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The Exceptional Nation: How American Exceptionalism Influences US Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Defined by beliefs in superiority, divine selection, and a perceived divine mission, American Exceptionalism has influenced American national identity and foreign policy. This article examines the instrumentalization of this idea in shaping US foreign policy, arguing that it serves as a fundamental lens through which the US tendency toward leadership is understood. By engaging with the theoretical frameworks of neorealism, neoliberalism, and constructivism, this study highlights that American Exceptionalism has driven unilateral policies and the US's self-perceived leadership role in global affairs. The analysis explores the intersubjective structures policymakers, and the public adopted, revealing how ideological principles intersect with national interests. The article also investigates how AE has fueled US ambitions for global dominance and the contradictions of this idea within contemporary international relations.

Keywords: American Exceptionalism, US foreign policy, global leadership, national identity, Constructivism

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İstisnaî Millet: Amerikan İstisnacılığı ABD Dış Politikasını Nasıl Etkiler?

Öz

Üstünlük, seçilmişlik ve tanrısal bir misyon yüklenmeyle tanımlanan Amerikan İstisnacılığı kavramı hem Amerikan ulusal kimliğini hem de dış politikasını etkilemiştir. Amerikan İstisnacılığı kavramının ABD'nin liderlik eğiliminin anlaşılmasında temel bir araç görevi gördüğünü öne süren bu makale, neorealizm, neoliberalizm ve konstrüktivizm gibi teorik çerçeveleri ele alarak, kavramın tek taraflı eylemleri ve ABD'nin küresel ilişkilerdeki liderlik çabalarını nasıl şekillendirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Politikacılar ve halkın benimsediği özneler-arası yapıların yani sıra, ideolojik ilkelerin ulusal çıkarlarla kesişimini gözler önüne sermeyi amaçlayan bu çalışma, eleştirel bir Konstrüktivist perspektiften hareket ederek, Amerikan İstisnacılığı kavramının esnek yapısını ve uluslararası ilişkilerde yol açtığı çelişkileri ele almaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Amerikan İstisnacılığı, Amerikan dış politikası, küresel liderlik, ulusal kimlik, Konstrüktivizm

Introduction

The idea of American Exceptionalism (*hereafter* AE) has been a prominent issue in American politics and academia for the past few decades (McCoy). Tracing its roots back to the early days of the US, AE emerges as a complex and multifaceted concept that has significantly influenced American foreign policy. At its core, this idea asserts that the US pursues a unique historical path, portraying it as inherently superior to other nations; however, this portrayal is a constructed narrative rather than an objective truth. This belief fosters a tendency toward a unilateral foreign policy approach and has likely contributed

to the spread of anti-American sentiments worldwide. American conservatives, particularly influential figures within the Grand Old Party circles such as Mike Pence, John McCain, Mitt Romney, Sarah Palin, Newt Gingrich, and Marco Rubio, have prominently championed this idea in their electoral campaigns. This was especially evident during the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, where AE became central to their political narratives and policy proposals (Tumulty). Therefore, the idea has garnered both ardent supporters and fervent critics who continue to debate its legitimacy and impact.

In the introduction to the third edition of Australian scholar Hedley Bull's *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, Andrew Hurrell pointed out, "all human societies rely on historical stories about themselves to legitimize the notions of where they are and where they might be going" (Hurrell xiii). The focal point within this quotation resides in the prominence accorded to the national narratives, deemed instrumental in cultivating a sense of identity in its foundational stages. Implicit in this statement is the proposition that these national narratives, often conveyed in the guise of historical stories, could have been expanded by both statesmen and ordinary citizens within a nation, serving to perpetuate a collective sense of identity in bygone eras (Campbell 8). This underscores the potential efficacy of national narratives in either instilling a sense of nationhood or mirroring a fervent collective self-perception (Anderson xiv). Whether these narratives underwent distortions or remained unaltered, it becomes conceivable that virtually all nations may necessitate ideational constructs that function as national narratives underpinned by the endorsement of policymakers (Smith 1-2).

The impetus behind this article lies in addressing a critical gap in the existing literature on AE and its impact on US foreign policy. While much has been said about AE's ideological roots and historical significance, few analyses bridge theoretical approaches to show how AE actively shapes contemporary US actions on the global stage (Caporaso 600). This article seeks to fill that gap by exploring AE through a constructivist lens, which emphasizes the importance of identity and beliefs in shaping state behavior. This study also contrasts AE's influence with theoretical underpinnings from neorealism and

neoliberalism, showing where these theories fall short in capturing AE's complex nature. The goal of the article is to demonstrate that AE is more than a set of abstract ideals –it is an operational force influencing US unilateral actions, internationalist policies, and diplomatic strategies.

Before exploring the varied interpretations of AE and its persistent influence, it is essential to acknowledge how policymakers throughout history have harnessed this concept for their purposes (Huntington 12). Leaders have often invoked the principles of AE during pivotal moments to bolster public morale, justify policies, or assert moral superiority on the international stage (Restad, *American Exceptionalism* 3). Such usages range from President Woodrow Wilson's assertion of America's duty to promote democracy globally during World War I to President Ronald Reagan's portrayal of the US as a "shining city upon a hill," emphasizing its unique role as a beacon of freedom and opportunity (Chollet and Goldgeier 17). These usages reflect both the adaptability and the clarity with which AE has been employed to align with varying political motives (Pease 76-77). The utilization of the concept in political rhetoric underscores its centrality in constructing and reaffirming national narratives, setting the stage for understanding how its perception has been subject to both admiration and critique over time (Lipset 17-18).

Over time, the concept of AE has endured a dual fate of both unwarranted flattery and severe critique, thereby contributing to its widespread proliferation and, to a lesser extent, its evisceration within American political discourse (Erelı 3). To facilitate a consistent delineation in this study, AE is to be construed in a narrowly defined manner. The version of AE upon which the arguments herein pivot may be recognized as encapsulating three distinctive and enduring themes, each of which has garnered significant attention and resonance.

Firstly, the idea of AE embraces the notion of spatial distinctiveness and the explicit advantages inherent to the New World, wherein the US came to be established (Turner i-ii). This foundational aspect underscores the unique geographical attributes that underpin the nation's trajectory. Secondly, the idea of AE entails a distinct and enduring role characterized by an unwavering commitment to a divine

mission, positioning the US as a vanguard in global affairs (McCartney 47-48). This divine mission not only portrays the nation's path but also affords it the capacity to assume leadership on the world stage (Guth 77). Thirdly, the idea of AE encompasses a path for the US that is inherently superior and divergent from the trajectories of other great powers throughout history (Hodgson 11).

This so-called unique trajectory, while propelling the US to the echelons of great power status, stands in stark contrast to the historical patterns of other great powers that have invariably risen but ultimately succumbed to decline (Restad, *American Exceptionalism* 3; McCrisken 64-65). Unlike traditional great powers that often rose through conquest and exploitation and ultimately fell due to internal or external pressures, AE asserts that the US follows an idiosyncratic path. This path is defined not only by its pursuit of power but also by a belief in a unique moral purpose. The US sees itself as a nation with a higher calling to lead through the promotion of freedom, democracy, and human rights. This self-image implies that American power is not transient or cyclical but enduring, supported by the belief that the US is divinely selected to guide global progress (Restad, "Old Paradigms" 60). Mead implies that this perception, many of the proponents of AE claim, differentiates it from historical empires whose supremacy waned after periods of dominance (11).

As to how ideas shape identities, Daniel Béland posits that ideas gain political attention when championed by policymakers (707-708). The articulation of AE by key policymakers is a recurring theme throughout US history, spanning from Thomas Jefferson, the *Declaration of Independence's* principal author, to modern-day presidents. Throughout the modern era, American policymakers have continued to evoke AE to shape national rhetoric. For instance, President Ronald Reagan famously described the US as a "shining city upon a hill," emphasizing its role as a beacon of hope and freedom to the world (Frum).

President Barack Obama, despite being known for observing a more multilateral approach, also affirmed his belief in AE by stating, "I believe in AE, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British

exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism” (Obama). This could signal both pride in the US’s unique path and a recognition of its global responsibilities. Similarly, President Donald Trump landed the concept in a more nationalistic tone, highlighting America’s unparalleled strength and success as a justification for policies aimed at maintaining its dominance (Marshall). These examples underscore the enduring relevance of AE as an ideological cornerstone in political rhetoric and policymaking.

At this point, the development of identity plays a crucial role in foreign policy. Identity formation entails the process by which individuals distinguish themselves from others, establishing a unique sense of self and belonging (Ereli 51). As people in various countries ponder their responses to the complex global environment, ongoing preservation and interpretation of national narratives can be influential. In the US, McCrisken highlights these phrases and things such as “God Bless the United States,” “The Star-Spangled Banner,” the “Pledge of Allegiance,” and the “Statue of Liberty in New York,” “Mount Rushmore,” with its presidential carvings and numerous other symbols and rhetoric are the “invented traditions” that link American national identity with AE (McCrisken 8).

At this point, Gellner’s perspective on nationalism as a historically contingent construct offers a useful tool to critique AE (3-4). He suggests that national identity is shaped by social conditions such as industrialization and cultural dissemination while AE posits an inherent, almost predestined identity for the US (10). This highlights that the narrative of American superiority may be as constructed and propagated as the national identities forged in other industrial societies. Also, in the context of AE, the US educational system and cultural symbols play a central role, akin to what Gellner describes in his analysis of nationalism (27). The “city upon a hill” rhetoric and patriotic education serve as mechanisms to unify citizens under a shared national identity, reinforcing the belief in the US as a unique global leader. This cultural imposition mirrors Gellner’s idea of a state-managed high culture that sustains national consciousness (11-12). Consequently, framing American national identity as an independent variable and positioning American foreign policy as the dependent

variable, this study incorporates AE as an intervening variable, signifying its constructive impact on foreign policy.

Bringing AE back to International Relations

To investigate how AE shapes US foreign policy, it is essential to explore the lens through which mainstream IR theories perceive this phenomenon. While AE is fundamentally tied to identity and ideological beliefs, Neorealism presents a contrasting perspective by prioritizing material capabilities and state interests over ideational elements (Waltz 102-103). This part examines why neorealism, with its focus on the international system, often falls short of explaining the influence of AE on foreign policy.

Neorealists

As an ideological construct that shapes the American national identity and exerts a considerable influence on American foreign policy, the concept of AE warrants contextualization within the framework of international theories (Ereli 16). In this context, neither explicating AE within a neorealist framework nor recognizing it as a driving force for foreign policy has constituted a pivotal focus for neorealists. Fundamentally, the underlying premise of AE, which posits the US as an exceptional entity in a world characterized by diversity, stands in stark contrast to the tenets of realism. The realist perspective typically operates on the assumption of states pursuing their self-interest in a competitive international system, rendering the notion of AE incongruent with the realist viewpoint (Walt, “American Exceptionalism”). Neorealist theory suggests that differences between states mainly stem from shifts in the distribution of (hard power) capabilities, leading to changes in relative power dynamics (Walt, “American Exceptionalism”). However, focusing solely on material capabilities and ignoring domestic structures and ideological factors that can influence foreign policy is a limitation on the part of neorealism (Kitchen 117). Outlining the perspective of key neorealists on AE, Walt critically evaluates the concept, asserting “it is mostly a myth”

(“The Myth of American Exceptionalism”). While acknowledging that “America’s values, political system, and history are worthy of admiration,” Walt downplays the role of AE in shaping US foreign policy. From a neorealist standpoint, he argues that the US foreign policy should be guided by careful evaluations of “relative power and the competitive nature of international politics” (“The Myth of American Exceptionalism”).

Within the neorealist theory, the adverse repercussions of American foreign policy stemming from what is often characterized as an “imperial overstretch” by the US, exemplified by conflicts such as the Filipino War, the Nicaraguan War, and the Afghanistan in 2001, and Iraq War in 2003, have been presented as justifications for challenging the concept of AE (Erelı 22). This perspective argues that, despite its self-image as a unique and moral leader, the US has engaged in conflicts driven by power and strategic interests, like other powers. For instance, the Filipino War (1899-1902) demonstrated the US extending its influence under the guise of spreading democracy but resulting in significant loss of life and resistance that mirrored the colonial behaviors of European empires. More recently, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been viewed through a neorealist lens as costly ventures that prioritized geopolitical objectives over the purported moral imperatives of spreading democracy and human rights. Walt has contended that when confronted with the grim reality of war, the US is not inherently predisposed to behave in an “exceptional” manner that distinguishes it from other nations (“The Myth of American Exceptionalism”).

These parallels are strategically utilized by scholars to undermine the efficacy of AE. By highlighting instances of miscalculations within American foreign policy and situating the US within a historical context, Walt approaches to the concept of AE not with uncritical celebration but rather with a sense of circumspection (“American Exceptionalism”). Concluding the normative aspects of his argument, he expresses discontent with AE and contends that realism should have been the guiding principle underpinning American foreign policy for the preceding two decades (“Realist World”). A conspicuous limitation of the neorealist perspective in addressing AE lies in its emphasis on the outcomes of actions and its tendency to perceive states as uniform

entities. When it comes to analyzing the actions and behaviors of the US in terms of AE, it is imperative not to scrutinize it as merely another historical great power. While drawing comparisons could provide valuable insights, the primary focus should be on the enduring nature and pervasiveness of this ideology in American history and the nation's perception of itself (Lipset 18).

Neorealism, by its very nature, does not incorporate prevalent ideas, ideologies, or beliefs as variables of significance within the realm of international politics. Furthermore, the examination of identity is not a facet readily accommodated within the confines of neorealism. It is imperative to recognize that AE, to a considerable degree, plays a pivotal role in shaping the American national identity. It transcends the mere articulation of self-congratulatory narratives regarding the greatness of the US; instead, it possesses a profound depth and wields a corresponding influence (Ereli 22-23).

Neorealists have frequently overlooked the potential influence of ideational factors, often placing less emphasis on their impact compared to material elements in global politics. In their view, the US does not inherently carry a responsibility or mission to better the world. That is why most of the realists/neorealists opposed the Iraq War in 2003, arguing that it was not in the interest of the US to intervene in Iraq because nothing related to survival or genuine national interest was there for the US (Mearsheimer et al.). Nonetheless, the social world and the complicated nature of foreign policy are far from the simplistic binary perspectives that neorealism often posits. In conclusion, as evident from the foregoing discussion, neorealism envisages a world characterized by stability, homogeneity among states, and a uniform trajectory, thereby falling short of providing an adequate framework for comprehending the intricacies of AE within international relations (Ereli 22).

Neoliberals

Neoliberals embrace the idea of change. They contend that as time progresses, humans have the potential to evolve, and consequently, international institutions that are established by states also undergo

transformation. Based on this foundational assumption, one could argue that the concept of identity within neoliberal theory is inherently dynamic rather than stable. Neoliberalism posits that identities can evolve in response to shifts in human behavior and the evolution of international institutions. Of particular significance is the neoliberal theory's proposition of an identity concept that is simultaneously both unique and universal. This signifies the liberal commitment to individualism, wherein each actor possesses a distinctive identity while also participating in a broader, universal framework. In essence, neoliberalism promotes the idea that individual identities coexist within a larger, evolving international system (Heywood 184). Elements like religion, culture, and political principles do not form the basis of neoliberal identity, as identity is considered an individual notion where everyone holds the same rights (Heywood 184). The American identity is, in essence, deeply rooted in the notion that the United States is unique and embodies a sense of being divinely selected. This foundation raises questions about whether neoliberal identity frameworks are sufficient to fully explain the concept of AE.

Neoliberal theory places a strong emphasis on the importance of economic interdependence and active participation in multilateral endeavors, particularly in the creation of various international institutions. However, when analyzing the US through a neoliberal lens, it becomes evident that during the immediate postwar years, the nation assumed a central role in shaping the global order according to its vision. The US took the lead in establishing both economic and security institutions at both regional and global levels. This proactive role in shaping international institutions aligned with its perceived exceptional mission on the world stage, thereby highlighting the multifaceted nature of American identity and its interaction with neoliberal principles.

Following World War II, the United States assumed a significant role in global affairs through a series of strategic initiatives (McCormick 199). These included the Marshall Plan, designed to aid European economies in recovering from the devastation of war; the announcement of the Truman Doctrine, aimed at curbing Soviet influence in Greece and Turkey, the establishment of the North Atlantic

Treaty Organization (NATO), and the creation of the Bretton Woods monetary system to manage the international economy (McCormick 199). The US assumed an active role in the immediate postwar years to shape the global order in alignment with its vision. This proactive engagement carries significant implications for understanding AE within a neoliberal framework, as it highlights how American identity intertwines with neoliberal principles in shaping international institutions and global norms (Mottet 514). Specific post-World War II policies reflect both a commitment to promoting global stability, and a projection of uniquely American ideals rooted in its sense of exceptionalism (McCormick 199).

Neoliberalism highlights the importance of state priorities in shaping actions and provides a perspective for understanding the possibilities of cooperative efforts on a global scale within the context of AE. Along these lines, John Gerard Ruggie argues that the US, in its vision following World War II, embraced the notion of “sustainable engagement” (“Interests, Identity” 206). While Ruggie does not explicitly associate this concept with AE, it serves as a useful framework for understanding how the US’s active participation in multilateral initiatives aligns with its broader identity. This approach highlights that AE can manifest in isolationist tendencies and in a proactive commitment to international cooperation, where global norms are influenced by American values and preferences (Ruggie, “Interests, Identity” 206). This perspective invites further exploration of how AE’s unique characteristics might have driven or harmonized with such multilateral efforts in the post-1945 landscape.

America’s understanding of its founding principles and political identity is closely linked to its vision of world order in the postwar years (Ruggie, “Interests, Identity” 206, 218). In other words, ideas about the nature of the US have shaped the nation’s identity. Ruggie identifies these ideas as “inherent individual rights, equality of opportunity, the rule of law, and being born out of a radical revolution,” associating them with American national identity (“Interests, Identity” 218). As these are universal ideas that can and should be adopted to further human betterment, the US aims to initiate visions for establishing a world order that necessitates American leadership. Indeed, these initiatives

can be seen as directly aligned with the mission of promoting American values and actively engaging with the world to achieve this objective.

While the post-war world order may be characterized as a multilateral one, the US did not solely create this order through a strictly multilateral process. The US played a central role in the establishment of post-war institutions and the formulation of global norms, often steering the direction of these endeavors by its vision and values. This proactive stance was emblematic of AE, which sought to shape the world order in a manner that reflected its distinct identity and objectives, even within the framework of multilateral cooperation (Restad, *American Exceptionalism* 110). Given the US desire to maintain its autonomy and flexibility in foreign policy, it cannot be claimed that a genuinely multilateral order was established. The US has avoided pursuing a true multilateral approach in the post-war era, largely due to the restrictive nature of such policies (Skidmore 224). Consequently, the key result of AE in foreign relations has been the advancement of American primacy on the global stage.

Constructivists

Constructivism in the 1990s represented an innovative perspective within international relations field by assigning prominence to and offering a genuine recognition of the ideational factors that influence and shape state interests. Constructivism is a theoretical approach that elevates ideational variables over material variables when analyzing international politics. While constructivist theorizing places a primary emphasis on ideational factors, it is important to note that this does not imply a neglect of material and objective realities. The inherent logic of constructivist theory revolves around the premise that interests are not pre-given or predetermined; rather, it asserts that interests are constructed. This means that state interests are not static or fixed but are instead shaped and molded by a complex interplay of ideas, norms, identities, and social interactions. Constructivism's focus on the malleability of interests underscores its distinctive approach to understanding international relations, one that goes beyond traditional realist or liberal paradigms that tend to emphasize material or structural factors (Hopf 176).

In the constructivist framework, interests are not seen as permanent but are shaped by identities, which are formed through interactions with other actors (Wendt 102-103). This dynamic relationship between interests and identities implies that interests possess the potential for transformation and adaptation over time, signifying their inherent flexibility. Constructivism advocates that interests are intimately shaped by identity, and identity, in turn, is influenced by prevailing ideas and beliefs. Importantly, both identity and interests are viewed as socially constructed within the constructivist approach. This stands in contrast to conventional rationalist perspectives, which often assert that interests are structurally imposed on states by external factors. The constructivist approach underscores the role of social processes, norms, and shared understandings in shaping the behavior and preferences of states in international politics (Hopf 175).

The contradictions explored in Brickhouse's work between national pride and transitional influence reveal an important dimension of AE (27). While the US worked to present itself as a singular, independent identity, its cultural and literary expressions often drew from and resonated with influences from Latin America and the Caribbean (Brickhouse 3). This duality suggests that AE was as much about assimilating and repurposing external influences as it was about asserting a unique national identity. Brickhouse's work urges a reevaluation of the narrative that American cultural and political identity was forged in isolation. By showcasing the US's active engagement with literary and cultural currents from Latin America, it becomes clear that exceptionalism was not solely an internal phenomenon but part of a shared hemispheric dynamic (Brickhouse 3). This insight invites a rethinking of how the US positioned itself as exceptional about its neighbors.

Brickhouse's work reveals that nineteenth-century American literature was influenced by cultural and literary exchanges with Latin American nations (9). These transamerican interactions shaped how American authors articulated national identity, infusing their works with ideas and motifs that transcended US borders. This interconnectedness highlights that AE emerged within a broader hemispheric context, challenging the notion that US cultural development was an isolated

or entirely original process (Brickhouse 3). In this context, identity emerges as a predominant factor, oftentimes the most influential, in shaping a nation's interests. While the emphasis on ideational variables does not negate the importance of other factors that contribute to the definition of interests, it does assign a heightened significance to these ideational elements (Wendt 102-103). Specifically, this perspective prioritizes the understanding of how interests are delineated by giving precedence to the ideas held by policymakers and nations themselves (Gilmore 301-302).

In traditional analyses of AE, the concept has been interpreted from two main angles: As an “objective truth claim” and as a “subjective understanding of the American self” (Restad, *American Exceptionalism* 17). The first perspective uncovers the founding principles shaping US foreign policy as well as other tangible traits that are often framed to highlight the uniqueness of the US in comparison with other nations. This understanding underscores AE as an inherent characteristic rooted in identity, implying that America's perception of itself as exceptional is mirrored in its actions and policies on the world stage. The “subjective understanding” approach complements this by focusing on the self-perception of Americans and how this influences collective identity. For example, the idea that Americans view their country as having a unique mission or divine purpose in global affairs reflects an internalized sense of exceptionalism.

This connection between AE and identity could be further demonstrated through John F. Kennedy's “New Frontier” speech (1960), which capsulated the belief in American leadership and responsibility in advancing freedom and democracy. The speech exemplifies the principles underpinning AE by framing the US as a nation with a unique and divinely inspired mission to lead, innovate, and face global challenges head-on. Kennedy's rallying call for Americans to become “new pioneers” points out to the AE as an actionable commitment to progress and international leadership. His emphasis on ‘invention, innovation, imagination, decision’ underscores that American identity is both aspirational and proactive, consolidating the idea that the US holds a special role in guiding the world toward freedom and justice. This aligns with the constructivist notion that identity and action are

intertwined; Kennedy's speech illustrates how the American sense of exceptionalism drives its foreign policy and global initiatives, blending ideological conviction with practical efforts. Thus, the "New Frontier" frames AE's dual nature rooted in self-perception and manifested through a commitment to leading by example in a changing world.

In that respect, discussing American national identity, Tennenhouse offers a compelling perspective: Early American identity was inextricably linked to British cultural roots (1). This connection persisted even after political independence, as Americans sought to retain and adapt English cultural values to a distinctly American context (Tennenhouse 1-2). Integrating this view demonstrates that the foundational elements of AE were not created in a vacuum but were shaped by a transatlantic identity that blended British heritage with the evolving American self-perception (Tennenhouse 9). This continuity highlights that the notion of AE grew out of both inherited and reinterpreted cultural narratives, reinforcing the view that its uniqueness was an adaptation as much as an original construct (Tennenhouse 21). Moreover, Brickhouse's analysis of the nineteenth century public sphere reveals that the US was part of a hemispheric network of discourse, where ideas flowed across borders and influenced public opinion (Tennenhouse 3). This interconnected public sphere means that American identity was shaped through continuous interaction with ideas from neighboring countries, making it less insular and more dynamic.

Alternatively, another approach to the concept of AE characterizes it as a subjective perception of the American identity. It is noteworthy that the belief in exceptionalism remains enduring and has exerted a significant influence on the discourse and execution of foreign policy, notwithstanding the challenges in empirically validating its underlying assumptions (Restad, *American Exceptionalism* 17). This approach delves into the significance of the belief in AE in shaping Americans' self-conception. The essence of this subjective perspective originates from the beliefs held by Americans, encompassing national narratives, historical accounts, and myths sustained within the discourse of key policymakers and the broader populace. Rather than focusing on material distinctions that make America unique, this subjective view provides a rich basis for deeply anchoring the perception of the

American self (Restad, *American Exceptionalism* 17). This implies that the belief in AE is significant regardless of the validity of the underlying ideas. Americans define their identity based on the values they cherish. To be American is often seen as synonymous with adopting American values, making it an “ideological commitment” rather than something determined by birthright (Lipset 31). Samuel Huntington described “the American Creed” as encompassing “liberty, equality, individualism, democracy and the rule of law under a constitution” (McCrisken 7). The American Creed represents the essential values that shape American politics and national character. These foundational principles are what sustain the nation’s identity and sense of greatness. Therefore, adherence to these values and principles is central to being considered American (McCrisken 65).

Policy Implications: Unilateral Internationalism?

The belief in AE by both the American populace and its policymakers is regarded as a defining aspect of American identity. It is reflected in the rhetoric used by policymakers they devise. This is especially evident in discussions and decisions related to American foreign and security affairs, where the necessity of US leadership in international relations is consistently highlighted (Restad, *American Exceptionalism* 204-205). The American national identity, rooted in the concept of AE, advances the notion of American leadership on the global stage. It encompasses a cohesive set of values-based overarching ideals that serve as guiding principles shaping both the discourse and implementation of the foreign policy. In this manner, AE is perceived as being perpetuated through a combination of beliefs in American superiority, a sense of divine selection, and mission, as well as foreign and security policy practices that reformulate the necessity of American leadership in the world (Mead 10)

These practices encompass distinctive interpretations of the global order, envisioning a world order that is to be formulated and spearheaded by the US. In his analysis, Ruggie emphasizes that American foreign policy has historically been driven by a unique combination of interests and identity, where the US positions itself as an architect of global norms and institutions (“The Past as Prologue?” 97-98). This

idea aligns with AE, underscoring the belief that the US has both the responsibility and the capacity to lead the world. Alternatively, scholars such as George Löfflman propose that a post-American hegemony could be sustained through strategies like burden-sharing, cooperative engagement, and military restraint (Löfflman 308-32). These approaches reflect an understanding of how American primacy can be adapted in an era of shifting global power dynamics (Nye 90-91). While the exact strategies for maintaining American dominance continue to be debated within policy circles, the underlying consensus on the importance of American primacy remains one of the few areas where bipartisan agreement is evident, bridging the traditional divide between the GOP and the Democratic Party (Walt, “American Primacy” 10). This consensus highlights that AE not only informs the US’s self-perception but also shapes its strategic imperatives, whether through direct leadership or collaborative international engagement (Hodgson 26).

Internationalism represents a proactive commitment to actively participate in international affairs. This engagement encompasses political, military, and economic involvement in global matters, demonstrating a willingness to collaborate and interact with other nations on the international stage (Kuehl and Ostrower 41). Unilateralism and multilateralism represent distinct approaches to how a nation engages with the world, reflecting the choice between acting independently or in collaboration with other countries. Unilateralism signifies a foreign policy stance wherein the US seeks to safeguard its freedom of action, aiming for greater maneuverability while conducting international affairs (Kagan 4). It does not entail a passive or directionless approach to foreign policy but rather emphasizes independence and autonomy in decision-making (Mead 107). In contrast, multilateralism entails the coordination of policies with other international actors, adherence to established rules, and a willingness to yield to multilateral decisions in specific policy domains. This approach involves a commitment to cooperation with other nations and often necessitates compromises, thereby potentially limiting the degree of independent maneuverability in policy matters (Caporaso 603).

The central argument herein contends that the US has consistently adhered to an internationalist foreign policy paradigm characterized by sustained and proactive involvement with the global

community, a commitment dating back to its inception (Schlesinger 53-54). Concurrently, the US has persistently endeavored to augment its strategic maneuverability, displaying a zealous determination to safeguard its autonomy and freedom of action, even when participating in multilateral initiatives it may have played a pivotal role in initiating (Ikenberry et al. 1-2). Furthermore, this argument advocates that the concepts of unilateralism and internationalism offer substantially enhanced analytical utility for comprehending the intricacies of American foreign policy.

In this contextual framework, unilateralism can be construed as a corollary of the belief in AE, which inherently constitutes a foundational element of American identity. Within the construct of AE, wherein the US is perceived as chosen, superior, and entrusted with a divine mission, it follows that the nation is disinclined to curtail its autonomy (Hodgson 15-16). As a result, the US is inclined to vehemently safeguard its constitutional principles and sovereignty, particularly when faced with endeavors to subject them to external international norms or rules (McDougall 101-102).

The ongoing course of unilateral internationalism can be easily identified within a series of significant historical turning points, such as the formulation of the Monroe Doctrine, the introduction of Manifest Destiny, the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, and the latter's widespread implementation. In this context, Woodrow Wilson stands out as a pivotal individual who had a long-lasting impact on US foreign policy (Mead 88). Woodrow Wilson's visionary approach resonated profoundly and would subsequently find resonance in the policies of Cold War-era presidents. Administrations under Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Harry Truman also drew upon the tenets of Wilsonianism as foundational principles informing their strategies for shaping the global order (Ikenberry et al. 2). Post-1945 democratization efforts undertaken by the US toward Germany and Japan confirm this point (Hodgson 42).

Conclusion

This article addresses the concept of AE, an important element in understanding American foreign policy. AE is defined by beliefs such as superiority, a sense of divine selection, and a divine purpose, and it is argued that these ideological structures shape the country's national identity and influence interventionist and unilateral foreign policy decisions. In the article, neorealism and neoliberalism are critically examined, and it is revealed how the United States' quest for global leadership and autonomy is affected by this country's assumed unique status. By focusing on material power dynamics, neorealism tends to ignore the influence of ideological elements such as AE. However, this approach overlooks the enduring impact of national identity on policy. Neoliberalism, on the other hand, recognizes the influence of ideological factors but often underestimates the extent to which AE drives the country's efforts to actively establish international norms. Neoliberalism places a strong emphasis on economic interdependence and international institutions. Constructivism, on the other hand, provides a powerful framework for understanding how identities and ideas influence state behavior, emphasizing the importance of AE in the development and implementation of American foreign policy. Historical and contemporary research shows that the idea of AE has consistently led the country toward an interventionist attitude that emphasizes dominance and leadership not in the sense of "imperial-style domination" but ideologically (Ikenberry et al. 199).

The relationship between American foreign policy and AE emphasizes unilateral internationalism, in which the United States often seeks to guide and shape the international system according to its values, independent of multilateral constraints. However, there are also criticisms of this constant search for autonomy and leadership. The limits and potential drawbacks of AE must be considered, especially the dangers of overreach and alienating foreign allies. As the US navigates the complexities of modern international relations, striking a balance between the goals of exceptionalism and practical policy considerations is critical. As a result, AE remains a powerful element shaping American foreign policy. Understanding the impact of this ideology through various international relations theories allows

us to better understand the country's international relations. Going forward, carefully considering both the strengths and limitations of this ideology will be vital to creating effective and sustainable foreign policy strategies.

Considering recent global shifts, AE also faces new tests that challenge its traditional influence on foreign policy, such as China's assertive rise and climate change policies. These prompted the US to reconsider how it projects influence in a multipolar world and to navigate the tension between maintaining its exceptional identity and engaging in multilateral efforts that may limit unilateral control. The evolving challenges illustrate how AE continues to shape US foreign policy while adapting to new global realities.

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