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## **From the Obama Doctrine to America First: The erosion of the Washington consensus on grand strategy**

Abstract:

This article explores the social construction of American grand strategy as nexus of identity and national security. The article first highlights how the identity construct of American exceptionalism has underwritten a grand strategy of global leadership and military interventionism since the end of the Cold War, constituting liberal hegemony as dominant position within the bipartisan US foreign policy establishment. The article then explores the political impact of counter-hegemonic discourses of restraint and offshore balancing under the Obama presidency. It argues that in ‘leading from behind’ the Obama Doctrine represented a moderate intra-elite challenge to the status quo. Obama’s use of exceptionalist rhetoric to legitimate restraint simultaneously exposed the political limits of this strategic paradigm shift, which oscillated between continuity and change. Finally, the article examines Trump’s ‘America First’ stance, concluding that its combination of nationalism, nativism and protectionism has resulted in the erosion of the Washington consensus on liberal hegemony.

Key words: Grand Strategy, US Foreign Policy, Discourse, American Exceptionalism, Barack Obama, Donald Trump

*Introduction*

In April 2016, the magazine *Atlantic* featured the ‘Obama Doctrine’ on its cover. President Obama used this popular media outlet to once again place his foreign policy course between ‘internationalism’ and ‘realism’, laying out an American grand strategy of engaged multilateralism and military restraint (Goldberg 2016). At the same time, Obama declared that in 2013 over Syria, he had finally thrown out a ‘Washington playbook’ of intervening militarily to demonstrate American resolve to the world. The American president pointedly criticized the US foreign policy establishment and Washington think tank scene for fetishizing American credibility abroad and militarizing US policy responses (Goldberg 2016). The criticism of the ‘Obama Doctrine’ by large segments of that same Washington establishment in turn, reached a highpoint over the aborted plan to launch US air strikes against the Assad regime, and the caveated ‘no boots on the ground’ intervention against ISIS that began in September 2014 (Cohen 2015, Dueck 2015, Gerson 2014, Lieber 2016).

Prominent media pundits, foreign policy experts, neoconservative hawks, and liberal interventionists accused Obama of following a strategic vision that led the United States into retreat and undermined a liberal, international order of American origin (Kagan 2014). Obama’s successor, Donald Trump, came into office promoting a protectionist and non-interventionist foreign policy under the neo-isolationist slogan America First (White House 2017), which appeared as even more radical departure from America’s established role as the world’s liberal hegemon (Cohen 2017).

This article seeks to make two principal contributions to the understanding of American grand strategy. First, it argues that the meaning of grand strategy extends beyond a rational calculation and equation of means and ends to produce national security against

external threats (Kennedy 1991); it also constitutes a sense of national identity and provides confirmation about the nation's role and position in world politics linking discourse and practice (Croft 2006, Hansen 2006). Grand strategy thus attains its relevant political and social status through the interaction of elite networks, responsible for constructing a legitimate discourse of national security and world politics through invoking common sense, formal expertise and political authority (Ó Tuathail and Dalby 1998, 4-5). Second, on the empirical level, the article undertakes a detailed examination of the internal fragmentation of the American foreign policy establishment under the Obama presidency, which undermined a longstanding Washington consensus on national security and challenged the strategic vision of liberal hegemony on both ideational and practical grounds (Posen 2014, 5).

In the following segments, the article will first demonstrate how, since the end of the Cold War, the dominant elite discourse of American grand strategy was constructed around the idea of American exceptionalism and the political practices in US national security policy linked to this identity discourse. The article will then examine how under the Obama presidency, the bipartisan Washington consensus on liberal hegemony was challenged within the strategic community of national security think tanks and foreign policy experts by countering arguments for restraint and offshore balancing, exposing a widening rift over the big picture of grand strategy among competing elite producers of discourse. Finally, the article will demonstrate how Obama's strategic adjustment towards 'leading from behind' challenged the Washington consensus of grand strategy from the 'inside', while Trump initiated a more radical paradigm shift from the 'outside' that threatened the continued political relevance of the US foreign policy establishment.

*Grand Strategy in International Relations*

Conventionally understood, a grand strategy envisions how a state can best use its various resources of power, - military, economic, diplomatic – to achieve national security, thus establishing a guideline for the national interest. (Art 2003, Brands 2014, Martel 2015). As the realist scholar Barry Posen has summed up this view, prevailing in the majority of the academic literature on the subject: ‘A grand strategy is a nation state’s theory about how to produce security for itself’ (Posen 2014, 1). Realist scholars have provided an enduring categorization of grand strategy options, ranging from unipolar primacy to selective engagement and (neo)-isolationism.<sup>1</sup> A growing body of literature in International Relations (IR) has sought to widen interpretive insights from grand strategy analysis, beyond a realist emphasis on material power calculations and an aggregated national interest. Instead, the intellectual focus has shifted on how domestic actors, institutional processes, political ideologies, elite networks and official rhetoric shape the ‘big picture’ of grand strategy and its political effects (Apeldoorn and Graaf 2015, Goddard and Krebs 2015).

Conceptualizing grand strategy as nexus of geopolitical identity and national security combines constructivist approaches that focus on the writing and re-writing of identity as key performative function of foreign policy and international security (Campbell 1992, Huysmans 1998) with more practice-oriented perspectives on the political operation and policy effects of grand strategy (Dombrowski and Reich 2017). Deep-seated and widely shared representations of world history, national identity and international affairs are regularly used to authorize and legitimate national security practices, which in turn confirm or challenge the underlying identity discourse, which enables these practices. The grand strategy vision of liberal hegemony, for example, the default position taken by the US foreign policy establishment, links the dominant identity construct of American

exceptionalism and indispensability to the material reality of US military supremacy and security practices such as the forward basing of US troops in Europe, Asia and the Middle East, the global projection of military power and America's command of the global commons (Brooks 2013).

The use of these ideational constructs, at the same time, creates political expectations within the foreign policy establishment, elite networks and the wider public that the chosen means reconfirm the underlying identity discourse (Neumann & Coe 2012). If the established identity construct is contested rather than confirmed by national security policies, such as the 2011 'leading from behind' intervention in Libya, or Obama's turnaround on militarily intervening in Syria, this affects the political credibility of the grand strategy discourse, which can no longer provide the narrative of national orientation and political coherence and consistency it is supposed to perform (Balz and Craighill 2013). The American strategist William Martel has commented that 'fundamentally, grand strategy describes a broad consensus on the state's goals and the means by which to put them into practice' (Martel 2015, 359). The level of influence of a grand strategy discourse can therefore be gauged through its reproduction as authoritative and legitimate by a multitude of influential sources, ranging from government officials to policy experts and leading media. It is this intertextuality that establishes the grand strategy consensus as dominant 'regime of truth' (Foucault 1991), with foreign policy makers referencing other texts and discourses while 'seeking to establish their own discourse as hegemonic' (Hansen 2006, 215). As Christopher Layne has argued, American grand strategy is the product of a networked, elite-class foreign policy establishment in the United States, which exercises 'discourse dominance' and thus guarantees the strategic continuity of American primacy (Layne 2017). Under Obama, however, the discursive dominance of the 'Washington playbook' started to erode. An intense intra-elite contest occurred

between establishment insiders, like the neoconservative scholar Robert Kagan, who defended the status quo of liberal hegemony against ‘misguided’ and ‘isolationist’ critics (Kagan 2014), and outsiders like Andrew Bacevich, who targeted the imperialist hubris of Washington and challenged the prevailing elite consensus of national security through the advocacy of restraint (Bacevich 2010). At the heart of this confrontation was a battle over the meaning of American exceptionalism for US national security.

*American exceptionalism and the Washington consensus on liberal hegemony*

American exceptionalism stresses the uniqueness of the national character and world political role of the United States as objective truth and legitimate guideline for political action in international affairs (Gilmore, Sheets, and Rowling, 2016).<sup>2</sup> While never uncontested by competing discourses, it represents a dominant identity construct that is embedded in the mainstream of political rhetoric, intellectual expertise and popular culture, and thus acceptable to subsequent generations of Americans as a national Self-making resource (Ceaser 2012). The singularity, superiority and ‘God-favored’ status of the United States accordingly feature as dominant themes in political discourse, for example, in the annual State of the Union addresses given by US presidents (Gilmore 2014).

Since the end of the Cold War, the US foreign policy establishment had continuously linked this geopolitical identity discourse to a strategic vision that legitimated military interventions abroad, supported the unrivalled, global supremacy of American power and influence, and sought the country’s enduring hegemony in the international system.<sup>3</sup> As Feaver and Brands have summed up this strategic default position: “Every president since George H.W. Bush has committed the United States to maintaining American global

primacy, and to deepening and expanding the liberal international order that took hold after the Second World War” (Brands and Feaver 2016, 95). In following a grand strategy of liberal hegemony, the United States aimed to use its political influence, military power and economic weight to deter potential aggressors and preserve regional stability, foster the global spread of democracy, uphold the international rule of law, and guarantee free trade and open access to the global commons in support of a globalized economy (Rudolf 2016). Liberal hegemony thus entailed both the primacy of American power that was to be perpetuated, and an activist political leadership role in support of Western liberalism that reflected America’s own sense of its national exceptionalism (Posen 2014, 5-6).

Given this political dominance, cultural embeddedness and historic longevity, it is unsurprising that under the Obama presidency, American exceptionalism, global leadership and military preeminence remained at the center of US grand strategy. In the foreword to the *National Security Strategy* (NSS) of 2015, for example, president Obama reiterated: “Strong and sustained American leadership is essential to a rules-based international order (...). The question is not whether America should lead, but how we lead (White House 2015).” The *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) of 2010 unequivocally stated that the United States remained the ‘only nation able to project and sustain large-scale operations over extended distances,’ resulting in America’s unique responsibility for global leadership (DoD 2010, 1). The ‘exceptional’ character of American military power, - its indispensability, superiority, and singular global reach, as referenced in Obama’s speeches and statements, the 2010 and 2014 *Quadrennial Defense Review* reports, or the 2012 *Defense Strategic Guidance* (DSG) underwrote the strategic vision of liberal hegemony both materially and rhetorically. This reconfirmed the basic tenets of the bipartisan Washington consensus on national security and foreign policy (Brooks 2013). At the conservative of the spectrum, the proponents of American

hegemony emphasized unilateral action, the pre-emptive use of military power against threats to US national security, and the perpetuation of the unipolar primacy of the United States (Mead 2002). Under Obama, this strategic vision of liberal imperialism and unilateral primacy remained most closely associated with the establishment of the Republican Party (Romney 2010) and neoconservative intellectuals (Kagan 2012).

The liberal discourse of hegemony favored by Democrats in contrast stressed how the global leadership role of the United States functioned as integral and essential part of a global institutional framework with a preference for US foreign policy to operate multilaterally and in support of international cooperation (Slaughter 2013). Nonetheless, the underlying key assumption was that the United States had a unique leadership responsibility in these cooperative arrangements. As liberal hegemon, the United States was expected to take the lead in global political agenda setting, management of the world economy and sponsorship of international security (Reich and Lebow 2014). The US would also act unilaterally, including with military force, if necessary to maintain the Washington-led liberal order and defend its core values. As Obama made clear: “America must always lead on the world stage. If we don’t, no one else will” (Obama 2014). Although often clad in the rhetoric of cooperative security, engagement and mutual partnership, this discourse actually represented a hybrid form of hegemonic engagement, where the United States acted as indispensable partner, but never quite as an equal in the international system (Haass 2017). The bi-partisan Washington consensus elevated the discourse of liberal hegemony to the status of a political mantra. Assertions of American indispensability in world affairs accordingly appeared in speeches and statements of otherwise such diverse political figures as Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, Chris Christie, Jeb Bush, Bobby Jindal, Marco Rubio, and Michelle Bachman (Zenko, 2014) and were a mainstay of both foreign policy expertise and media coverage. Obama’s own

interpretation of hegemony thus largely operated within an established historic, political and ideological continuity, reconfirming the exceptionalist identity of the United States as unique, superior to and qualitatively different from other nations.

*Grand strategy expertise and the rotating door*

The political validity and normative quality of the Washington consensus on grand strategy were only rarely questioned within the foreign policy establishment, as the strategic community of think tanks demonstrates. Ranging from decidedly conservative organizations, such as Heritage (Wood 2016), to the liberal-leaning Brookings Institution (O'Hanlon 2013), and the center-right Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (Green 2012), leading policy research organizations continuously emphasized American military preeminence as necessary foundation for global security in their research outputs and assorted publications under the Obama presidency. While individual policy proposals varied, - for example, between Heritage and Brookings on offsetting or limiting defense budget sequestration, or between Brookings and CSIS on the appropriate size of the military component in the US rebalancing to Asia-, these variations did not signal a fundamental dispute about the global leadership role of the United States.

Part of the considerable political relevance of think tanks stems from the fact that their individual experts have spent time as part of a presidential administration, offering valuable personal connections and practical experience, or will re-enter government at a later point, which allows them to transfer their knowledge and research expertise into their respective future government functions. This 'rotating door' principle directly connects the spheres of government and policy expertise, reinforcing intertextual links of converging discourses in the production of knowledge with the practical intersection of

professional career paths in the national security establishment (Parmar 2009). The influential Center for a New American Security (CNAS), for example, enjoyed a particular close connection to the Obama White House.<sup>4</sup> On grand strategy, the research produced by CNAS formulated a vision of hegemonic engagement that focused on improving the effectiveness of US military power, but never questioned its indispensability for maintaining a liberal world order (Brimley and Flournoy 2008, Fontaine and Lord 2012). As CNAS itself stated:

(...) there is little that is fundamentally new in a strategy emphasizing the very theme and currents that lie deep within American history and the bipartisan exercise of statecraft over man decades. (Brimley, Flournoy, and Singh 2008, 17).

This statement further testifies to the strong ideological crossover that linked Republicans and Democrats, conservative and centrist think tanks and policy experts in supporting the Washington consensus on hegemony. In reproducing the basic identity-policy link of American exceptionalism and military primacy, most national security experts could therefore only provide a limited bandwidth of opinion on actual grand strategy alternatives. This position of ideological and discursive dominance within the political, expert and media class in Washington DC in turn considerably limited the political room to maneuver and to recast the status quo. Even a modest strategic adjustment as represented in the ‘Obama Doctrine’ thus triggered a considerable establishment backlash in response.

*Restraint and the stigma of isolationism*

The expert consensus on liberal hegemony and firm belief in America's necessary role as the world's 'indispensable nation' translated into overwhelming political support for an expansive and costly global security posture and military apparatus that critics challenged on both practical and ideational grounds (Walt 2011a, Preble, 2015). Advocates of restraint argued that Americans should disentangle their belief in the nation's exceptionalism from a conviction in the wisdom of global military primacy and interventionism (Bacevich 2014). This intra-elite critique and questioning of the identity-policy link of American exceptionalism and liberal hegemony was formulated by deviant insiders of the wider Washington foreign policy establishment, not radical critics of US imperialism or traditionally subjugated voices existing at the fringes. It nonetheless remained an outlier and outsider's view, which existed on the margins of acceptable elite opinion. This was predominantly due to the stigma of 'isolationism', which was actively invoked by American primacists in leading US media to discredit strategic ideas of non-interventionism and offshore balancing. Senators Joe Lieberman and Jon Kyl, for example, invoked the dangers of isolationism in a bipartisan plea against sequester-induced defense cuts in the *Washington Post* (Lieberman and Kyl, 2013). In the *New York Times* the historian Bill Keller attacked the American public's reluctance for military engagement of Assad's Syria explaining: "Isolationism is not just an aversion to war (...). It is a broader reluctance to engage, to assert responsibility, to commit" (Keller, 2013). When a much-reported Pew research poll in 2013 found that 52% of Americans agreed that 'the U.S. should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own,' the *Washington Post* featured the results under the alarmist headline: "American isolationism just hit a 50-year high. Why that matters." (Fisher 2013). The stigmatization of restraint as negative, timid or amoral in elite media outlets like the *Washington Post* or *New York Times* attempted to influence public opinion, resulting in a national security debate that was supposed to revolve around the

appropriate ways and means to manage American hegemony, not its replacement with an altogether alternative grand strategy.<sup>5</sup>

The attempt to sideline or discredit the ‘isolationist’ ideas of the libertarian Cato Institute, the neo-realist Stephen Walt or libertarian conservatives like Rand Paul meant that proponents of primacy within the Washington foreign policy establishment viewed domestic critics as considerable threat to US national security. According to many prominent and influential supporters of liberal hegemony, American world leadership and global security were a question of national willpower; unless Americans could be convinced domestically of the virtues of US leadership, the international order was likely to disintegrate and collapse with devastating consequences for the US itself (Kagan 2014, Lieber 2016). The external threats of a rising China, a revisionist Russia or international terrorism were treated as significant and controversial issues in the American grand strategy debate under Obama regarding the appropriate nature of US policy responses (White House 2015). The fundamental nature of the geopolitical role of the United States as the ‘world’s global constabulary’ (Preble 2015), however, was more directly challenged internally by proposals that demanded a fundamental strategic reorientation of the domestic political consensus on US foreign policy.

A counter-hegemonic discourse of restraint was supported by a heterogeneous coalition of libertarian conservatives (Preble 2009), progressive critics of American foreign policy (vanden Heuvel 2018), and neorealist IR scholars (Posen 2014), which advocated the retrenchment of US power to varying degrees.<sup>6</sup> Realist foreign policy experts in particular proposed a grand strategy of ‘offshore balancing’ and ‘non-interventionism,’ where the United States would withdraw its forces from the Middle East and Central Asia and husband its military and economic resources more carefully in the future, while

maintaining the ability to project decisive military power overseas in order to determine the balance of power in key geostrategic regions such as Western Europe and East Asia (Mearsheimer 2010, Layne 2012, Walt 2011b). According to this diverse set of deviant establishment voices, the existing strategic paradigm of global primacy and liberal hegemony had overextended American commitments, squandered financial and military resources through frequent military intervention, and triggered regional instability, fuelling anti-Americanism through ill-fated attempts at democracy export and forced regime change.

In opposing both the underlying identity construct and associated policy options of the Washington consensus on grand strategy, the restraint discourse questioned its seemingly self-evident, normative status and instead presented American hegemony as ideologically driven political choice that was not in the national interest.<sup>7</sup> As an alternative grand strategy, however, restraint never fully materialized beyond its relatively small circle of supporters. The cautious, pragmatic and deliberately un-idealistic vision of America's role in the world 'offshore balancing' outlined, crucially lacked the high level of discursive intertextuality that legitimated liberal hegemony as common sense position of political rhetoric, intellectual expertise, and mainstream media coverage.<sup>8</sup> The bias of elite opinion in America's leading think tanks and newspapers, at the same time, demonstrated the substantial hurdles president Obama faced in reorienting the status quo of American grand strategy and to establish the Obama Doctrine as authoritative and legitimate in the public realm.

*The Obama Doctrine: 'Leading from Behind'*

From the onset of his presidency, Obama attempted to reconcile singular representations of America's world political role as 'exceptional' and 'indispensable' with a foreign policy course of cooperative engagement and 'burden sharing', highlighting the limitations of US power and influence (Obama 2009). This strategic shift would maintain American hegemony at less cost, both financially and militarily. Yet, it also challenged the existing identity-policy link that translated exceptionalist sentiments about American identity at home into regular calls for military action abroad. At the highest level of strategy making, Obama linked the lessons of the failed military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan into a political maxim that the United States should avoid making 'stupid' mistakes, resulting from moral absolutism, exceptionalist hubris and a misguided faith in military solutions to complex geopolitical problems (Goldberg 2016, 73). As Mark Stoddart, has pointed out, referring to the work by Gramsci, and Laclau and Mouffe on hegemony and discourse: "Hegemony is always contested; we may only speak of the relative success of a particular hegemonic discourse" (Stoddart 2007, 208). While Obama charted a strategic course that sought to align more limited means with less ambitious goals, his continued reliance on the identity construct of American exceptionalism to legitimate this policy produced a persistent disconnect between rhetoric and action (Chollet 2016) that exposed the Obama Doctrine to charges of inconsistency. The conceptual gap between identity and policy was most prominent in the president's use of force. In 'leading from behind' in Libya, surging and, at the same time, announcing to withdraw in Afghanistan, and setting up, but failing to militarily enforce 'red lines' in Syria, Obama's policies seemed to question, not confirm, America's singular exceptionalism and the country's unique role as liberal hegemon.

Rather than facilitating public support through persuasion, the contradiction between the ambitious rhetoric of American exceptionalism and a policy course of limited

engagement and military restraint exposed the limits of Obama's strategic adjustment. The discrepancy in the discourse undermined the political credibility of Obama's course both at home and abroad (Balz and Craighill 2013, Inboden 2014) and provoked widespread criticism of Obama's passivity and weakness, not only in Republican circles, but also among elite media outlets and liberal interventionists in the Democratic Party. Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State during Obama's first term and presidential nominee of the Democratic Party in 2016, publicly rebuked Obama's strategic caution after leaving office in 2014 declaring: "Don't do stupid stuff is not an organizing principle." (Goldberg 2016, 73). When Obama's foreign policy speechwriter and deputy national security advisor Ben Rhodes attacked the groupthink of the Washington foreign policy 'Blob' for its intellectual laziness and ignorance towards nuance and detail (Samuels 2016), - a derogatory label under which Rhodes included Clinton, Robert Gates and supporters of the Iraq War in both parties as well as foreign policy experts, think tanks and elite media outlets like the *Washington Post* and the *New Yorker* -, his criticism directly targeted the identity-policy nexus of American exceptionalism and the militarization of US foreign policy Obama would increasingly try to counteract over the course of his presidency.

All American presidents since the end of the Cold War encountered the difficulty to formulate a coherent and consistent American grand strategy in the absence of an overarching threat perception, such as the Soviet Union, while attempting to reconcile contradictory impulses emerging from America's main foreign policy traditions (Mead 2002).<sup>9</sup> Yet, regarding the prevailing identity-policy nexus, all post-Cold War American grand strategies, - from George H. W. Bush's 'New World Order' and Bill Clinton's 'Engagement and Enlargement' strategy to George W. Bush's emphasis on unilateralism and pre-emption -, represented mere variations of the theme of liberal hegemony, securing and expanding US leadership and national security within an international system defined

by liberal democracy and capitalism. Within this strategic continuity, Obama's emphasis on lessening costs and commitments signaled a more significant departure from the post-Cold War Washington consensus in both discourse and practice than his predecessors, resulting in a more vehement criticism by US foreign policy experts about its lacking coherence and consistency and its acceptance of American decline (Kagan 2014).

In both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, prominent critics found Obama's public candor, including his disdain for the Washington establishment voiced in the *Atlantic* itself 'destabilizing' (Ignatius 2016), and 'depressing' for articulating doubts about the efficacy of American power and liberal interventionism (Cohen 2016). In the *Wall Street Journal*, the conservative historian Niall Ferguson attacked the 'Obama Doctrine' and its vision of a less hegemonic United States for 'failing disastrously' (Ferguson 2015). Both neoconservative (Krauthammer 2014) and liberal internationalist (Judis 2014) critics saw Obama's emphasis of military restraint as dangerous weakness. Obama was perceived as too naïve to counter aggressive great powers like Russia and China, and as too passive to enforce human rights through military intervention. This criticism was returned in kind by the Obama administration and its dismissal of the US foreign policy establishment 'Blob' and the often-hyperbolic rhetoric and 'threat inflation' cultivated inside the Washington DC media bubble (Samuels 2016). Travelling to Asia in April 2014, president Obama famously used a baseball analogy to defend the Obama Doctrine:

You hit singles, you hit doubles; every once in a while we may be able to hit a home run. That may not always be sexy. That may not always attract a lot of attention, and it doesn't make for good argument on Sunday morning shows. But we steadily

advance the interests of the American people and our partnership with folks around the world (Landler 2014).

The president's strategic vision was more caveated, more appreciative of the complexity of world politics, and less simplistic in its characterization of American power and what it could achieve on the world stage (Obama 2014). This set Obama apart, not only from conservative proponents of unchecked American primacy in the Republican party (Romney 2010), but also the Democratic standard bearers of liberal hegemony and military interventionism, Hillary Clinton first among them. Clinton was a firm believer in America's role as the world's 'indispensable nation' whose opposition to Obama was both politically and ideologically motivated (Teague Beckwith 2016).

Obama's failure to legitimate a new strategic consensus on America's role in the world in the public realm exposed both the policy constraints set by an existing hegemonic identity discourse and the limits practical modifications could achieve to reorient grand strategy without being accompanied by a reformulated overarching vision to embed these policy changes in a new conceptual paradigm. The inability to coherently link the identity and policy dimensions of the Obama Doctrine, however, were mostly rooted in structural inconsistencies, given that restraint only ever formed part of Obama's strategic vision, and was never considered as a holistic and encompassing strategy of disengagement or offshore balancing as, for example, demanded by critics like Walt (2011b) or Bacevich (2010). This was also emphasized by Obama's signature counter-terrorism policy of drone strikes, which escalated military attacks on suspected terrorist targets in Pakistan, Yemen and other places, allowing US forces to operate with invulnerability, while violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other nations in the process.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, in reorienting US foreign and security policy Obama acted as a transitional

rather than a transformative figure, whose moderate strategic adjustment would be overshadowed by the more radical departure of his successor's America First stance.

### *Donald Trump and 'America First'*

President Trump's impulsive behavior and often-contradictory policies and statements make identification of an actual Trump Doctrine difficult. Furthermore, at the time of writing Trump has only been in office for just over two years. Nonetheless, from the discursive performance of 'America First' and its policy manifestations so far, it can be argued that Trump's populist vision presents the most significant internal challenge to the post-Cold War Washington consensus on liberal hegemony to date.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump, a real estate mogul and TV celebrity had carefully cultivated an image as the quintessentially Washington outsider, placing himself outside the foreign policy mainstream by advocating a nativist, protectionist, and nationalist-isolationist vision for the United States, under the populist slogan 'America First' (Trump 2016a). Once in office, Trump enacted a series of policies that corresponded to this strategic vision, from declaring a ban on immigration from majority Muslim countries, to imposing tariffs on steel and aluminum imports from China and close US partners (including Canada, Japan, the EU and Mexico), justified on national security grounds, to withdrawing from several key international agreements considered signature achievements of Obama's cooperative approach to US foreign and security policy, including the Trans Pacific Partnership agreement (TPP), the Paris climate change accord, and the Iran nuclear deal (Kagan 2018).

The perception of a breakdown of the established identity-policy nexus of American grand strategy is also reconfirmed by the wholesale denunciation of Trump's rhetoric and policies by the collective US foreign policy establishment, a fundamental critique that went beyond previous attacks on Obama's 'leading from behind' stance. Both Republican and Democratic foreign policy and national security experts (Glasser 2018), leading Washington think tanks like the Council on Foreign Relations (Patrick 2018) and national and international elite media outlets from the *Atlantic* to the *Financial Times* (Frum 2017, Wolf 2017) attacked Trump for 'abdicating global leadership and retreating into narrow-minded nationalism' (Lee 2018). These critics viewed Trump as genuine threat to the survival of a liberal world order and the geopolitical cohesion of the West due to his long-standing ideological hostility towards free trade, US alliances and international cooperation that according to Trump had disadvantaged the United States to the benefit of other nations for decades.

At the same time, key foreign policy ideas voiced by Trump, as, for example, on the strategic miscalculation of the Iraq War or the need for greater 'burden sharing' in NATO echoed realist ideas for offshore balancing and continued the growing strategic momentum for restraint that had begun under the Obama presidency (Byman 2017). Similar to Obama, Trump indicated that US power and influence were not unlimited, declaring in September 2016 that: "At some point, we cannot be the policeman of the world" (Trump 2016b); an almost word for word a repetition of Obama's rhetorical stance in his televised address on Syria three years prior (Obama 2013). As presidential candidate Trump had also called the NATO alliance 'obsolete,' and suggested that the United States could withdraw its troops from South Korea and Japan, resulting in these countries providing for their own defense independently (Trump 2016b). Once in office, Trump's repeated public reprimands of European partners for failing the NATO spending

target of 2 per cent of GDP on defense were supported by realist critics as overdue pushback against alliance freeriding (Walt 2017), which Obama had likewise criticized albeit with more diplomatic language and in less dramatic fashion (Goldberg 2016). Both, Obama and Trump thus challenged the prevailing American grand strategy discourse through their respective advocacy of restraint.

Obama, however, attempted to modify American grand strategy still within an established identity paradigm of American exceptionalism and liberal hegemony that broadly reflected the views of the country's political elites, leading national security experts and mainstream media. Trump established a new populist discourse outside that elite consensus that resulted in a more profound paradigm shift. Trump's ideas on foreign and security policy, immigration and the economy seem to primarily reflect the political views, economic concerns and cultural threat perceptions of Trump's nativist base of ethno-nationalist voters, where the influx of illegal immigrants into the US and the negative economic impact of globalization are of primary concern, rather than Russian actions in Ukraine or even the Kremlin's interference with American elections (Kagan 2018).

Despite Trump's frequent conceptual incoherence, poor attention to policy detail, at times, dysfunctional White House administration, personal moral deficiencies and abrasive public behavior he successfully 'challenged the assumption that the pursuit of unipolarity serves average Americans' (Beinart 2018). Trump's radical departure from the status quo in both rhetoric and practice subsequently led to an erosion of the discursive dominance of the Washington consensus that has forced an intense debate on the future of US foreign policy in both major parties (Ashford and Thrall 2018). This may yet prove to be temporary disruption, or a more lasting shift where a strategic vision of American

nationalism underwritten by populist mobilization, post-truth politics, and nativist resentment gains political momentum, while the previous Washington consensus on liberal hegemony becomes increasingly marginalized.

### *Conclusion*

This article has argued that American grand strategy constitutes an internal, hegemonic discourse that links notions of national identity to the conduct of foreign policy and national security, thus providing the ‘big picture’ of the national interest. Focusing on the interlinkage of discourse and practice in the study of American grand strategy allows for a more detailed examination into the domestic contextualization, politicization and polarization of strategic rationales, and how changes and continuities in US foreign and security policy are both legitimized and contested through the mobilization of ideas, concepts and narratives of national identity at the elite level.

Since at least the end of the Cold War, a grand strategy vision of liberal hegemony has represented a broad ideological consensus of the Washington foreign policy establishment, resulting in a marked congruence between neoconservative intellectuals, liberal media outlets and centrist think tanks in their recommendations for America’s preferred world political role. However, within the elite network at the center of the American grand strategy debate, a significant challenger emerged under the Obama presidency in form of a countering discourse of restraint. Obama himself adopted some of the key arguments of the restraint discourse, as displayed in several of his foreign policy decisions, and in particular in respect to his use of force, resulting in the complex and contradictory nature of the Obama Doctrine, which oscillated between an America-centric, hegemonic identity discourse and a post-American practice of hegemony.

Obama was operating under the normative constraints of a powerful discursive status quo in politics, expert circles and the media that did not allow for a more holistic reorientation of grand strategy given Obama's own ideological and political preferences. As commander-in-chief Obama sought to modify rather than to replace the existing strategic paradigm, using the exceptionalist rhetoric of hegemonic continuity to augment a moderate policy change towards greater military caution and foreign policy pragmatism. This allowed his critics to contest his grand strategy on grounds of that very same identity discourse, attacking this strategic adjustment for being un-exceptional and therefore 'un-American'. The domestic controversy over the Obama Doctrine both exposed the discursive limits of grand strategy change within established identity paradigms and poses questions about how the tradeoffs between acknowledging international complexity and fulfilling the reductionist demands for identity narratives aimed at national self-confirmation and reassurance can be reconciled. Here, the presidency of Donald Trump has heralded an at least temporary breakdown of the discursive dominance of liberal hegemony in the United States that has decidedly opted to prioritize the latter.

In the eyes of the foreign policy establishment and key US allies Trump has threatened to undermine the very idea of American exceptionalism and the existence of an US-led liberal world order. Trump in turn has directly attacked America's allies and partners abroad and targeted liberal elites at home as 'enemies of the people', advocating his populist nationalism as necessary break with a past that has neglected the interests of ordinary Americans. Both the Obama Doctrine and America First thus posed domestic challenges to the continuity of American liberal hegemony beyond external national security threats. Going forward, further avenues of research on American grand strategy should therefore consider the discursive construction of the identity-policy nexus, how

media, public opinion and political rhetoric interact and impact the prevailing meaning of national security and identity, and how the political relevance of the Washington consensus might be affected by the rise of populism in the United States.

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I state that there is no conflict of interest.

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<sup>1</sup> See also Barry Posen and Andrew Ross, 'Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy,' *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1996/1997), pp. 5-53.

<sup>2</sup> American exceptionalism not only establishes the United States as geographically separate, constitutionally unique (Jackson 2006) and politically, culturally and socio-economically different from other countries (Lipset 1996), but as uniquely powerful entity and 'chosen nation' with a special role to play in world history to guarantee the success of freedom and democracy (McCracken 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Obama's predecessor George W. Bush translated this amalgam of exceptionalist self-perception and the material preponderance of US power into a strategic vision of unilateral primacy and pre-emptive warfare, with the 2002 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) declaring: "The United States must defend liberty and justice because these principles are right and true for all people everywhere" (White House 2002, 1). president Bill Clinton's Secretary of State, Madeline Albright famously expressed the moral conviction in the singular virtue of American exceptionalism in 1998, when she made the case for US air strikes against Saddam Hussein's Iraq: "If we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation" (NBC 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Michèle Flournoy, co-founder of CNAS served as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, and was centrally involved in the formulation of the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review. CNAS co-founder Kurt Campbell served in Hillary Clinton's State Department as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs and was one the leading architects behind Obama's 'pivot to Asia' strategy.

<sup>5</sup> This establishment stance was similarly on display when in October 2015, the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute (AEI), Heritage, CNAS, the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA), and the Cato Institute were invited to testify before the US Senate Armed Services Committee on the topic of 'Alternative Approaches to Defense Strategy and Force Structure'. Of the invited leading representatives of Washington's strategic community only Cato endorsed restraint and argued that 'a grand strategy, built around a greater skepticism toward military intervention, leads logically toward a new profile of power' (Preble 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Although representing opposing sides of the ideological spectrum, both progressives and libertarians favored a more wholesale strategic course correction towards global restraint including substantial cuts to the defense budget. For libertarians, fiscal prudence and a reduction in the ballooning federal debt were the main impetus behind an endorsement of strategic restraint (Preble 2009), while progressives sought to prioritize domestic issues such as healthcare, education and public infrastructure over any hegemonic geopolitical aspirations of the United States abroad (Nixon 2018). Both camps also saw reducing the political clout of the military-industrial and intelligence complexes as beneficial for reorienting American government from a quasi-imperial stance towards the republican civic ideal that predated the rise of the country to superpower status in World War II (Bacevich 2010).

<sup>7</sup> For a critical assessment of liberal hegemony from a realist perspective see also John Mearsheimer (2018) *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. Yale University Press, and Stephen Walt (2018) *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

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<sup>8</sup> A leading proponent of a grand strategy of offshore balancing, the realist IR scholar Stephen Walt openly lamented the lack of realist foreign policy expertise and voices of restraint in such elite media outlets as the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* or the *Washington Post* (Walt, 2011b), which predominantly supported the hegemonic consensus.

<sup>9</sup> As identified by Walter Russell Mead: a Hamiltonian emphasis on international commerce and free trade, a Jeffersonian focus on perfecting American democracy at home, Jacksonian unilateral nationalism, and the transformative impetus of Wilsonian liberal idealism (Mead 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Despite being accused of retrenchment, Obama, among other things, oversaw NATO enlargement by two Eastern European member states; supported the pro-Western government in Ukraine; increased the military presence of the United States in in the Asia-Pacific; and significantly expanded military operations in Africa.