

A New Foreign Policy: Beyond American Exceptionalism

Jeffrey D. Sachs

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American exceptionalism means different things to different people. As the term is used in our political lexicon, there are at least four distinct versions of it, each of which blends into the other in some way. The traditional version harkens back to the famous 1630 exhortation from the governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, that “we shall be as a city upon a hill” with “the eyes of all people” upon us. Originally intended more to encourage adherence to the Christian doctrine as it was then interpreted by the Puritans, Winthrop’s language was passed on through the political generations to mean something different: that we are exceptional because America is a nation guided by God’s Providence, an example unto the world.

Another related version lauds the principles of the American Founding and locates our exceptionalism in our peculiar beginnings as the first country to throw off the chains of colonialism and establish a government based on enlightenment ideas. There is also a version that came of age in the post-WWII era, perhaps articulated most eloquently by Ronald Reagan, that we are the last best hope of man on earth, a haven of democracy and freedom in a world of tyranny.

And then there’s the most recent version of American exceptionalism. Though it has antecedents deep in our history, its heyday arrived in the post-Cold War era—the so-called unipolar moment in which America faced no geopolitical enemy that could hold a candle to our power and influence. This version says that we are exceptional in that we have exclusive prerogatives and special responsibilities for global governance that no other country possesses.

The figurehead of this version is not John Winthrop, but Madeline Albright, President Bill Clinton’s Secretary of State from 1997 to 2001. As she put it, “If we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future.” We are not just a nation among nations, according to this doctrine. We’re indispensable for global peace and security and, to carry out these responsibilities, we have the right to act in ways that others would be punished and condemned for.

These are all ahistorical nationalist myths to one extent or another. Most of the time, such narratives are used to inculcate a certain patriotic fervor, to feed the population's desire to aggrandize the nation, and to create a sense of belonging and purpose. But the version of exceptionalism epitomized by Albright's hubristic rhetoric has manifested in far more tangible ways, particularly in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. The idea that world order requires the United States to regularly use force abroad lest a Hobbesian chaos descend upon international society seems to possess all of Washington.

This is the exceptionalism at which world-renowned Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs takes aim in his latest book *A New Foreign Policy: Beyond American Exceptionalism*. According to Sachs, the American exceptionalism that most infects U.S. foreign policy had its origins in Washington's post-WWII institution-building, when "American leaders held the view that America was different, ultimately exceptional, with the inherent right to make and break the international rules of the game." This self-righteous idea, Sachs argues, has driven U.S. foreign policy to the extremes of international hypocrisy and unrelenting military interventionism, wasting resources, creating new enemies, and missing opportunities for peaceful cooperation. And it has acquired an especially menacing quality in the Trump era.

"Donald Trump's 'America First' foreign policy represents a new and vulgar strain of American exceptionalism," Sachs writes. It still prioritizes "unrivaled U.S. military superiority" to maintain "global stability," but it is mixed with an even more virulent disregard for international laws and norms and it is punctuated by naïve economic protectionism.

Sachs's book is a foreign policy treatise for the layman. He simplifies a much denser debate in the field of international relations over the proper U.S. role in the world. Occasionally, this produces a lack of nuance. His understanding of the realist school as committed to "a new arms race [as] the necessary and inevitable price to pay to keep the balance of power and preserve U.S. security" is a rather shallow one, for example. He also offers a few clumsy polemics—condemning the malicious dark money influence of the Koch brothers despite their own apparent displeasure with U.S. military activism. But Sachs knows enough to buck the expert consensus of Washington, D.C.'s foreign policy community, and the general thrust of Sachs's case is both commonsensical and compelling.

Sachs argues that the United States should take advantage of its wealth, power, and security to pursue cooperative diplomacy as a nation among nations, rather than play policeman of the world, constantly intervene in the affairs of other sovereign countries, and habitually violate the very rules and norms we often punish others for transgressing. Sachs criticizes post-Cold War NATO expansion as a betrayal of its original strategic purpose and needlessly antagonistic toward Russia. He is unsparing in his denunciation of the Iraq War and dismisses the Obama administration's justification for intervening in Libya as "propaganda." He explains why America is not blameless when it comes to the situation on the Korean peninsula and boldly states the plain reality, still controversial in D.C., that we should be willing to "accept a nuclear-armed North Korea that is deterred" rather than "risk a U.S.-led war of choice."

Sachs also takes aim at the Trump administration's major foreign policy documents, the National Defense Strategy and the National Security Strategy, for inflating threats to U.S. interests and continuing to insist on military dominance as a first-order objective. The view put forward in these official documents that the world is increasingly dangerous is "far too deterministic and pessimistic" and "belied by the facts." Their depiction of great power competition from Russia and China as a major threat to world order and U.S. national security, according to Sachs, merely exemplifies the exceptionalist orientation.

While "the US security state is pointing the finger at China and Russia as undermining the global system," Sachs complains, it is the United States that "launched catastrophic wars of 'regime change' without requisite UN backing." The United States has "failed to ratify a UN-backed treaty in nearly a quarter-century" and has repeatedly adopted foreign policies inconsistent with international laws and norms. It was the United States that "was the first to undermine U.S.-Russian nuclear cooperation by unilaterally abandoning the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002," a misstep the Trump administration emulated by backing out of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019.

Likewise, official depictions of China as "a dangerously expansionist power" ignore the fact that the United States "outspends China on the military by more than two to one" and that America has been an openly revisionist superpower "in nonstop overseas wars and regime change operations for decades," much in contrast to China's more risk-averse

security policies. “While there’s room to be concerned about China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea,” Sachs soberly points out, “so far those maritime claims seem mainly designed to secure China’s trade routes rather than to impede the neighboring countries.”

The more immediate danger from Russia and China, therefore, is born of the risk that America’s hardline policies against them create “a self-fulfilling prophecy.” Making enemies of Russia and China while insisting on global military dominance and special privileges in policing the world, Sachs warns, is not likely to satiate an insecure, aggrieved Russia or to stifle a rising China. Instead, the results could be “a huge debacle for the United States and a potential threat for the world.” Although Russia, China, and other adversaries “are indeed pushing back against U.S. assertions of dominance,” Sachs argues, “that does not make them system breakers.” Rather than assume a determined revisionism that we must confront militarily, Washington should accommodate and incorporate these states into the existing international order—an approach that can only succeed in the absence of a belligerent American exceptionalism.

Sachs exhibits admirable clarity on the bottom line: “There is one foreign policy goal that matters above all the others, and that is to keep the United States out of a new war.” For the United States to do this, Sachs proposes several reforms. First, the United States must withdraw from active hostilities in elective wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, Niger, and beyond. Sachs recommends restructuring the CIA to focus on intelligence instead of serving as “an unaccountable secret army of the president.” He calls on Congress “to reestablish its decision-making authority over war and peace.” Excessive secrecy, which has allowed the executive branch to covertly involve the United States in overseas wars, must be reined in too. Finally, the United States must reorient its foreign policy to prioritize peace-making, diplomacy, and economic cooperation over the use of force.

Both Sachs’s diagnosis and his prescription fit nicely within an emerging debate about the future of U.S. grand strategy. The contest of ideas essentially splits into two camps. One argues that our current grand strategy, primacy, is still imperative for global peace, prosperity, and democracy and that the proper response to the strategic confusion of the Trump era is to double down on, and even expand, America’s overseas military commitments. The other argues for an alternative grand strategy of restraint in which America rolls back its global military commitments, defines its national interests

more narrowly, and reenergizes diplomacy as the primary tool of foreign policy.

A major element of the prominent economist's prescription, however, is a massive boost to programs that distribute U.S. aid and economic development assistance. Sachs is much more confident in the effectiveness of U.S. aid programs than his libertarian allies on foreign policy, but he is at least an advocate, albeit a left-of-center one, for market economies and free trade across international borders. To the extent that President Trump's isolationist impulses produce a (highly selective) aversion to new military interventions, his tariff-hungry protectionism makes him a comparatively poor ally-of-convenience for libertarians who oppose military activism but understand that markets and trade enrich the world and pacify international politics. Sachs is further proof that there is a diverse coalition of intellectuals who understand the need for U.S. retrenchment but who also reject the anti-immigrant and anti-trade biases that fester within certain other ideological camps.

A change in strategy is of paramount importance. The United States has been in a constant state of war for almost 20 years. Trillions of taxpayer dollars have been wasted on unwinnable and unnecessary wars. Millions of innocent lives have been caught in the storm. At home, Americans are faced with a ballooning national debt, an ominous growth of government power, and a national security state that is a constant threat to civil liberties and constitutional checks and balances.

But America need not entirely abandon its coveted sense of distinction. Indeed, one strain of American exceptionalism, another version of exceptionalism that's been largely lost to history, held that the United States could be exceptional—that is, different from the rest—only insofar as it resisted the temptations of global dominion. America, John Quincy Adams proclaimed in 1821, “respected the independence of other nations while asserting and maintaining her own.” That “she has abstained from interference in the concerns of others, even when conflict has been for principles to which she clings” spoke precisely to what made her exceptional.

At the close of the 19th century, as the United States fought a war with Spain and gobbled up new territories as the spoils of victory, anti-imperialists, as they were then called, mourned the loss of that American exceptionalism. America “had wantonly relinquished her refuge of isolation to enter the enmeshing trap of European rivalry

and conflict,” explains Robert Beisner, a historian of the period. “The United States,” anti-imperialists felt, “could no longer shine as the world’s favored nation, detached and unstained in her special place above the fray.”

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**Public Governance and the Classical-Liberal Perspective:
Political Economy Foundations**

Paul Dragos Aligica, Peter J. Boettke, and Vlad Tarko
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Classical liberal doctrine is often conflated with the “laissez-faire” perspective that advocates for a larger market sphere and a smaller government sphere. That conflation, however, neglects the work of classical liberal scholars such as Friedrich A. Hayek and James M. Buchanan, who both spent a great deal of their careers investigating the economic *and political* institutional arrangements—and the social-choice processes governing those institutions—that engender a prosperous and free society. In fact, Hayek and Buchanan both posited that governments had institutional superiority over the market for some collective-choice issues. Furthermore, classical liberal scholars did not simply complete their analysis with a market-or-state dichotomy. They recognized that, in the real world, the lines between markets are “fuzzy” and often overlap. Moreover, the market-or-state dichotomy neglects the “third sector,” civil society, which also needs to be analyzed and compared.

The writings of Hayek, Buchanan, and other classical liberals are often missed or misinterpreted, leaving the classical liberal position on public governance unknown, unarticulated, and understudied. In their book *Public Governance and the Classical-Liberal Perspective: Political Economy Foundations*, Paul Dragos Aligica, Peter J. Boettke, and Vlad Tarko seek to fill this gap in the literature by synthesizing the work of the aforementioned scholars and others in order to articulate a theory of public governance in the classical liberal perspective. The authors do so in three parts.

Part I aims to present the basic “building blocks” of public governance that are exegetical with classical liberalism: governance theory, applied governance theory, and institutional design principles.