global role for the United States. It entails the moralism and idealism in foreign policy; the promotion of liberal values such as democracy and human rights to the rest of the world.

These three indicators are assumed to represent essential features of the American sense of self and to significantly shape and influence the way the United States conducts itself in the world. They will be utilized as the indicators through which trends in American exceptionalism can be identified.

**Religiosity**

The United States is often referred to as a “blessed nation” set apart by Providence, and endowed with a “special mission” as the leader of the Free World. Ever since the Puritans came to America, this idea has been embraced by the American people and it constitutes a decisive feature and a core pillar of American exceptionalism. The religious roots of American exceptionalism are well-established, and the belief that American exceptionalism
is largely an ongoing and unbroken manifestation of America’s Puritan founding is a longstanding consensus view (Deneen 2012:30).

Alexis de Tocqueville noted in *Democracy in America* (1835 [2010]: 473) that: «America is still the place in the world where the Christian religion has most retained true power over souls». In his book, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, Seymour Martin Lipset (1996: 18-19) quoted Karl Marx calling America «preeminently the country of religiosity». Lipset himself shared this belief stating that the United States has been «the most religious country in Christendom», and that it has exhibited greater acceptance of biblical beliefs and higher levels of church attendance than the rest of the world. For Tocqueville (1835 [2010]), religiosity was necessary in a democratic country, as it gave the people a moral language to restrict the unimpeded longings of individualism.

The Founders arranged for a separation between church and state, yet Americans have a strong inclination to intertwine religion with politics (Dunn 2013: 5-6). Even though the United States does not have an established church or an official state religion, Christianity plays a fundamental and partisan role in U.S. politics. To give one example, that the closing remarks of American presidents addresses to the nation is the words “God Bless America” is widely accepted in the United States, whilst in Western European countries this would most likely have been unpopular as the role of religion often is separated from politics and considered a part of one’s private life.

**Patriotism**

This indicator represents an essential part of the American Creed, as it reassures the American people that the United States, as a force of human good, will lead the world in its image. The “special mission” that God has endowed upon America as the leader of the Free World accentuates the belief that the United States has a unique role to play in world history. In the words of Mitt Romney (2011):

> We are a people who, in the language of our Declaration of Independence, hold certain truths to be self-evident: namely, that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain
unalienable rights. It is our belief in the universality of these unalienable rights that leads us to our exceptional role on the world stage, that of a great champion of human dignity and human freedom.

William Kristol (2013: 100) identifies American exceptionalism as America’s special responsibility or destiny to defend and promote the universal ideals. In this sense, American patriotism is «the patriotism of universal principles». This is further described by Heclo (2013: 36) as «a patriotism that loves America not only because it is your particular homeland, but also because you cherish the universal principles that it represents for everyone’s homeland». Americans continue to be proud of their nation, to exhibit a greater sense of patriotism and of belief that their system is superior to all others, regardless of evidence that might indicate otherwise (Lipset 1996: 51).

It is worth addressing that conclusions derived from measuring patriotism through indicators of willingness to military intervention and global engagement, as the forthcoming analysis will seek to do, can constitute a difficult analytical problem as public opinion often can reflect changing sentiments rather than real changes in the society. Accordingly, it is important to take context into consideration to avoid such misinterpretation.

Economic mobility

For more than two centuries, economic opportunity and the prospect of upward mobility have formed the bedrock upon which the American story has been anchored — inspiring people in distant lands to seek our shores and sustaining the unwavering optimism of Americans at home (Sawhill and Morton 2007:1).

Economic mobility can be defined as «the ability of people to move up or down the economic ladder within a lifetime or from one generation to the next» (Sawhill and Monton 2007: 1). From the arrival of the British Puritans to the American colonies in 1620 to the hopes and aspirations of today’s diverse population, the United States has represented a safe haven for people seeking the social and economic mobility that it can offer. The belief in
America as a land of opportunity is strong, and the American Dream unites Americans in a common quest for individual and national success (ibid: 1-2).

The Declaration of Independence holds that: «all men are created equal». This refers to the equality of citizens before the law and in their rights to compete for jobs, income, status, and education on an equal footing with others. It is connected to the individualism, or opportunities that the American Dream promises. Opportunity in this instance, refers to rewarding personal effort and achievement rather than a person's social class, family standing, or some other arbitrary privilege that has not been personally earned (Dunn 2013: 3-4). Tocqueville emphasized that egalitarianism, in its American meaning, involved equality of opportunity and respect, and that the United States, as a new society, lacked the emphasis on social hierarchy and status differences (Lipset 1996:19). Upward mobility represents a key attribute of the American society, and the belief in economic mobility is deeply embedded in the American identity and the American Dream.

4.2 Research design

Any research design needs to maximize its quality through four conditions: construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability. The choice of research method entails a trade-off between these conditions, and their relevance vary between qualitative and quantitative methods, as well as across different research designs. Even though any analysis will entail an amount of uncertainty and the risk of omitting important variables, one may improve the reliability, validity and certainty of any conclusions by paying attention to the rules of scientific inference (Lund 2002: 105-106). Cook and Campbell (as quoted in Lund 2002: 105-106) distinguish between two types of validity of causal interference. The internal validity addresses causality in the study, while the external validity refers to whether the findings of an analysis can be generalized from the sample to a larger universe.

This thesis will conduct a single case study of American exceptionalism and consider its impact on U.S. grand strategy. The choice of a case study, as well as the use of data
triangulation, offers an in-depth analysis of a complex social phenomenon in an accurate and precise manner. One of the most prominent advocates of case study research, Robert Yin (2009: 18) defines it as «an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident».

Single case studies have, however, been subject to a number of criticisms; the most common of which concerns methodological issues with regard to the conclusions one can draw from single cases, and the interrelated issues of methodological rigor, researcher subjectivity, and concerns over generalizability. These criticisms are often related to the small $N$-problem — the use of multiple causal factors to draw causal inferences from a limited number of cases (Rueschemeyer 2003: 305). Yin argues that in general, multiple case study is preferred over single case study as they offer more robust analytical conclusions and increases the likelihood for generalizations (Yin 2009: 156). However, the advantages of smaller case studies are that they often focus on information that might otherwise be ignored as the in-depth analysis moves beyond the ordinary descriptions, and highlights reasons behind possible changes. Dietrich Rueschemeyer (2003) is skeptical of what he considers the most conventional view of single case studies, namely that the only theoretical outcome would be hypothesis generation that can be tested in more numerous cases. Accordingly, he argues that one or a few cases can provide theoretical gains as it can develop new ideas, put them to the test and use its results to explain certain outcomes.

In order to make a causal inference from a single case, one has to make some kind of comparison, either within or across cases. The method of process tracing aims to uncover the variables, which together produce an observed series of events. The method identifies how variables, or links in a causal chain, are interrelated in time and space. It reveals both the causal chain and the causal mechanism between the independent and dependent variables in the analysis (George and Bennett 2005: 206; Gerring 2007: 173). Process tracing is a sub-discipline of within-case analysis (Gerring 2007: 178), but the findings may be generalized in the sense that a causal path identified in one case can be retrieved from other cases as well (George and Bennett 2005: 222). The method requires large amounts of empirical data as it connects several mutually independent observations together in the
attempt to derive or corroborate one causal inference. By identifying relevant variables, the
use of process tracing increases internal validity and prevents false inference from
correlation to causation in small N-studies (ibid: 173-178, 208)

Through indicators selected to represent American exceptionalism, this thesis will analyze
developments in this phenomenon over time to reflect on its current value in the American
society and its importance for American policymaking. An important criterion for a well-
constructed operationalization is the construct validity or the descriptive inference —
meaning the accordance between the selected indicator and the theoretical interpretation
of the phenomenon that emerges from the research question (King, Keohane and Verba
1994: 6-9; Adcock and Collier 2001: 529; Lund 2002: 105-106). Hence, a clear, unambiguous,
and precise operationalization is a precondition for achieving a high degree of validity and

Michael Desch (1998: 150-152) presents two challenges for the assessments and testing of
cultural theories. The first is that cultural variables are sometimes hard to clearly define and
operationalize, while the second challenge is the focus on the particulars of single cases
rather than on factors common to a number of cases, because they assume that each one is
sui generis. As shown in the previous chapter, the concept of American exceptionalism
entails a vast selection of attributes and central elements may have been omitted from the
subsequent analysis. Considering that this thesis is limited both in time and scope, it is
important to express that the indicators chosen for the analysis represent only a small
sample of a larger selection of indicators related to the concept. Consequently, the results
will not represent a fully comprehensive coverage of American exceptionalism

As mentioned, perhaps the most prominent critique of small N-studies concerns the issue of
external validity of the analysis. The method is criticized for producing results with lower
external validity than analyses with a larger number of cases, thus making generalization
difficult (King et al. 1994: 212). On the other hand, studies of smaller number of cases
provide the opportunity to go more in-depth which provides better internal validity and
construct validity (Gerring: 2007: 43).
Other related concerns are the reliability and replicability of the analysis. Reliability is about using the same procedures in the same way to achieve the same goals, findings and conclusions (King et al. 1994: 25). The goal of reliability is to minimize the errors and biases in a study (Yin 2009: 45). However, considering that this is a study of something exceptional and unique to the United States, the aim of this analysis will be to make descriptive and causal interferences on the basis of empirical information about the American society, and to trace the links between likely explanatory factors and the observed outcome (King et al. 1994: 7-8; George and Bennett 2005: 5, 31). As Desch (1998: 155) writes: «[c]ultural theories that may not be amenable to generalization across cases might still lead to generalization within cases across time».

Robert Yin (2009: 14-15) expresses concern about the lack of rigor while performing research; the absence of systematic procedures and relative methodological guidelines for case studies. To avoid this pitfall of case studies, the previous chapters have built up an integrated theoretical, conceptual and methodological framework to guide the subsequent analysis. This study is also based on various forms of data material and it employs data triangulation, the use of multiple sources and methods, to conduct an in-depth analysis of American exceptionalism and its effect on grand strategy.

The first chapters have provided a thorough literature review and presented a rigorous framework for the procedure of the following analysis. The written sources of this study will consist of opinion polls and reports from research institutions in the United States such as the Pew Research Center, a selection of official documents and statements, and secondary literature such as academic papers and newspaper articles. The rationale for the selection of these sources is their credibility and relevance to the research questions (c.f. Kjeldstali 1999: 171-172; Tosh 2002: 87-98). This thesis relies on articles published in well-known American newspapers such as The Washington Post and The New York Times, as well as magazines such as Foreign Policy and Foreign Affairs. .The use of acknowledged media sources increases the credibility of the findings of this thesis.

The indicators will be analyzed through research on contemporary features of and trends in the American society. Some of these trends will briefly be compared with results from counterparts in Western Europe to examine the distinctiveness of the United States which is
embedded in Americans exceptional tradition. First, the religious dimension of American exceptionalism will be measured by examining levels of religious belief and the importance of religion in Americans’ life, as well as trends in opinion and practices of the American population. The second indicator will consider Americans’ attitudes and opinions related to U.S. global leadership, foreign policy and the willingness to engage in world politics. In addition, levels of patriotic sentiments will be reviewed to examine the uniqueness, or superiority, of the American identity. The final, and perhaps the most vital, indicator of American exceptionalism will be explored through levels of economic mobility and inequality.

Table 4.2. Summary of the indicators of American Exceptionalism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religiosity</th>
<th>Patriotism</th>
<th>Mobility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main feature</strong></td>
<td>Views the Unites States as a «blessed nation» which gives religion a unique impact on U.S. politics</td>
<td>United States has been endowed with a «special mission» and the role as leader of the free world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Measurements</strong></td>
<td>Level of religious affiliation and practices</td>
<td>Global leadership and willingness to engage in world politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The importance of religions in relation to current social and political issues</td>
<td>Level of patriotic sentiments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that the method chosen for this thesis does not constitute a comprehensive study of the development of American exceptionalism. In order to understand the deeply rooted position of exceptionalism in American society, it would be necessary to undertake a large-scale and thorough cultural study of American national identity and assess the development
from its Anglo-Protestant roots to a more multicultural society. Considering the scope of this thesis, that method would have been too extensive to complete the project within the given timeline. Accordingly, there are several interesting political, demographic, societal and economic attributes of the American society that are omitted from this study. One worth noting is indeed the rise of multiculturalism and diversity in the United States mainly due to globalization trends and high levels of immigration from parts of the world with other cultural backgrounds, especially Hispanic immigrants from Latin America (Huntington 2004: 254).

4.3 Data

Quantitative survey research provides the empirical tools for a systematic study of the political values, attitudes, orientations and activities of ordinary people (Kittilson 2007: 865). For this thesis, the indicators of American exceptionalism will be studied by investigating, empirically and systematically, contemporary trends in American society, and adjustments in American people’s values and beliefs. The analysis of religiosity and patriotism will mostly be based on quantitative opinion polling and demographic research from The Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan and nonprofit American think tank providing information on social issues, public opinion, and demographic trends shaping the United States and the world. The analysis of mobility, on the other hand, will depend on a landmark study by Raj Chetty of Harvard University and his research group consisting of scholars from Harvard University and University of California, Berkeley.

Any given survey and its results may be off due to several factors. Chief among those factors are low response rates and non-participation, measurement errors, comparability and measurement equivalence in cross-national surveys (Harkness, van de Vijver, and Johnson 2003; Couper and de Leeuw 2003; Kittilson 2007; Ariely and Davidov 2011). A potential disadvantage for national or regional surveys, such as those used for this thesis is fewer observations, but one advantage is the substantive focus on issues particularly relevant to
the region (Kittelson 2007: 881). Other strengths of survey data are that they are stable and precise. They contain a broad coverage of a given phenomenon — often over a long time span and under different contexts. However, relating to the selection and reporting of opinion polls, surveys may reflect bias which raises questions of researcher subjectivity. The procedures and components of the survey design from the organizational structure and management, through the sampling and instrument design, to the data collection methods, processing, and documentation, are also (Harkness et al. 2003; Couper and de Leeuw 2003).

This makes information on the method for polling of great importance as the survey design, sampling procedures, and the wording of questions affects the result of any given poll, and it ensures that the procedures are reliable (Harkness et al. 2003; King et al. 1994: 23). Although national surveys lack the aspect of cross-national comparability, they often comprise the most methodologically sound surveys available. In general, sampling and interview procedures are rigorous and the issues of misinterpretation and the ‘transportability’ of theoretical or practical concepts across national borders are reduced (Kittelson 2007: 866, 887). However, some of these procedures are not possible to account in this thesis, but there is good evidence to assume that the Pew Research Center presents reliable data. They strongly value scientific principles and methodological standards such as independence, objectivity, accuracy, and transparency, and is known to be one of the least biased, and most reliable sources of polling information in the United States.

The Harvard/Berkeley study of mobility presents new evidence on trends in intergenerational mobility using data from de-identified tax records. These data have less measurement error and much larger sample sizes than prior survey-based studies and yield more precise estimates of intergenerational mobility over time. Intergenerational mobility is estimated for the 1971 to 1993 birth cohorts. For children born between 1971 and 1986, mobility is measured by estimating the correlation between parent and child income percentile ranks, and the probability that a child reaches the top fifth of the income distribution conditional on her parents’ income quintile. For children born after 1986, they measure mobility as the correlation between parent income ranks and children’s college attendance rates, which are a strong predictor of later earnings (Chetty et al. 2014).
5 To what extent are the sources of American exceptionalism still present in American society today?

The first part of the analysis will consider to what extent the sources of American exceptionalism are still present in American society today by examining the three indicators selected in the previous chapter. By understanding the contemporary position American exceptionalism holds in the United States today, one might be able to indicate its continued importance on grand strategy and foreign policy.

American leaders and politicians generally agree that America is an exceptional nation. Yet, passionate and often quite personal debates emerge over what exactly makes America special. Conservatives often argue that President Obama is abandoning American exceptionalism, and pushing a secular agenda that leads him to apologize for American greatness. Peter Beinart (2014) writes in the *National Journal* that American exceptionalism is endangered in today’s society. Given the impact American exceptionalism is assumed to have on U.S. grand strategy and engagement in the world, this claim of crisis or endangerment deserves closer consideration. With reference to the framework of neoclassical realism — if what Beinart argues is true, it is crucial to analyze the domestic foundation of American external behavior, and reassess the current position of exceptionalism in American society with regard to the future direction of U.S. leadership in the world.

The international system changed dramatically with the end of the Cold War, yet throughout this time period the core values of the American public have remained relatively stable according to the 2012 Pew Research Center *American Values survey*. Overall, the survey shows more stability than change across the spectrum of political value measures that Pew Research Center has tracked since 1987. However, this relative stability in the overall balance of values does not mean that the society has not undergone a fundamental transformation.
The past five decades cover the period since the Silent generation entered adulthood to today’s Millennials, and through this period the United States has experienced large shifts in terms of social and cultural issues. Many Americans, especially the younger generation, have become less attached to major institutions such as political parties, religion, the military, and marriage. For instance, just 26 percent of the Millennial generation are married. When they were the age that Millennials are now, 36 percent of Generation X, 48 percent of Baby Boomers and 65 percent of the Silent Generation were married (Pew Research Center 2012a, 2014a).

**Table 5.1 The generations defined**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Age of adults in 2015</th>
<th>Cohort</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Millennials</td>
<td>18-34</td>
<td>1981-1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation X</td>
<td>35-50</td>
<td>1965-1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Boomers</td>
<td>51-69</td>
<td>1946-1964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent Generation</td>
<td>70-87</td>
<td>1928-1945</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another defining feature of American politics today is the partisan polarization between the Republican and Democratic Party. This is also reflected in American values and beliefs as they are more polarized along partisan lines than at any point since the aforementioned series of surveys began. In the last elections, generational differences played a larger role than in decades before. According to exit polls, Americans under 30 have voted more Democratic than other generations in each election since 2004, while older voters have favored the Republican candidates. Recent surveys find that half of the Millennials describe themselves as political independents⁹, with a majority identifying with or leaning towards the Democratic Party. By contrast, the Silent generation, to a higher degree, identifies or lean Republican. These generational differences are shaped by underlying values and opinions in a number of areas that have been undergoing change in recent years, especially in terms of the social changes that are occurring in the country today. Issues relating to diversity, equality, homosexuality, and secularism show that Millennials take a more liberal

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⁹ Not affiliated with any political party.
position on most social issues than the older generations (Pew Research Center 2011a, 2012a, 2014a, 2015a).

American exceptionalism also entails the distinction from the *anciens régimes* of Europe. As has long been the case, American values differ from those of Western Europeans in many important ways. Principally, these differences involve the pillars of American exceptionalism. For instance, Americans are more individualistic, less supportive of collective institutions, considerably more religious and more socially conservative than their counterparts in Britain, France, Germany and Spain (Pew Research Center 2011b).

### 5.1 Religiosity

The religious dimension of American exceptionalism is deeply embedded in the American identity, and churches are a cornerstone of American life; the United States remains the home of most Christians in the world, Americans are still far more willing than Europeans to affirm God’s importance in their lives, and religion remains powerful in terms of shaping the views and values of American people. Surveys of Americans’ religious beliefs and practices show a close link to social and political views, and demonstrate that the social and political fault lines in the American society run through, as well as alongside, religious traditions. The connection is especially strong with regard to political ideology and views on social issues, and it shows that the religiously affiliated part of the public and those who say that religion is very important in their lives, across several religious traditions, are much more likely to identify conservative (Pew Research Center 2008a: 3).

American conservatives have assumed the role of «defenders of religious exceptionalism against Obama’s allegedly secularizing impulses» according to Peter Beinart (2014). During the campaign for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination, Rick Perry (2011), in a campaign ad, promised to «end Obama’s war on religion» and to «fight against liberal
attacks on our religious heritage». And recently Senator Ted Cruz (2015) of Texas stated that: «religious liberty has never been more threatened in America than right now today».

Yet in significant ways, the exceptional American religiosity that conservatives so desperately want to defend is changing. According to the 2014 Religious Landscape Survey by the Pew Research Center (2015b), the Christian share of the American population is declining, while the number of adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing. The survey finds that the number of adults who consider themselves Christians fell from 78.4 percent in 2007 to 70.6 percent in 2014, which represents a decline of 5 million adults in just seven years and the lowest estimate of Christian affiliation measured from any sizable survey to date. Over the same period, the number of Americans defining themselves as unaffiliated — describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular — has increased with more than six percentage points, from 16.1 percent to 22.8 percent in 2014 (ibid: 3-7). Through the 1980s, the General Social Survey (GSS) consistently found that between 5 and 8 percent of the public was unaffiliated with any particular religious tradition (Pew Research Center 2008b: 20).

The decline in religiosity reveals two trends in Americans’ relationship to organized religion. One of the most prominent factors is generational replacement as the Millennial generation identifies relatively non-Christian compared to older generations. Among Millennials, only 36 percent say the phrase “a religious person” describes them very well. By contrast, 52 percent of Gen Xers, 55 percent of Boomers and 61 percent of Silents say the same (Pew Research Center 2014a). While a majority of Millennials still consider themselves Christian, the number is far greater for the older generations. Conversely, the older generations identify less unaffiliated than Millennials.

Table 5.2. Generational differences in affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Silent Generation</th>
<th>Baby Boomers</th>
<th>Generation X</th>
<th>Older Millennials</th>
<th>Younger Millennials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>85 %</td>
<td>78 %</td>
<td>70 %</td>
<td>57 %</td>
<td>56 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unaffiliated</td>
<td>11 %</td>
<td>17 %</td>
<td>23 %</td>
<td>34 %</td>
<td>36 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The trend that younger generations are less likely than older ones to affiliate with any religious tradition started back in the 1970s when 13 percent of Baby Boomers were unaffiliated with any particular religion, according to the GSS. That compared with just 6 percent among the Silent generation (Pew Research Center 2011a). Still, the 2014 Religious Landscape Survey also finds an increase in the general number of unaffiliated Americans across generations. The share of religiously unaffiliated Americans are growing rapidly and many former Christians, of all ages, are increasingly less religious. Today one-in-five Americans, and one-in-three Millennials, do not identify with any organized religion (Pew Research Center 2015b: 11-12).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5.3. Growing share of unaffiliated Americans across generations</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Silent Generation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baby Boomers</td>
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<td>Generation X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Older Millennials</td>
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<tr>
<td>Younger Millennials</td>
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</table>


There are few signs that the decline in the share of Christians in America will slow down or reverse as Millennials age. The survey shows that the trend of unaffiliation is growing fast, and occurring within a variety of demographic groups and across generations. This large and growing group of Americans is less religious than the public at large on many conventional measures, including frequency of attendance at religious services and the degree of importance they attach to religion in their lives (Pew Research Center 2012b: 9). According to the World Religion Database, Europeans were over 16 percentage points more likely to reject any religious affiliation than Americans in 1970. However, in 2010 this gap was reduced to less than half of 1 percentage point. While Americans remain more likely to identify with a religious tradition than people in Germany or France, they are actually less likely to do so than Italians and Danes (Pew Research Center 2012c).
There are several reasons for this change, including changes in family and work patterns, the politicization of religion by American conservatives, disengagement from traditional institutions and labels, the combination of delayed and inter-religious marriage, and economic development (Cohn 2015). These changes represent a steady modernization and secularization process of society that has characterized Western civilization, including America, for over two centuries, writes Peter Berkowitz (2014) in the National Journal.

Many Americans face difficult economic circumstances, and Millennials are the first generation in modern times to have higher levels of student loan debt, poverty and unemployment, and lower levels of wealth and personal income than their two immediate predecessors had at the same stage of their life cycles. The economic hardships may also contribute to young adults’ decision to marry later in life. The median age of first marriage is currently the highest in modern history with 29 for men and 27 for women. Additionally, in contrast to trends of the past, marriage today is more frequent among those with higher levels of incomes and education (Pew Research Center 2014a).

While Beinart (2014) acknowledges these explanations, he emphasizes the current relationship between religion and politics as the principal cause. He notes that during the mid-20th century, liberals were almost as likely to attend church as conservatives. But when the Religious Right started to arouse public concern against several social issues such as abortion, feminism, and gay rights in the 1970s, both political moderates and liberals began to identify organized Christianity with conservative politics. The Religious Right’s opposition to homosexuality and same-sex marriage has highlighted the generational differences in religion-informed issues, and has been particularly alienating to Millennials. The Pew Research Center (2012b, 2015c) also show that those who identify as religiously unaffiliated are disproportionately liberal, pro same-sex marriage, and critical of religion for playing a too significant role in politics.

To give a concrete example of these changing attitudes in social issues, consider the case of same-sex marriage. In June 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled all state bans on same-sex marriage unconstitutional, thus allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry nationwide. Pew Research polling from 2001 found that Americans opposed same-sex marriage by a 57 percent to 35 percent margin. Since then, support for same-sex marriage has grown at a
steady pace. Based on polling in 2015, a majority of Americans (55%) support same-sex marriage, compared with 39 percent who oppose it. This is partly due to generational differences. Younger generations have consistently expressed higher levels of support for same-sex marriage. However, older generations also have become more supportive of same-sex marriage in recent years (Pew Research Center 2015c).

Figure 5.1. Attitudes on same-sex marriage by generation

Summing up, this section finds a continued, yet slightly decreased, emphasis on the traditional religious pillar of American exceptionalism. While the United States remains the home of most Christians in the world, and religion is still powerful in terms of shaping the views and values of the American people, religiosity in America is in decline. The share of Americans that self-identify as Christians has decreased by a significant amount these past

10Source: Pew Research Center (2015c) "Changing Attitudes on Gay Marriage"
years, and simultaneously, Americans defining themselves as religiously unaffiliated — atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular — has increased within a variety of demographic groups and across generations.

Still, the Millennial generation is more likely to reject religious affiliation than older Americans. There are several sociological reasons for this change, for instance changes in family and work patterns, detachment from traditional institutions, and the combination of delayed and inter-religious marriage. Another contributing factor to this decline is the politicization of religion by American conservatives. In issues relating to diversity, equality, and secularism, Millennials often take a more liberal position than the older generations, and the Religious Right’s opposition to abortion, homosexuality and same-sex marriage has highlighted the gap between religion and social views, and been particularly alienating to Millennials.

### 5.2 Patriotism

The second indicator of American exceptionalism can be considered an extension of the religious aspect of American national identity. It involves the nation’s “special mission” as the leader of the free world. According to most conservatives, a central element of American exceptionalism is their destiny to defend and promote democracy, freedom and capitalism through the consolidation, maintenance, and extension of America’s global leadership role. This leadership role has been at the heart of American exceptionalism since the founding of the United States, as Rich Lowry and Ramesh Ponnuru (2010) write: «The founders thought we would play an outsized role in the world from the very beginning».

The Pew Research Center conducts, in association with the Council on Foreign Relations, a quadrennial America’s Place in the World survey which examines the American public’s support for U.S. global engagement and opinions on the global security situation and challenges facing the United States. The latest edition was released in 2013, and it indicated
two emerging trends in the American public assessment of U.S. foreign policy and America’s role in the world\textsuperscript{11}.

The first trend confirms that an increasing number of Americans believe that U.S. power and prestige is declining in the world. For the first time in surveys dating back nearly four decades, a majority (53\%) of the public regard the United States as “less important and powerful” compared with 10 years ago, while only 17\% believe it to be “more important and powerful” and 27\% ‘as important’. This is a sharp reversal of the findings recorded a decade ago when 45\% of the public viewed the U.S. as more important and powerful, and just 20\% said less important and powerful (Pew Research Center 2013a: 4-5, 15).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{chart.png}
\caption{Views of U.S. global leadership role\textsuperscript{12}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{11} The latest Pew Research Center’s America’s Place in the World survey was conducted in 2013, after Bashar al-Assad’s use of chemical weapons against the Syrian population. Results from this report might be influenced by the American public’s negative assessments of Obama’s handling of the crisis which could indicate a weakened American position in the world compared with Russia. The topics of this report are open to misinterpretation as public opinion often can reflect changing sentiments rather than real changes in the society. Accordingly, it is important to take this context into consideration in order to avoid bias.

From 1993 to 2004, higher percentages of the public said that the United States played a more important and powerful role as world leader than 10 years ago. However, this shifted in 2009 to 41 percent saying it was less important and powerful, while 25 percent said more important and 30 percent as important. In other words, the share of Americans believing the United States is less important and powerful in the world has increased these past years, and more than doubled compared with a decade ago. It also shows a big partisan swing over the last decade. More than 70 percent of Republicans now view the U.S. as a less important and powerful world leader, but when asked the same question in 2004 just 8 percent said the same. This shows that the question can be susceptible to changes in administrations, the current international environment, and swings in partisan identification (ibid: 16).

The second trend finds that support for U.S. international engagement has fallen even further this past decade. About half of the public (51%) believes the United States “does too much in terms of solving world problems”, while 17 percent thinks it does too little and 28 percent says it does the right amount in helping world problems. This is fairly consistent with past surveys, but another question regarding America’s global role represents a change among an increasing number of the public; 52 percent of the American public now believes the United States should “mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own”. Just 38 percent disagrees with this statement. This is the highest percentage recorded since the question was first asked in 1964, and up from 30 percent just a decade ago (ibid: 19-20).
The United States is currently facing a challenging security environment with limited resources and a relative decline in power. Such challenges have led to an adjustment in its global leadership role. However, just as the public appeared war weary, Americans suddenly showed support for at least limited military operations against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL$^{14}$) (Telhami 2015). Seventy percent of Americans rank ISIL the biggest challenge facing the United States in the Middle East—well above Iran (12%) and Palestinian-Israeli conflict (13%). Opinion polls also suggest a willingness to continue the operations and even escalate them if necessary. Most Americans (57%) would oppose sending ground forces if airstrikes fail to defeat ISIL, yet a majority of Republican (53%) does support the use of ground troops compared with only 36 percent of Democrats and 31 percent of Independents (The Brookings Institution 2015).


$^{14}$Also known as the Islamic State (IS), the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or Daesh.
Despite this opposition, the American public expresses the need to confront ISIL and the current crisis in Syria and Iraq. When given the choice between two opposing views on the level of U.S. involvement, one suggesting that the United States “should stay out of the conflict” and another one suggesting intervention “at the necessary level”, 57 percent of Americans chose the latter (67% of Republicans, 52% Democrats and 51% Independents) (ibid.). One reason for public ambivalence—wanting the U.S. to intervene at the “necessary level” while excluding ground forces—may be the assessment of prospects of success and failure of intervention. The public is concerned about Americans joining ISIL and carrying attacks on American soil. This fear could be increased following the recent massacre carried out against Charlie Hebdo in Paris (Telhami 2015).

The American population’s desire to pull back has increased from past years. War/intervention fatigue after the lengthy engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq, the 2011 military intervention in Libya, the conflict in Ukraine and the current crisis in Syria and Iraq constitutes a major part of the explanation, but the restraint also has domestic roots. Many Americans find that the social, political and economic challenges at home are of greater priority than most foreign policy objectives (Hormats 2014). This is also the conclusion from the Pew Research Center’s America’s Place in the World survey. When those who say the United States does “too much” internationally are asked to describe in their own words why they feel this way, nearly half (47%) lists some domestic problem that deserves more attention. Correspondingly, 80 percent of Americans agreed with the statement: «We should not think so much in international terms but concentrate more on our national problems and building up our strength and prosperity here at home» (Pew Research Center 2013a: 4-7, 19-20).

These two findings show that something very unusual is going on in the American public’s attitudes toward U.S foreign policy and leadership in the world. As many of the findings in the survey were consistent with those from previous years, they serve as a baseline which highlights the exception of these two. However, this restraint is not an expression of across-the-board isolationism. Even as doubts grow about the United States’ geopolitical role, most Americans (66%) believe the benefits from U.S. participation in the global economy
outweigh the risks. And support for closer trade and business ties with other nations stands at its highest point in more than a decade (77%) (Pew Research Center 2013a: 23).

Similarly, Americans are neither willing to abandon internationalism nor to embrace unilateralism. When asked what kind of role the United States should play in the world, 72 percent answered a shared leadership role. Nearly 8 in 10 Americans (77%) agree that “in deciding on its foreign policies, the U.S. should take into account the views of its major allies” and a majority (56%) of the public agrees that “the United States should cooperate fully with the United Nations”. Even further, 56 percent of Americans rejects the idea that the U.S., as the most powerful nation in the world, should go its own way in international matters (ibid: 18-21).

Summing up, the report shows that Americans are conflicted about the U.S. role in the world. On one hand, a majority of the public thinks the United States should mind its own business internationally and focus on problems at home. On the other hand, they want the United States to play a leading role in world affairs, and they see the benefit of greater involvement in the global economy. This can be viewed as a natural shift in the public’s assessment on foreign policy rather than a decline in power; it is a definite wish to pull back in terms of foreign policy, but a willingness to continue to engage and further integrate on the economic front. This is also reflected in the results of the 2014 *Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy*. This report finds that the public shows consistent and stable support for a wide variety of American engagement, ranging from an international military presence and espionage to dialogue with hostile actors and international trade. They see benefits to multilateral cooperation enshrined in alliances, trade agreements, treaties, and working through the United Nations (The Chicago Council on Global Affairs 2014: 41).

The generational gap affecting American politics is also present in terms of foreign policy and international engagement. The Millennial generation is far less likely than their elders to endorse the exceptional global role of the United States. While all generations favor more focus on domestic issues rather than problems overseas, Millennials have been less inclined to support an active role for the United States than the older generations. The fact that the Millennial generation does not remember the Cold War and that they are shaped by the
interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, provides them with a different view of America’s role in the world. Combined with older generations that have tired of playing a global leadership role, it is hardly surprising that attitudes are changing.

Americans are somewhat more inclined than Western Europeans to say that: «it is sometimes necessary to use military force to maintain order in the world». Similarly, Americans more often than their Western European counterparts believe that getting approval from the United Nations before the use of military force “would make it too difficult to deal with an international threat” (Pew Research Center 2011b). However, Millennials, more than any other generation, are more likely than older people to favor multilateralism over unilateralism and the use of diplomacy to ensure peace, rather than a reliance on military strength. They are 23 percentage points more likely than the Silent generation to say that in terms of foreign policy the United States should “take its allies interests into account, even if it means making compromises”, and Americans under 30 are more favorable to the United Nations compared to Americans over 50 (Pew Research Center 2011a: 89; 2013b: 4).

The shift would not be as profound had it merely represented the younger generation being more willing to embrace multilateralism in U.S. foreign policy. As shown in previous chapters, America’s exceptional role in the world is about more than just foreign policy behavior. American exceptionalism represents a sense of self; a distinct belief that the United States is unique, if not superior to other nations, and American behavior abroad is an expression of this belief. Therefore, Beinart (2014) argues that: «Americans’ declining belief in our special virtue as a world power really is connected to our declining belief in our special virtue as a people».

Nearly all Americans consider themselves patriotic and voice pride in being an American. Seymour M. Lipset (1996: 51) makes reference to opinion polls conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s that find 75 percent of American adults to say that they are proud to be Americans, with the degree of patriotism to be even higher for American youth. A 2010 national survey by the Pew Research Center found that more than 83 percent of Americans say they are either extremely proud (52%) or very proud (31%) to be an American. However,
it also showed that people younger than 30 are far less likely than older Americans to say they are extremely proud of being an American (Pew Research Center 2010).

In 2014, a clear majority of the American people considered the United States to be one of the greatest countries in the world. Nevertheless, the view that the United States is exceptional — as in standing above all other countries in the world — has declined by 10 points since 2011.

Table 5.4. Declining share of Americans say the U.S. stand above all other countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>38 %</td>
<td>28 %</td>
<td>-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-29</td>
<td>27 %</td>
<td>15 %</td>
<td>-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-49</td>
<td>38 %</td>
<td>26 %</td>
<td>-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>40 %</td>
<td>33 %</td>
<td>-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>50 %</td>
<td>40 %</td>
<td>-10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Pew Research Center (2014c)

This decline, or what Beinart (2014) calls “the loss of American civilizational self-confidence” has occurred across most demographic and political groups. The current polling shows that the American public is coming closer to Europeans in not seeing their culture as superior to that of other nations.

These polls also revealed generational differences in beliefs about whether the U.S. is “the greatest country in the world”. In both 2011 and 2014, the younger generation was far less likely than older Americans to say that the U.S. stands above all other nations: Just 15 percent of those under 30 expressed that view in 2014, down from 27 percent three years earlier (Pew Research Center 2014b).

Interestingly, similar surveys from Pew Research Center’s The American-Western European Values Gap, show that young Americans are no more “civilizationally self-confident” than their peers in Britain, France, Germany, and Spain. For example, in 2002 respondents from the United States were 20 percentage points more likely to agree with the statement “our
people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others” than Germans. In 2007, the gap was reduced to 13 percentage points, and by 2011 it was down to just 2. When asked in 2011 about cultural superiority, the survey found that Americans over the age of 50 were 15 points more likely to agree with the statement than Western Europeans. On the opposite side, Americans under 30 were, in fact, less likely to answer yes than their equivalents in Britain, Germany, and Spain (Pew Research Center 2011b).

One of the largest factors driving the current generation gap is the arrival of the diverse and heavily Democratic-leaning Millennials. Shaped by the presidencies of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush and growing up at a time when America’s relative power in the world has declined, younger Americans tend to identify more liberal on most social and political issues. This, in addition to showing more willingness than older generation in terms of embracing inclusion and diversity, may not correlate with claims of American superiority. In 2014, the Millennial generation was much less inclined than their elders to self-identify as patriotic. Only about half (49%) of Millennials say the phrase “a patriotic person” describes them very well. Meanwhile, 61 percent of Gen Xers, 75 percent of Boomers and 81 percent of Silents say this describes them very well (Pew Research Center 2014a).

As Peter Beinart (2014) notes in relation to young Americans’ opinion on the 2003 invasion of Iraq:

As young Americans turned against the war, they turned against Bush’s exceptionalist vision of an America with unique burdens and privileges. Even more fundamentally, they turned against the chest-thumping, "We’re No. 1" brand of patriotism that often accompanied it.

The turn against the exceptionalist foreign policy under George W. Bush, was an advantage for Obama in the 2008 presidential election. A foreign policy doctrine based on the idea that the United States can play by its own rules on the world stage as led under Bush, combined with a complex international situation and growing challenges at home, has led to a majority of Americans who regards the United States as less important and powerful in the world compared with ten years ago, and a public who wants a less active leadership role for the United States in world politics.
5.3 Economic mobility

The third dimension of American exceptionalism, and likely the most fundamental, is upward economic mobility. The American people declared their independence with the famous words “all men are created equal” and ever since American society has been defined by the promise of equal opportunities for all citizens regardless of origins, social class, family standing, or some other arbitrary, non-meritocratic privilege. The idea of the United States as the land of opportunity and the ability to make one's own way is firmly integrated in the American identity and the American Dream. Hence, resisting development into an Old World class-based society where one is born into its destiny is of great importance for the American people.

There is no denying that the United States faces disturbing economic challenges after the 2007-2009 recession, and the issue of inequality is one of the most urgent. Economic mobility in America is lower than in most other developed countries, and growing inequality, increasing poverty, and stagnant middle-class incomes are threats to economic growth and social cohesion (Kruger 2012; Berkowitz 2014). This is mainly due to the increasing gap between the more stable, wealthy and educated parts of the population on one side, and the working class faced with economic stagnation and instability on the other. These higher levels of inequality are often associated with less upward mobility and lower equality of opportunity.

George Packer (2011) wrote in Foreign Affairs that the income gap, combined with the rise of organized money, lobbyism and special interests into politics from the 1970s, has marginalized the lower and middle classes’ opportunities of influencing politics. According to Packer (2011: 31), «inequality corrodes trust among fellow citizens, making it seem as if the game is rigged». He argues that this generates anger towards American elites and government in all forms, hardens society into a class-based system, reduces the willingness to find ambitious solutions to collective problems, and generally undermines democracy.

One example of this anger is the protest movement Occupy Wall Street. The movement and their slogan “we are the 99%” received global attention and raised issues such as economic
inequality, corruption and the influence of corporations on government. While the protests have quieted, the study of income distributions over time and between places has increased. Thomas Piketty’s *Capital* (2013), Anthony Atkinson’s *Inequality* (2015), Joseph E. Stiglitz’s *The Price of Inequality* (2012) and *The Great Divide* (2015), and Robert Reich’s *Aftershock* (2011) have all contributed to the elevation of this emerging debate in the United States.

For the most part, Americans endorse the exceptionalist narrative of economic mobility. However, as inequality rises in America, conservatives are becoming increasingly concerned that Obama is making the United States more like Europe by encouraging reliance on government rather than individual initiatives. «Frankly, the president’s policies have made income inequality worse» stated John Boehner, current Speaker of the House of Representatives, in an interview on CBS’s *60 Minutes* discussing the President’s State of the Union Address. «All the regulations that are coming out of Washington make it more difficult for employers to hire more people, chief amongst those, I would argue is Obamacare – which basically puts a penalty or a tax on employers for every new job they create» (Boehner 2015).

The American public largely agrees that economic inequality has grown over the past decade. In a recent poll from the Pew Research Center, 65 percent of Americans believe: “the gap between the rich and everyone else” in the United States has been increasing the last 10 years. This view is shared across partisan lines, but respondents differ on the government’s role in reducing this wealth gap. An overwhelming degree of Democrats (90%) agrees the government should do “a lot” or “some”, while only half as many Republicans (45%) say the same. Instead, nearly half of Republicans believe the government should do “not much” or “nothing at all” to reduce the gap between the rich and everyone else. Moreover, by a 60 percent to 36 percent margin, most Americans feel the economic system unfairly favors the wealthy, as opposed to being fair to most Americans. The same poll finds that more than half of the public (51%) believes that having more advantages than others generally has more to do with why a person is rich than hard work. In the midst of these views of skepticism, most Americans continue to believe in the American Dream. Six-in-ten

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say “most people who want to get ahead can make it if they are willing to work hard” (Pew Research Center 2014c:1-4)

According to an April 2014 NBC/Wall Street Journal poll, a majority of Americans believes that the economic and political structures in the United States “are stacked against people like me” Similarly, 54 percent also agreed that “because of the widening gap between the incomes of the wealthy and everyone else, America is no longer a country where everyone regardless of their background has an opportunity to get ahead”. (NBC News/Wall Street Journal 2014). There is a growing public perception that intergenerational income mobility — that it, a child’s chance of moving up the income distribution ladder relative to her parents — is declining in the United States.

However, according to a landmark study led by Raj Chetty and other researchers at Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley, economic mobility has not changed in a

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16Source: Pew Research Center (2014c) Q44a
half-century in America. In contrary to popular perception, the study of trends in intergenerational mobility in the United States found that percentile rank-based measures of intergenerational mobility have remained relatively stable for the 1971-1993 cohorts. It states that children growing up in America today are just as likely to climb the economic ladder as children born more than a half-century ago. For instance, the probability that a child reaches the top fifth of the income distribution given parents in the bottom fifth of the income distribution is 8.4 percent for children born in 1971, compared with 9 percent for those born in 1986. Another example, children born into the highest-income families in 1984 was 74.5 percentage points more likely to attend college than those from the lowest-income families. The corresponding gap for children born in 1993 is 62.2 percentage points, suggesting that, if anything, mobility has increased slightly in recent cohorts. Moreover, intergenerational mobility is fairly stable over time in each of the nine census divisions of the United States even though they have very different levels of mobility (Chetty et al. 2014: 1).

Despite the fact that measures of mobility have remained stable, income inequality has increased substantially over the same time period and the levels are high in the United States compared with other OECD countries. Hence, the finding suggests that who your parents are and how much they earn is more consequential for American youths today than in the past. This is mainly due to the fact that as the gap between the bottom and the top of the economic ladder has become more evident, moving up ladder has not gotten any easier (ibid.). President Obama (as quoted by Kruger 2012) summarized this rise in inequality when he said, «over the last few decades, the rungs on the ladder of opportunity have grown farther and farther apart, and the middle class has shrunk». Such findings are clearly not in line with the belief in economic mobility, which is deeply embedded in the American identity and the American Dream.
«[...] it is not true that mobility itself is getting lower» Lawrence F. Katz, a Harvard economist and mobility scholar, said in The Washington Post. «What’s really changed is the consequences of it. Because there’s so much inequality, people born near the bottom tend to stay near the bottom, and that’s much more consequential than it was 50 years ago». Those findings put the debate about the consequences of economic inequality in a new light. Because the consequences of mobility are, in fact, what has changed (Tankersly 2014).

Robert Putnam (2015) suggests in this new book Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis that the United States is losing its status as a nation of opportunity. The children growing up in America today, he claims, no longer have equality of opportunity. In the American Dream, upward mobility is equal for all, constrained only by meritocratic factors such as ability, hard work, and ambition. In Our Kids, Putnam presents data which finds the emergence of an “opportunity gap” between education for wealthy and poor children in America during the last twenty-five years, and he explains how differences in politics, class, and race now are impacting the American Dream. He contends that the loss of faith in mobility is the real issue.

Figure 5.4. Changes in the income ladder in the United States

18 Article published by The Washington Post without page numbers.
in today’s society, not economic inequality. The perception of one’s opportunities to climb up the ladder constitutes a fundamental part of the belief in the exceptional America. The rising issue of inequality would not be as important if it had not been for the declining faith in the American Dream of upward mobility.

Many Americans currently face difficult economic challenges, particularly the younger generation. As previously mentioned, Millennials are the first generation in the modern era to have higher levels of student loan debt, poverty and unemployment, and lower levels of wealth and personal income than their two immediate predecessors had at the same stage of their life cycle. Their difficult circumstance reflects both the impact of the recession, and the longer-term effects of globalization and rapid technological change on the American workforce. Median household income in the United States today remains below its 1999 peak, the longest stretch of stagnation in the modern era, and during that time income and wealth gaps have widened. It should come as no surprise that recent surveys find that about 70 percent of the American public believes young adults today face greater economic challenges than their elders when they were first starting out (Pew Research Center 2014a).

A third of older Millennials (ages 27 to 34) have a four-year college degree or more, making them the best-educated cohort of young adults in American history. Education highly correlates with economic success, and even more so for this generation as the economy is growing more knowledge-based. Despite their economic circumstances, the Millennial generation are highly optimistic about their economic futures. More than 80 percent say they either currently “have enough money to lead the lives they want” (32%) or “expect to in the future” (53%). None of the other cohorts in the survey are equally optimistic (Pew Research Center 2014a).

The debate on economic mobility and inequality is emerging in the United States. As shown by Boehner’s statement, when acknowledging these issues conservatives often blame President Obama’s policies. While several Democrats would prefer to raise the topic of economic inequality more often, the public does not seem to respond to talk of redistribution when it comes to the widening income gap. Republicans, on the other hand, would prefer to focus on economic growth rather than economic concerns. However, this does not take the difficulties Americans are facing into consideration. Issues important to
the working and middle-class in the United States such as low and/or stagnant wages, the cost of higher education and the student debt problem, are not appeased by talk of tax cuts, reduced regulation, and restricted redistribution (Gerson 2015). Still, the question of income distribution and economic issues will most certainly play a predominant role in the race for the Presidency between now and November 2016.

5.4 The current position of American exceptionalism

A closer examination of the three indicators shows that American society is indeed undergoing fundamental changes. By tracing trends in the core features of American exceptionalism — the view of religion in society and politics, the American global leadership role and the belief in upward mobility — this analysis finds that such beliefs have declined these past decades for all three indicators, and that the pillars of American exceptionalism are especially being challenged by a generational shift in the United States. During the past five decades, from the Silent generation until today’s Millennials, the United States has been subject to fundamental changes of social, cultural, economic, and political nature which has generated an adjustment in the American populations beliefs in American exceptionalism.

The fact that the belief in American exceptionalism once again was lifted to the forefront of political debate earlier this year, drove President Obama into delivering a speech at the 50th Anniversary of the Selma Montgomery Marches which reflected his effort to articulate a new form of American exceptionalism with a more inwardly focus. He presented the idea of «a patriotism that embraces the darker moments in American history and celebrates the ability of the unsung and the outsiders to challenge the country’s elite and force change» (Jaffe 201519). This view is seemingly more suited to a country whose population is growing more diverse and whose values are changing

19 Article published by The Washington Post without page numbers.
6 What consequences might an adjustment in American exceptionalism have on America’s global role and strategy?

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has held a preeminent position in the liberal world order which was established after World War II. American leadership currently represents the status quo; the stability of the international system is reliant on American power, and allies of the United States have been organized around U.S. security guarantees. Today, the foundation of this world order is eroding. The rules-based system has begun to unravel following the problems and setbacks of the past decades (Kissinger 2014: 2–8). This might signal a transition toward a post-American world order or into a world of global disorder resembling the 1930s (Kagan 2014).

Nevertheless, Robert Kagan (2012) rejects that the erosion of the liberal world order is due to the decline of American power, as several scholars today contend. Because of its geopolitical position, the United States is not only the world’s sole great power, largely unthreatened on its own borders. It has a dynamic and diverse economy and a public with an entrepreneurial culture. It has a worldwide network of strong and/or wealthy allies, strategic security partnerships and military bases, military superiority, and a large nuclear deterrent (Walt 2015). As such, America’s capabilities remain adequate to face the present challenges.

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20 Chief among them: The current civil war in Syria, the challenge of terrorism and instability in the Middle East and North Africa, the Ukraine crisis and Russian ambitions to restore its power position, growing nationalist power tensions in East Asia and China’s attempts to redraw maritime borders in the South China Sea, and the Iranian nuclear and geopolitical challenge.

21 The post-World War I era in which the great powers either lacked the will (Britain and the United States) or wherewithal (France) to police the global order. As a result, revisionist regimes seeking to revise their positions realized that they could fill the power vacuum which led to aggression and the rise of dictatorships around the world (Stephens 2014).

Arguably, the erosion of the liberal world order is rather due to a question of Americans’ sense of self and the purpose of American power. In order to understand the complex nature of the American world order, it is necessary to understand the complex character of the American people. This complex character, which this thesis has argued constitutes the concept of American exceptionalism, endorses contradictory impulses in foreign policy and ambivalent views on what role, if any, the United States should play in the world.

Henry Kissinger (2014: 234) writes: «No other nation has played such a decisive role in shaping contemporary world as the United States, nor professed such ambivalence about participating in it». Americans act out of a sense of responsibility and then resent and fear the burden of responsibility they have taken upon themselves (Kagan 2012: 14). This ambivalence led the United States toward the role of reluctant sheriff23 after the Cold War, which was reflected in John Kerry’s speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention: «The United States of America never goes to war because we want to; we only go to war because we have to».

The erosions in the liberal world order and major domestic constraints, such as limited resources and conflicting public options, constitute a difficult task for American leaders and policymakers. Faced with this pressure, what is the sustainable course for the United States — further engagement or retrenchment? Key questions for future American leadership to answer are:

I. How can the United States best achieve balance between its pressing needs at home and its established role as a world leader and commitments abroad?

II. What are the consequences for the liberal world order if the declined belief in American exceptionalism leads the United States toward further disengagement and abandonment of some of its idealistic foundations?

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How can the United States best confront its upcoming challenges? The fundamental issue for the United States as it faces the future is closing the *Lippmann gap*\(^{24}\). This means «bringing into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, the nation’s commitments and the nation’s power» (Lippmann as quoted in Huntington 1987: 453). In order to do this, the United States will need to undertake new strategic priorities and reassess its current international commitments.

The 2015 National Security Strategy outlines an international order in need of American leadership to face acute and growing challenges. This leadership role is grounded in the enduring national interests of the United States which are the following (The White House 2015: 1-2, 19-23):

1. Strengthening American national defense, and providing security of U.S. homeland, its citizens, and its allies and partners

2. Maintaining a strong, innovative, and growing U.S. economy in an open international economic system that promotes opportunity and prosperity.

3. Respect for universal values and the defense of human rights at home and around the world. The support of emerging democracies and prevention of mass atrocities are also considered to be in America’s interests.

4. Defense of the rules-based international order advanced by U.S. leadership that promotes peace, security, and opportunity through stronger cooperation to meet global challenges.

Anne-Marie Slaughter (2015) defines American interests as *defensive interests* and *affirmative goals*. Defensive interests correspond with the narrow definition of security in the first two interests of the National Security Strategy. Meanwhile, the affirmative goals the United States pursues in the world relate to American ideals and values which are clearly in line with the two last interests of the United States. The continued value placed on these

\(^{24}\) The term Lippmann gap was coined by Samuel P. Huntington in 1987, named after journalist Walter Lippmann.
affirmative goals in the formulation of strategy is at the core of the current debate. Since they constitute the foundation of the liberal world order that promotes peace, security, and opportunity through cooperation, the future of this order is reliant upon their prevalence.

This previous chapter found that American beliefs in the exceptionalist narrative are in decline, and the influence of liberal ideals and values on U.S. grand strategy seem to be weakened for some time to come. In order to protect, preserve and advance American interests, security and prosperity in the long run, different strategic choices are available to balance the ends, ways and means of American power. As previously shown, strategic options available for the United States can be placed on a spectrum of ideal types of strategy from restraint to assertiveness. Whether the United States can continue to pursue a variant of primacy, or whether it should pursue a more restrained strategy of collective security, selective engagement, offshore balancing or neo-isolationism depends, to a large degree, on the ends and means at its disposal, and the purpose of its power.

The following sections will analyze the strategic options available for the United States through the lens of American exceptionalism, discuss the appropriate role for the United States as it faces its future, and consider the consequences of more uncertainty about the idealistic component of American strategic thinking. In addition, it will consider the implications for the international order and the promotion of collective interests if the declined belief in American exceptionalism leads the United States toward abandonment of America’s role as keeper of the world order. Finally, this thesis will propose a case for a more sustainable American grand strategy in line with the current international and domestic circumstances.

### 6.1 American Exceptionalism and U.S. Grand Strategy

Grand strategies provide nations with an overarching sense of purpose in their international affairs. Grand strategy helps to build domestic support and provide international clarity for a
nation’s foreign policies. The formulation of grand strategy involves the identification and prioritization of national interests, goals and objectives, as well as any potential threats to such interests and the resources and means with which a state will meet threats in order to protect its interests. These material and systemic factors are, following the neoclassical realist framework, filtered through domestic and ideational factors to be translated into adjustments in strategic choice.

Among others, Trevor B. McCrisken (2003) argues that the belief in American exceptionalism can be understood as an essential part of the domestic nature of the United States, and it has thus provided and continues to provide a vital element in the framework for U.S. grand strategy making. It is necessary for the United States to follow a coherent grand strategy which allocates its resources accordingly, and makes the inevitable trade-offs and priorities to address the strategic risks to American interests. Throughout the history of America, American exceptionalism has inspired formulations of grand strategies ranging across the spectrum. It has served as the basis for various ideas about America’s global role and the best way to promote the American way of life, and it has manifested itself in the form of political idealism which historically has been counterbalanced by the principles of realism with regard to the direction of grand strategy.

In his second inaugural address, President George W. Bush (2005) articulated what had become a dominant and bipartisan vision of American grand strategy:

America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth. Across the generations we have proclaimed the imperative of self-government, because no one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave. Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation. It is the honorable achievement of our fathers. Now it is the urgent requirement of our nation's security, and the calling of our time. So it is the policy of the United States 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.

This address clearly reflects the impact American exceptionalism can have on strategic thinking: First, American exceptionalism shows how religion shapes the nation’s character;
helps form Americans’ ideas about the world; and influences the ways Americans respond to events beyond their borders. Religion explains both Americans’ sense of themselves as a chosen people and their belief that they have a duty to spread their values throughout the world (Mead 2006: 24). Second, American exceptionalism also indicates the importance of the universal principle of individual freedom. Equality and social and economic mobility constitute the American Dream and the value of meritocratic factors such as ability, effort and ambition. Finally, American exceptionalism represents patriotism through the moralism and idealism in its strategic approach; the promotion of democracy and human rights around the world as the guiding principle of U.S. foreign policy.

In order to effectively formulate a grand strategy it is significant to understand how American exceptionalism continues to affect American strategic thinking. Due to the unique synthesis between realism and idealism in American strategic culture, the continued importance of idealistic values and affirmative goals in the nation’s grand strategic course is dependent on the preservation of the exceptional American self-understanding. Because of its profound impact on strategic thinking, it might also contribute to a degree of uncertainty and ambiguity when it comes to America’s role in the world and its commitments in international affairs.

6.2 The appropriate role of the United States in the world

Debates on American exceptionalism and its importance for policy formulation seem to emerge as soon as there is anxiety about the American position in the world caused by an economic, social or political setback. Following the global financial crisis, a population characterized by intervention fatigue, and large domestic economic challenges, it is not surprising that questions regarding an American decline and a retrenchment from U.S. global affairs emerge. The ideological foundation of American exceptionalism has both influenced and constrained U.S. behavior abroad throughout its nation’s history. The liberal assumptions of American strategic culture have influenced strategic thinking in an idealistic
manner and encouraged the United States to define its interests and goals in expansive and
global terms which requires continued global engagement and a leadership role for the
United States. At the same time, the tradition of limited liability, which is rooted in a
combination of historical, geopolitical, institutional, and cultural factors, has predisposed
Americans to limit costs of overseas commitments and toward strategies of non-
entanglement and disengagement.

The synthesis between idealism and realism in American strategic thinking has historically
served the United States well. However, after the Cold War, the heavy emphasis on idealism
based on a bipartisan consensus that the United States should spread its vision of
democracy, freedom, and economic system, outbalanced the realist aspect. This version
deeply embraced the concept of American exceptionalism which sees the United States as
uniquely qualified to lead the world. It reflected an institutionalized desire to maintain
American primacy in the world and to promote American values abroad. The vital or core
interests of the United States has remained remarkably consistent, and American
overarching priorities and national means are largely characterized by stability and
continuity over time. Simultaneously, the United States adjusts its global strategy in line with
changing national and international conditions.

As shown in the first part of this analysis; the belief in American exceptionalism is
significantly changing. The American public in general, and the younger generation in
particular, are losing faith in its core pillars — religiosity, patriotism and mobility. Today, the
American public seems unwilling to continue to support a strategy of primacy, and they
remain divided in their views of the appropriate role for the United States in the world and
the purpose of American power.

Following the decline in American exceptionalist sentiments and the desire to disengage
from global affairs, a strategy of restraint seems to fit the moment. American leadership
today might be more inclined to pull back from international commitments, which is already
reflected in the foreign policy of the Obama administration, and American grand strategy
may be moving away from its “special mission” in the world, and back toward the narrower
focus on defensive interests and the role of leading by example. Even as most politicians still
continue to assert their commitment to a global American leadership, a more restricted view
has taken hold among scholars of international relations over the past decades: that the United States should abandon its strategy of primacy and replace it with one of restraint (Brooks, Ikenberry and Wohlforth 2013: 131-132). Hence, the question of whether to engage or retreat from global affairs reflects the basic issue of the debate of an appropriate grand strategy for the United States.

The declined belief in the exceptionalist narrative has undoubtedly had a profound effect on strategic thinking in the United States. This makes the consequences of further uncertainty with regard to the idealistic component of U.S. grand strategy the core of the current debate. There are many Americans who feel the United States should go back to realist political principles instead of the ideals of self-righteous moralizing. While others would prefer that the United States moved away from its exceptionalist influences altogether, and toward a strategy of disengagement and non-entanglement. Given the impact the exceptional narrative is assumed to have on policy formulation, what are the implications for grand strategic choice if the idea of American exceptionalism is in retreat?

American exceptionalism provides the idealistic foundation for two fundamentally different identities and foreign policy approaches. The division of the debate on grand strategy into shapers and restrainers correspond with these divergent approaches as both dichotomies contrast each other in their views about America’s global role. American exceptionalism thus involves a substantial potential for adjustments, fluctuations and inner conflict with regard to the nature and extent of international engagement.

The exemplary identity is said to inspire an isolationist foreign policy which entails that the United States should be reluctant to involve itself with the outside world and nurture its own political experiment. This corresponds with the opinions of restrainers who prefer a light footprint in the use of force in order to avoid the slippery slope into the messes of sustained involvements, and who believe that solving domestic challenges should be of higher priority than international commitments.

Meanwhile, the internationalist foreign policy, inspired by the missionary approach, entails an active engagement in world affairs with the United States acting out the mission they have been given. Similarly, shapers believe the United States must remain its leadership role
and influence developments all over the world because global events could damage American interests. Accordingly, different interpretations of the challenges to American power lead to different approaches to grand strategy. While restrainers and exemplarists seek to limit U.S. engagement in international events, shapers and internationalists seek to influence them.

The affirmative goals of the United States are deeply rooted in American history, ideals and identity. For shapers, national security and defensive interests are uniquely connected to idealism, the spread and protection of democracy and liberal values, the promotion of a more peaceful world order, and the maintenance of global stability. Realists tend to define national interests in terms of power and capabilities relative to the evolving international system. Restrainers support the protection of narrower and defensive national security interests at the expense of such affirmative goals. American foreign policy will always entail reconciliation between these two elements. The question involves their composition within administrations and their implications when it comes to policy objectives and choice of strategy. The strategic options also represent different variations in the willingness and the tendency to use military force or economic sanctions to achieve grand strategy objectives, and the equivalent value of soft power instruments, such as diplomacy and institutional policies, to ensure that the United States is an attractive partner.

Shapers, which often refer to adherents of cooperative security and primacy, have focused on an expansive use of American power to advance democracy and human rights, and for humanitarian or nation-building purposes. These views coincide with idealist views on the use of military force to advance or defend idealistic values, although they increasingly recognize that the use of military force should be linked to national interests. Over the last decade, America’s “special mission” has been articulated to legitimate policies such as the invasion, occupation and failed reconstruction of Afghanistan and Iraq, the 2011 NATO operation in Libya and the current military operation against ISIL. These wars and policies have been costly for the United States, both in terms of resources and casualties. They have also been accompanied by violations of human rights and civil liberties, in the United States and abroad, as the ‘mission’ has justified a disregard for American laws and values as well as
international norms and treaty obligations, primarily with regard to torture and the treatment of prisoners of war\textsuperscript{25}.

Adherents of primacy are considered the most idealistic in the sense that the spread of liberal values such as human rights and democracy are considered as a main concern for U.S. foreign policy and a vital component of its national interests. Idealists have often been driven by moral and humanitarian concerns. They see American interests engaged when American values are threatened, and they justify U.S. intervention, including use of force, when there is a high moral purpose. Similarly, cooperative security often represents liberal internationalists who assert that the United States has a core interest in pursuing a «world of liberty under law» (Posen and Ross 1996/97: 23). The post-Cold War era with increased interdependence, deepened connectivity and proliferation of conflict and insecurity across the world, demands that American interests and objectives are defined broadly and include affirmative goals. The United States must therefore pursue liberty both at home and abroad.

While the desire to preserve American primacy makes its advocates predisposed to use American power, vigorously and unilaterally if necessary, against failed, failing, or rouge states with meaningful military capabilities, particularly in sensitive geo-strategic regions in order to maintain stability all over the world. Cooperative security relies on more multilateral use of force with support from the international system. It emphasizes the role of international institutions such as the United Nations and NATO to legitimate international engagement and preserve credibility. Due to its focus on liberal values and the concept of human security, this strategy desires an increased willingness to use force and undertake humanitarian interventions.

While the promotion of democracy and human rights abroad are consistent with American political culture and ideology, in practice, these are highly case specific. When in accordance with the framework and principles of U.S. grand strategy, the United States may act for humanitarian purposes, but more often, a pragmatic realism governs. The current disaster in Syria highlights this tension in American foreign policy. Due to the large numbers of

\textsuperscript{25} As documented in the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee’s study on CIA’s Detention and Interrogation Program post 9/11. The report disclosed that the ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ used by the CIA on detainees were more brutal and employed more extensively than the agency had portrayed. The program was mismanaged, lacked adequate oversight, and members of Congress and the White House were misled by the CIA about the effectiveness of its torture practices (United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence 2014).
casualties and human rights violations, and growing regional instability and extremism involvement, this resembles a classic case for military intervention. Yet, at least for the time being, there seems to be little willingness to further intervene. When there is no direct threat to U.S. homeland, citizens or allies, or the U.S. economy, the prospects for large scale military intervention at present seem low, despite the unfolding humanitarian tragedy (Hooker 2015: 321).

In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the Bush presidency, a new and more sober American self-understanding, characterized by a balance between continuity in the belief in their own values and increased insight into how the United States is perceived by the rest of the world, has developed. Many Americans felt that under George W. Bush, the pendulum that swings between assertiveness and retrenchment with regard to U.S. global role had swung too far toward unilateral engagement for idealistic purposes. The declined value placed on idealism under Obama has further led to conflicted American views about U.S. engagement in the world, and seems to strengthen the structural basis for a more pragmatic grand strategy.

Obama’s *Doctrine of Restraint*\(^\text{26}\) reflects the current circumstance and temperament. He was elected to lead a nation exhausted by the two longest and most expensive wars in its history, and entered the White House with a pledge to bring home American troops from two major wars. Rather than continuing his predecessor’s outward focus, his priorities were domestic: nation building at home and recovery from the financial crisis (Cohen 2015a).

The more restrained strategic options available for the United States entail an abandonment of exceptional values and affirmative goals. Restrainers seek a transformation of the military into a smaller force that goes to war only when it must, rather than by the goal of democracy promotion. For instance, neo-isolationism holds that America’s only true vital interest is national defense — defined as securing the liberty, property, and security of the homeland. Similarly, adherents of offshore balancing call for a strategy that would give up parts of the U.S. global agenda and focus on the protection of narrow and vital national security interests.

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One prominent advocate of this approach, Barry Posen (2013: 117-118) argues that by not relying on America’s geo-strategic position, the strategy of primacy has damaged the nation’s prosperity and security in the long run:

This undisciplined, expensive and bloody strategy has done untold harm to U.S. national security [...] further raising the costs of carrying out its foreign policy [...] Instead of relying on these inherent advantages for its security, the United States has acted with profound sense of insecurity, adopting an unnecessarily militarized and forward-leaning foreign policy. That strategy has generated predictable pushback.

Both strategies are deeply rooted in the realist tradition and strongly believe that the United States should only intervene when it has vital interests at stake; for instance when the nation or a strategic ally are directly threatened, or when the nation’s broader credibility is at risk. Accordingly, for them, humanitarian interventions and democracy promotion are seen as costly affairs that make the United States less capable of intervening when American interests actually require it. Meanwhile, the option of selective engagement shows willingness to use both military force and international cooperation in order to further American interests and objectives. In this context, selective engagement represents a hybrid strategy that is firmly rooted in the realist goals of security and prosperity, but also includes liberal goals such as preservation of an open international economic order, protection of human rights and prevention of genocide. This approach is more selective as to where U.S. interests are defined and military force applied, but still open to engage and maintain allies and commitments in strategic areas.

Restrainers would rather focus on security challenges such as preventing a powerful rival from shifting the global balance of power, counterterrorism, and limiting nuclear proliferation. More restrained strategies are therefore designed to reduce the nation’s international and military costs and commitments by cutting defense spending, withdrawing from certain alliance obligations, scaling back on deployments abroad, and reducing international expenditures (Mearsheimer 2011; Walt 2011; Posen 2013).

This is in line with the findings of the previous chapter. According to Robert Kagan (2014), Americans are “world-weary”. Whether it is their support for a smaller, cheaper military or
their skepticism toward unilateral use of force, Americans are highly sensitive to the financial and moral costs of continuing Bush’s expansive strategy. The desire to pull back from global affairs has increased during the past decades. This is partly due to the lengthy engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan and the current security environment which is characterized by complexity and conflict, but the restraint also has domestic roots.

Many Americans find that social, political and economic challenges at home are of greater priority than most foreign policy objectives. The Pew Research Center’s 2013 America’s Place in the World survey indicates similar attitudes in terms of support for “soft power” efforts such as defending human rights abroad, helping improve living standards in developing countries and promoting democracy which rate as relatively low priorities for the American public. When respondents were asked to list their top priorities for foreign policy, protecting the United States from terrorist attacks (83%) and preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction (73%), as well as domestic concern such as protection of the jobs of American workers (81%) were at the top of the list. Majorities also say that reducing the country’s dependence on imported energy sources and combating international drug trafficking should be top priorities, while nearly half say the same about reducing illegal immigration (Pew Research Center 2013a: 10).

Shapers argue that a strong and assertive grand strategy is crucial in order for American prosperity, security and ideals to flourish. As the world’s sole superpower, the protection of the liberal world order must remain at the core of American security. For some time to come, the United States is the only nation with the required resources to inhabit this role and to promote and protect the liberal values of the order on a global scale. This position reflects the embracement of a central feature of American exceptionalism; that America’s “special mission” is to lead the international order and actively promote its values abroad. Anne-Marie Slaughter (2015) also notes that standing for such a world and working to promote it is not only an exercise of American power; it is a source of that power.

Meanwhile, restrainers in grand strategy find the United States overcommitted in world affairs and too involved in matters with little bearing on own security. They assert that it is not sustainable for the United States to preserve its current international position without either provoking counterbalancing by revisionist states or overextending its own resources.
Restrainers believe that the disproportionate fluctuation towards idealism these past decades has led to overstretch and domestic decline, and that the promotion of democracy around the world only serves to generate additional enemies and risk strategic exhaustion.

For instance, Christopher Layne (2012a) argues that America’s leadership role, combined with various global interests throughout the world, makes retrenchment inevitable. Proponents of restraint often argue that an insistence on primacy is a recipe for strategic overstretch, national exhaustion, and a decline of power and influence. Yet shapers argue that an abandonment of America’s leadership role, particularly with regard to security, will most certainly have profound effect on the liberal world order.

While the massive costs of global engagement — in terms of dollars and human lives spent, and focus on international issues at the expense of domestic ones — are clear and measurable. Those predisposed not to act do not necessarily take sufficient consideration of the fact that inaction has consequences as well. The costs of disengagement are more complex than those of engagement, and perhaps impossible to quantify before they are experienced. As such, some find that the risk of inaction may be greater than the risk of mistake (Fontaine and Flournoy 2014). Furthermore, in addition to the existing and emerging threats the world faces, it will undoubtedly be confronted with unexpected crises in the years to come. Such unknown events accentuate the importance of principles and objectives to guide American leadership in the world.

Shapers in the debate on grand strategy argue that in order to preserve American global leadership, one must define policies that will make Americans more secure and prosperous, and that, at the same time, will promote and protect the core ideals and values of the United States. More assertive grand strategic options share the idea of maintenance and expansion of current alliances and commitments to account for the changing nature of the international system. The emergence of new actors and increased competition in the system means that the United States will have to work harder to maintain its military and diplomatic edge.

Cooperative security encourages multilateralism, and put heavy reliance on alliances and commitments abroad regardless of economic or geopolitical position. The strategy of
cooperative security argues that in a world in which transnational threats are likely to increase, the international community has a responsibility to protect and prevent, which challenges the realist assumption that sovereignty is absolute. Accordingly, this approach values international institutions, norms and laws. If the United States were to pull back from the world order, it would be counterproductive for the pursuit of core American interests as they lay the foundation of the current order. The strategy of primacy is more unilateral in its approach. The main objective is to preserve American supremacy and the prevention of any serious contender to the hegemonic world order that emerged after the Cold War (Posen and Ross 1996/97; Posen 2013).

However, providing the stability of the world order is a heavy burden, and the idea of seeking to share this burden makes sense in the aftermath of the lengthy engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan. More than 50 percent of Americans believe the United States plays “a less important and powerful role as a world leader than it did a decade ago” and a majority of Americans today express a desire for the United States to “mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own” (Pew Research Center 2013a). Considering the current international and domestic context, adherents of engagement acknowledge that it may be tempting for leaders to abandon the current strategy and rather seek to pull back from the world.

Neo-isolationists seek to keep the level of U.S. global engagement and commitments at a minimal; they are highly skeptical of the use of American power abroad and retain a deep animosity toward international institutions and international law. However, even as the American public is negative toward sustained American global leadership, their view does not represent an expression of isolationism nor a return to the United States as “a shining city upon the hill”. As the United States faces its future, it is clear that while the public opinion represents a clear desire to pull back in terms of foreign policy, there is a willingness to continue to engage and further integrate with the rest of the world on other fronts.

Restraint does not necessarily involve the avoidance of all strategic alliances, but the desired direction is one of lowered cost and reduced commitment. Indeed, certain elements of restraint are merited as the economic circumstances of the United States and the leaner national security budget do not allow for the same level of American engagement.
Accordingly, the option of offshore balancing is proposed. This approach opens for alliances at an ad-hoc basis and for a limited time. It entails getting other states to do more for their own security so the United States can do less. It is thus, a strategy of burden shifting, instead of burden sharing. By setting clear priorities and emphasizing reliance on regional allies, it reduces the danger of being drawn into unnecessary conflicts and encourages other states to do more to help us. Equally important, it takes advantage of America’s favorable geopolitical position and exploits the tendency for regional powers to worry more about each other than about the United States (Walt 2005: 223).

A strategy of offshore balancing means that the United States must give up its efforts to lead the liberal international order as it calls for deeper reliance on regional allies and a world role for the United States as a ‘balancer of last resort’ (McDonough 2009: 11; Brooks et al. 2013; Posen 2013). Yet adherents of engagement speculate that the United States would be less secure, prosperous, and influential, were it to cede its global leadership role. Since this approach delegates the responsibility for regional stability to the major powers of the region, it also becomes a question of how the United States can accept an international system reliant on Russia, China and Iran to stabilize Asia and the Pacific, and the Middle East and Persian Gulf. According to Fontaine and Flournoy (201427):

[D]isengagement is misguided and dangerous, for a simple reason: the world will not permit America to retreat significantly from its global leadership role without very real and substantial costs.

The approach of selective engagement furthers an agenda that seeks to scale back U.S. commitments overseas, shift the burden somewhat to American allies, and maintain military deployments in regions critical to U.S. interests such as Europe, the Persian Gulf, and East Asia. According to Robert Art (2003: 9-10), this strategy is both politically feasible and affordable, steering «a middle course between not doing enough and attempting to do too much; it takes neither an isolationist, unilateralist path at one extreme nor a world policeman role at the other». Unlike most neo-isolationist ideas, engagement strategies posit that a forward posture that seeks to prevent significant threats from materializing is

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27 Article published in The National Interest without page numbers.
preferable to one that employs offshore balancing. Therefore, selective engagement strategies would for example maintain core American alliances such as NATO and bilateral alliances with Japan and South Korea (ibid: 121-137). This corresponds quite well with Obama’s policies toward reduction of America’s military footprint in a changed world and the empowerment of other countries to do more (Department of Defense 2012; The White House 2015).

However, while the American public seems to desire a more restrained strategy for America in the future, Obama’s Doctrine of Restraint is met with criticism (Cohen 2015b). Apparently, the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of retrenchment which is unacceptable as most Americans still believe strongly in the notion of American exceptionalism. As such, the American public favors the liberal world order, but they are no longer willing to sacrifice as much to uphold it. This is a product of what Robert Kagan (2014) has termed a “search for normalcy” — the belief that the United States does too much in terms of solving world problems and should return to being a more normal kind of great power, more attuned to its own domestic needs and less focused on the collective interests of the world.

6.3 Implications for the liberal world order

This thesis has shown that American beliefs in the exceptionalist narrative are changing, and the views of America’s role as keeper of the world order are eroding. U.S. grand strategy — including its emphasis on military, diplomatic, and economic means — is of great importance for the world at large, and any strategic adjustments may have consequences for the entire global order. Following this trend, it is significant to discuss the implications for the liberal world order and the promotion of collective interests if the declined belief in America as an exceptional nation leads the United States to focus on its material interests at the expense of its ideals, and toward further retrenchment and restraint in its grand strategy. Robert
Kagan (2014) believes that unless Americans can be led back to «an understanding of their enlightened self-interest, to see again how their fate is entangled with that of the world, then the prospects for a peaceful twenty-first century in which Americans and American principles can thrive will be bleak». According to Joseph S. Nye (2015), the inability or unwillingness of American leadership to use power may become its greatest problem. Similarly, G. John Ikenberry (2008: 45-46) states that the greatest threat to U.S. national security today is the erosion of the institutional foundations of the world order.

In the early 1990s, Samuel Huntington (1991: 287) asked: «What would happen [...] if the American model no longer embodied strength and success, no longer seemed to be the winning model? ». His conclusion was that:

People around the world would come to see the United States as a declining power, characterized by political stagnation, economic inefficiency, and social chaos. If this happened, the perceived failures of the United States would inevitably be seen as failures of democracy (ibid).

In several manners, the quote seems to correspond with America’s current standing in the world. Geopolitical challenges appears to have returned to international politics as the foundations of the liberal world order has begun to erode due to the growing isolationist sentiments of the American public, nervous allies, and ambitious rivals (Stephens 2014: 126). The United States’ uncertainty about its future role is already causing adjustments in the world order. Robert Kagan (2014) writes that the world will change much more quickly than restrainers imagine, and there is no democratic superpower waiting in the wings to save the world if the United States falters.

Richard Haass (2014: 76) argues that the unraveling of the world order is due to three trends; power in the world has diffused across a greater number and range of actors, respect for the American economic and political model has diminished, and the inconsistency of specific U.S. policy choices, especially in the Middle East. The result is that while the United States’ absolute strength remains considerable, American influence has diminished. While some believe that because of this, it is time for America to pull back and let others shoulder
more of the world’s burdens, others find that the current security environment makes it hard for the United States to retreat significantly from its global role without substantial costs.

Walter Russell Mead (2014: 69) predicts a return to geopolitics in international relations, and the rise of revisionist powers in the system. As the world sense a United States not eager to carry the burden of global responsibility, instability and uncertainty grows. First of all, declined American influence in the international system might unleash growing challenges from ambitious regional powers seeking to revise their position and reshape the system in ways that reflect their own interests, norms and values. Secondly, for Americans allies, U.S. security guarantees are meaningless unless the United States is able and willing to meet them. Consequently, this has raised doubts about American judgment and the reliability of both the United States’ threats and promises.

Whether it is Russia annexing Crimea, aggressive Chinese claims of maritime borders in the South China Sea, or Iran’s efforts to influence events in the Middle East through its alliances with Syria and Hezbollah, issues of geopolitical importance are emerging. While the United States and its allies in Europe would like to continue the shift in international relations away from zero-sum issues toward win-win ones, and move past the geopolitical issues of territory and material power capabilities toward focus on those of the world order and global governance, the current security environment is making the task of promoting and maintaining the world order a challenging one.

On the other hand, G. John Ikenberry (2014: 80-81) argues that Walter Russell Mead is overestimating the ability of the “coalition of illiberal powers” to revise the post-Cold War settlement and the American-led world order that underlines it. While Ikenberry acknowledges that these states look for opportunities to resist U.S. global leadership and to push back against it. He finds that Mead’s focus on the objective of these revisionist states to build regional spheres of influence in order to threaten the foundations of U.S. leadership and the global order represents a misreading of the character of the existing order which is more stable and expansive than Mead depicts.
Because of the sustained efforts taken by the United States since World War II to build a system of multilateral institutions, alliances, trade agreements, and political partnerships, Ikenberry (2011) asserts that the world order will remain stable and prevail even as America’s ability to protect and promote it weakens. He believes that the current world order has led countries toward cooperation, and strengthened the global norms and rules which undercut the legitimacy of old-fashioned spheres of influence, regional domination and territorial claims. Ikenberry (2014: 84) argues that Mead’s vision of a contest over Eurasia misunderstands the more profound power transition under way: the increasing ascendancy of liberal capitalist democracy. In addition, the world order has provided the United States with the capacities, partnerships and principles necessary to confront the current challenges of revisionist states. America’s alliances, partnerships, multilateralism and democracy represent the core tools available for U.S. leadership, and according to Ikenberry (2014: 81), these are winning the struggles over geopolitics and the world order.

Greater uncertainty in the international system is increasing volatility in world politics. According to Bremmer (2015) and Mead (2014), the outcome of that volatility will depend on the manner in which China, Russia and Iran seek to pursue its revisionist goals, establish their spheres of influence, and challenge American interests in the world. They argue that the United States will have very little influence over these developments, so the better course of action is to stand aloof from them and find another purpose for American energy and values. Meanwhile, Ikenberry (2014) and Kagan (2012; 2014), and Nye (2015) argue that due to its economic and geopolitical foundations, none of America’s adversaries are currently prepared to take on the costs and risks of challenging the United States as of yet. Although U.S. hegemony eventually will diminish, the nation’s power is still unrivaled. Accordingly, for some time to come, the United States will preserve its ability to influence global events as long as it avoids overstretch.

As the international system grows more multipolar with an increasing diversity of actors, Ian Bremmer (2015) writes that the United States no longer has the influence necessary to play the role of world leader. More importantly, he says, because of the responsibilities that come with it, the American public is no longer supportive of such a role. The public opinion
shows that Americans believe the United States does too much in terms of solving world problems.

In an effort to protect American security and prosperity, the promotion of a liberal economic order and close security commitments with allies in Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East has been essential to American grand strategy and the advancement of American interests since the end of World War II. On that account, Ikenberry believes the appropriate grand strategy for the United States must be «one aimed at restoring its role as the recognized and legitimate leader of the system and rebuilding the institutions and partnerships upon which this leadership position is based» (Ikenberry 2008: 45-46). This would mean an increase of the present level of America’s military. Interventionists argue that the current levels of military capacity and defense spending is inadequate to shoulder the burdens of the world. As Marco Rubio (2015: 110) puts it: «the world is at its safest when America is at its strongest»

In making their case for maintaining the United States' policy of deep engagement, Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlfforth (2013: 130) stress that U.S. security commitment to allied states in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia, together with American preponderance of power, stifles regional rivalries and hinders the resurgence of a dangerous era of multipolar power politics. Advocates of retrenchment, such as Barry Posen (2013), recognize that the world will become a much more dangerous place as new powers emerge. They just believe that these regional conflicts will not affect the United States. America can protect itself due to its geopolitical position and behind its nuclear deterrent. The United States only has to worry about other regions if one rival power is poised to dominate East Asia, Europe, or the Middle East. The sheer physics of balancing means this is very unlikely to happen, but if it did there would be enough time to intervene and tip the balance against the rival. They even argue that the United States could manipulate regional tensions to its own benefit.

Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlfforth (2013: 130) on the other hand, argue that continued U.S. security commitments supplies both reassurance and deterrence, reduces competition in key regions and acts as a check against potential rivals. Moreover, active management of the world order helps the Unites States in maintaining an open world economy and gives
Washington leverage in economic negotiations. This strategy also makes it easier for the United States to secure cooperation for combating a wide range of global threats. The United States is the ultimate provider of security due to its power and its alliance system, which supports its global reach and power projection. They believe the strategy of deep engagement is the appropriate one as the United States faces its future, because in their view the United States would be less secure, prosperous, and influential, were it to cede its global leadership role (Brooks et al. 2013: 131-132). From this perspective, the rise of a peer competitor in Eurasia would pose a dramatic threat to international order and significantly increase the risk of war.

Yet, most of the strategists who reject deep engagement do not call for isolationism. They favor continued U.S. engagement, albeit in a more restrained, highly selective, and strategically sustainable way. They believe the United States should seek to maintain favorable balances of power in key regions, but that it does not need to provide all the military muscle itself and certainly should not try to dictate or control the political evolution of these areas with military force. They believe a more restrained approach would preserve core U.S. interests at an acceptable cost, and would be far better suited to the current distribution of global power (Walt 2013).

6.4 The case for a sustainable U.S. grand strategy

A country’s actual grand strategy will often be a hybrid of ideal types and American national security strategies tend to contain elements from several of these schools. For instance, both Clinton and Bush-era National Security Strategies contain elements of selective engagement, cooperative security and primacy (Center for a New American Security 2008: 17). Today, the international security environment has become more complex and the United States faces a broader set of challenges than those of the previous era. Therefore, the limited resources available for American leadership and the public’s unwillingness to engage in international affairs, has led to an adjustment in its global leadership role.
The American public opinion and the declined belief in the United States as an exceptional nation seem to reflect an overall tiredness to world affairs, especially lengthy engagements and military commitments abroad. This represents an increased emphasis on the tradition of limited liability in American strategic culture at the expense of exceptional and liberal ideals. At the same time, the value placed on idealism and the influence of the classical liberal assumptions has, most likely, been weakened for some time to come following the identity crisis caused primarily by the setbacks of the past decades. This reinforce the argument made by the political scientists Charles Kupchan and Peter Trubowitz (2007), that demographic and political shifts within the United States are making it harder and harder to build support for a grand strategy based on liberal internationalist principles.

Consequently, a grand strategy around the idea of maintaining American international leadership, but doing so at lower costs will better reflect the changing geography of global power. A combined appreciation for balance of power realism and discriminate intervention with the focus on multilateral institutions of liberal internationalism are more in line with the underlying and enduring principles reflected in American power, the bureaucracy, and public attitudes. In order to sustain its leadership role and its capacity to influence international events, certain strategic choices must be made. The United States must reorient its policies, balance the hard and soft powers at its disposal, and focus on homeland security rather than towards costly military presence abroad.

The United States needs to reduce its strategic and military overstretch, avoid prolonged stability operations and find more discrete ways of applying force when it is required. It should strengthen its homeland security apparatuses to counter the threat of terrorism at home. While non-state actors and terrorist organizations oppose American values, currently they do not pose a direct existential threat to the United States and none of these groups possess conventional military capabilities equal to those of the United States and its allies. In addition, the United States should rely on diplomacy to accommodate its allies as well as its rivals. It should seek to peacefully engage with major powers such as China and Russia, and attempt to find diplomatic solutions to counter nuclear proliferations by rogue state actors such as Iran and North Korea.
The United States also needs to overcome its national challenges and setting its house in order (Brzezinski 2012: 37, 44-45). Richard Haass (2013: 1-10) made a similar case in his book *Foreign Policy Begins at Home*:

Many of the foundations of this country’s power are eroding [...] Isolationism would be folly. At the same time, the United States must become significantly more discriminating in choosing what it does in the world and how it does it. Hard choices need to be made [...] For the last two decades, American foreign policy [...] has quite simply overreached.

The perceived belief that the United States is in decline has often leads to the conclusion that America must focus inwardly and downsize its reach, its ambitions, and its responsibilities in the world. But in fact, responsible foreign and domestic policies are mutually reinforcing, as Richard Haass (2014: 79) writes: «a stable world is good for the home front, and a successful home front provides the resources needed for American global leadership».

Such a strategy reflects the current international and domestic setting for several reasons: First, the emphasis on multilateralism and international institutions offers an opportunity for greater burden sharing with regard to international engagement and commitments; in addition it addresses real and perceived declines in American power and influence and seeks to restore the domestic foundations of America’s role abroad. Second, the focus on balance of power means that this strategy does not seek to challenge emerging competitors, which would require conventional rather than the counter-insurgency capabilities that the military has refined in recent years. Third, it calls for a less assertive international role for the United States, attends to concerns about the U.S. image abroad, and prefers diplomacy over force without withdrawing international military presence altogether (Kreps 2009: 645). This corresponds to the position of American exceptionalism in today’s society as it reflects the present reconciliation between idealism and realism, as well as the two traits of American strategic culture.
7 Conclusion

The issue of how the United States can best balance its pressing needs at home with its established role as a world leader and commitments abroad is as old as the nation itself. The pendulum has fluctuated between greater and lesser willingness to engage in the world which, in part, is due to the unique dynamics that shape America’s role in the world. With reference to the neoclassical realist framework, which integrates the importance of domestic ideas, strategic culture, and national discourse to the realm of realism in order to include domestic-level factors when explaining foreign policy behavior, the premise of this thesis is that American exceptionalism, defined as the national identity of the American people, profoundly affects how the United States acts and justifies its behavior in the world, and act as a filter through which material and systemic factors are translated into strategic choice.

The unique American self-understanding and the synthesis between idealism and realism in American strategic culture, represents a guiding principle for policy formulation in the United States and endorses contradictory impulses in foreign policy and ambivalent views on what role, if any, the United States should play in the world. Three fundamental ideas constitute American exceptionalism: the belief in America’s superiority, its historical mission, and the fact that the United States shall rise to power but never decline. These ideas are connected to the three selected indicators through their Anglo-Protestant roots.

The preservation of American exceptionalism and the nation’s idealistic values and ideals will determine the nation’s grand strategic course for the coming years. Consequently, the current debate on American exceptionalism can be understood as a symptom of the U.S. identity crisis that has formed in the wake of the erosion of the liberal world order and the scholarly discussion of America’s decline in power. The international system has begun to unravel following the challenges and setbacks of the past decades which might indicate a shift toward a ‘post-post-Cold War era’ or a world characterized by global disorder.
Chapter 5 of this thesis finds adjustments in the belief in American exceptionalism in the United States today. The American public in general, and the younger generation in particular, is turning away from some of its core pillars; the view of religion in society and politics, the idea of an American global leadership role and the belief in upward mobility have all declined these past decades due to fundamental changes of social, cultural, economic, and political nature in the United States. In the aftermath of 9/11 and the Global War on Terror, the exceptional American self-understanding has developed into a more sober one that reflects a balance between the continued belief in the aspects that make America great and increased insight into how the United States is perceived by the rest of the world. In addition, the international security environment has become more complex as the United States faces a broader set of challenges than those of the previous era.

Therefore, the limited resources available for American leadership and the publics seemingly unwillingness to engage in international affairs, has further led to conflicted American views about America’s global role. Currently, it is a debate between restrainers and shapers: between those who think the United States is overextended in the world and those who continue to believe in Pax Americana. A national sentiment of retrenchment is spreading in the United States, and engagement abroad is seen as too expensive, too risky and too prone to failure. The adjustments in the American public opinion have undoubtedly caused reluctance to get involved in new international engagements and in the use force during Obama’s tenure, and is likely to continue to do so in years to come. The role of American exceptionalism as grounds for the unilateral interventionism of the Bush presidency has lost meaning in the American society, but a shift back to the former idealistic and exemplary picture of the United States as “a shining city upon the hill” is not likely either.

Chapter 6 finds that the question of whether to engage or retreat limns the contours of a useful debate on the appropriate global role for the United States. In addition, it raises the discussion on the implications for the liberal world order if the United States were to further disengage from world affairs and abandon of some of its idealistic foundations.

The power and influence of the United States and its liberal norms and values constitute essential parts of the current world order, and today this foundation is beginning to unravel. While some believe that because of this, it is time for America to pull back and let others
shoulder more of the world’s burdens, others find that the current security environment makes it hard for the United States to retreat significantly from its global role without substantial costs.

For more than seventy years some version of primacy has been the guiding principle for American grand strategy, but today Americans are world-weary and seem unwilling to support assertive and deeply engaged strategies for the United States. Burden-sharing in world affairs and more inwardly focus on own domestic challenges are more in line with the public opinion. Even as most politicians still continue to assert their commitment to a global American leadership, a more restrained view has also taken hold among the American public and scholars of international relations over the past decades. Accordingly retrenchment seems to fit the moment.

Joseph S. Nye (2015) states that the current moment does not represent the end of the American era. Yet, in a world of dynamic change and shaky geopolitical equilibrium, the United States needs to formulate a grand strategy that will frame its interests, shape the various instruments of national power, and arrange the necessary investments to underwrite its national security interests. Due to its economic and geopolitical position, the U.S. power is still unrivaled in the world order. Renewing its economic foundation and getting its house in order will have to be an integral part of any grand strategy for the United States as it faces its future, but at the same time it cannot pull away from its international role and the challenges beyond its borders.

Domestically, the United States is characterized by several social, political and economic challenges that the public find are of greater priority than most foreign policy objectives. While the desire to pull back has increased, Americans continue to wish for a leadership role for the United States and are positive to deeper involvement in the global economy. Rather than understanding these as desires toward isolationism in terms of foreign policy, this thesis propose that these findings should be understood as an expression of reasonable assessments of the domestic roots for American behavior abroad. In order to revive America’s leadership role in the world and its capacity to influence the international order and events, the United States needs to overcome its domestic challenges and reorient its foreign policy (Brzezinski 2012: 37, 44-45).
The uncertainty regarding the future global role of the United States is currently leading to insecurity and adjustments in the world order. Issues of geopolitical nature appear to have returned to international relations, and the foundation of the order is eroding because of American sentiments of retrenchment, nervous allies and ambitious revisionist nations. The result is that while the United States’ absolute strength remains considerable, American influence has diminished in the international system. American foreign policy leadership today and in coming years will, in parts, depend on the vigor and strength of the nation’s society and economy. Leaders of the United States will be hard pressed to obtain sustained support at home and credibility abroad for its foreign policy without substantial progress on a host of as yet inadequately addressed domestic social and economic challenges (Hormats 2014). Such themes are likely to shape the debate heading into the 2016 elections.

This thesis proposes a hybrid solution for American grand strategy in order for the United States to best confront its existing and emerging challenges, as well as prepare for the unknowns of the years ahead. This strategy is also seemingly consistent with the current domestic setting in the United States. In order to sustain its leadership role and its capacity to influence international events, the United States must make certain strategic choices to avoid overstretch and regain domestic support for its foreign policy. Thus, a strategy based on a continued leadership role for the United States, but at a lower cost due to higher levels of burden-sharing between America’s allies and partners, reflects the American public’s desire for a shared leadership role. In addition, a combination of balance of power realism and discriminate intervention with the focus on multilateral institutions and liberal internationalism represents the two aspects of American strategic culture and the ebb and flow between interests and ideals in American foreign policy.

While the liberal aspect of American strategic culture has led the United States toward more assertive and idealistic policies, the current public opinion and the expressed desire for a more modest and consensual foreign policy correspond with the second aspect of American strategic culture. The wish to limit costs overseas and focus on problems at home might have some grounds in the overreach of the ‘War on terror’ and its financial and moral costs. This idea is clearly shared by the current president who is promoting a limited-liability global leadership for the United States:
The United States will use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand it — when our people are threatened, when our livelihoods are at stake, when the security of our allies is in danger (Obama 2014)

That there is more continuity than change in American grand strategy is consistent with the structural constraints that neoclassical realism argues influences adjustments — the international system, bureaucracy, and public opinion. The international distribution of power determines whether a state can pursue an expansive or restrained grand strategy. The organization of the bureaucracies which carries out a nation’s grand strategy, particularly the Department of Defense and the State Department, determines how well they are equipped to pursue the nation’s interests. The public opinion represents an obstacle for mobilization, since an enduring grand strategy is unsustainable without the public support.

The lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan humbled American’s perceptions of their country’s power. The prevailing view going into Iraq was that the projection of American power could be «a force of good». As upheaval rather than democracy took root in the Middle East following the interventions, it became clear that decision-makers had overestimated the capacity of the United States to shape the course of events abroad or the behavior of other states. Another factor that has contributed to the perception of waning American power was the growing sense of overstretch in the world (Kreps 2009: 363).

The policies led by President Obama seems suited to the current moment in the United States. Since his inauguration, he has believed that the current international environment, combined with greater domestic challenges and less national resources available, make it necessary for the United States to behave in a more restrained and pragmatic manner in the world. American grand strategy under Obama has been multifaceted and he gives less value to the concept of American exceptionalism than his predecessors. His strategy sometimes includes assertive components such as the Afghan surge in 2009-2010, the 2011 intervention in Libya which toppled Qaddafi, the take down Osama Bin Laden, the Pivot to Asia, continued focus on counterterrorism, and the increased use of unmanned drone strikes against terrorist organizations. The United States also continues to uphold its worldwide
system of alliances, which certainly is at a higher level than more restrained strategies would prefer (Stephens 2014).

However, a modest form of strategic retrenchment has been a central element of Obama’s grand strategy. This has been reflected for instance in the patterns of military spending, force posture, and security strategy (Dueck 2015). In addition, he has been more selective as to where U.S. interests are defined and military force applied to reduce America’s footprint in the world (Department of Defense 2012). Christopher Layne (2012b) stated that the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance represented a significant move toward offshore balancing, and the 2015 National Security Strategy does not reverse that direction.

Obama’s strategy of “nation building at home” also converges with the public’s desire for focus on domestic challenges first. In total, this adds up to a global role for the United States, more similar to the traditional great powers of the past, which focuses on defensive national interest rather than the keeper of the world order which promotes international collective interests (Stephens 2014).

The main issue for the Obama administration, however, is the incoherent manner in which these policies have been expressed to the America public and the inconsistency in the implementation which has led to criticism across partisan lines. For instance, Hillary Clinton (2014) criticized Obama for being slow and cautious as overcompensation for the policies led under Bush, and stated that: «Great nations need organizing principles, and 'Don't do stupid stuff' is not an organizing principle». Another example is Marco Rubio (2015: 115) who writes that: «Obama has put the international system at the mercy of the most ruthless aggressors. They are constantly seeking to undermine the basic principles of the post-1945 world by challenging American military primacy, threatening the global commons, and undermining liberal values».

Even though Obama’s grand strategy seems suitable, most politicians continue to assert their commitment to global leadership as they believe that further erosions in America’s military, economic and moral strength will lead to further breakdown in the global order and challenge domestic security and prosperity. In an interview with CBS’s Face the Nation, Hillary Clinton (2015) began to distance herself from Obama’s record, especially with regard
to foreign policy and she presented a change in foreign policy course if she wins the Presidency. She represents the exceptionalist vision of U.S. global role, and believes that the stability of the system and its ability to solve current challenges depends on an activist and assertive grand strategy for the United States. The importance of American leadership is also reflected in Marco Rubio’s (2015: 115) vision for U.S. foreign policy: «Retrenchment and retreat are not our destiny. The United States, by its presence alone, has the ability to alter balances, realign regional powers, promote stability, and enhance liberty».

The next president is likely to move back to a more ambitious and exceptionalistic foreign policy. Most of the 2016 presidential candidates represent foreign policy approaches that will move away from the retrenchment of the Obama administration and toward renewed American leadership in the world.
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