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Leading from Behind – American Exceptionalism and President Obama’s post-American Vision of Hegemony

Introduction: Still the 'Indispensable Nation'?

The public invocation of ‘American exceptionalism’ by president Barack Obama to legitimize a possible military intervention by the US in Syria on September 10, 2013 prompted Russia’s president Vladimir Putin to rebuke that very exceptionalism only two days later in an op-ed article for the *New York Times*:

I would rather disagree with a case he made on American exceptionalism, stating that the United States’ policy is ‘what makes America different. It’s what makes us exceptional.’ It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation.¹

Gerard Toal on the other hand, writing in *Geopolitics* in 2009, expressed his hope that the American exceptionalism president Obama embodied, -post-modern, globalized, inclusive, pragmatic, and cosmopolitan-, could act as a transforming agent to the geopolitical culture of the United States, and move the country away from the imperial hubris and ideological fixation on ‘ethnocentric provincialism’ that had prevailed under George W. Bush.² Putin in turn clearly found the very idea of American exceptionalism unacceptable, because he identified it as the ideational foundation for the global hegemony of the United States, and its policy of liberal interventionism.

This article argues that a critical examination of contemporary geopolitical discourses in the United States can neither fully validate either claim brought forward in context with the 'exceptionalist' character of the Obama presidency and its effect on US policy. In fact, a critical engagement with the discursive performance and political significance of American exceptionalism under the Obama presidency suggests that the key features discussed in the literature, -the uniqueness of the United States, the belief in the superiority of American values, and the preeminence of American power-, have been re-appropriated by president Obama.³

Under Obama, American exceptionalism functions as a discursive device that augments a largely un-exceptional foreign and security policy that stresses cooperative engagement and military restraint, reflecting a 'post-American' vision of hegemony.⁴ So, a key concept of geopolitical identity construction associated with uniqueness, difference and separation is actually linked to a policy course meant to make the United States somewhat more like others, not to exclusively stress its hegemonic, unipolar position and sole responsibility for world order. This challenges the view, often brought forward in the critical literature that the belief in American exceptionalism, the 'discourse of distinctness' in the words of Nayak and Malone, serves primarily to underwrite a worldview of American hegemony, and to formulate an activist foreign and security policy to re-make the world in America's image.⁵

Post-American exceptionalism: a critical reading

Rather than investigating, as the positivist literature does, if the uniqueness of the United States can be empirically validated through a study of socio-economic, political,

and historical factors, as exemplary executed in the works of Seymour Martin Lipset, Deborah Madsen, and others, a critical approach seeks to understand how the belief in American exceptionalism, as a key myth of American identity formation, is constituted and reconstituted through discourse.⁶ However, the critical literature shares an important analytical common ground with the former approach in that the research primarily focuses on the issue of the construction of uniqueness in the American identity performance, and the discourses and narratives that reproduce this exceptionalist definition of the American Self.⁷ As James W. Ceaser has noted on the study of the meaning of exceptionalism: “The common denominator is a claim to uniqueness, which the investigator may then confirm or deny.”⁸

‘Only in America,’ Toal for example asserted, would the story of Obama’s mercurial rise from outsider, both racially and geographically (an African-American, born on Hawaii, and raised in Indonesia) to ‘ultimate insider’ of commander-in-chief have been possible.⁹ Toal’s article outlined in detail Obama’s presidential campaign and election as positive example for American exceptionalism, and its promise for a US foreign policy of pragmatism and ‘reflexive security,’ contrasted against the negative exceptionalism of the Bush administration and its ‘aggressive neoconservative foreign policy.’¹⁰ Nayak and Malone in turn concluded that next to American orientalism, the genealogical prevalence of American exceptionalism was a critical component of national identity construction that would help to better understand the ‘continuity and endurance of American hegemony.’¹¹

An interpretive reading of the discursive reproduction of a historic-cultural genealogy of Puritan republicanism and insular, geographical position, -the claimed singularity of the

American experience, from the Massachusetts Bay Colony to Manifest Destiny and the American Century-, seeks to critically engage the construction of an American geopolitical identity of uniqueness and separation and its political implications. As Trevor McCrisken has written in his detailed analysis: “The belief in American exceptionalism provides an essential element of the cultural and intellectual framework for the making and conduct of US foreign policy.”¹² The construct of an exceptional American identity in turn is seen as connected primarily to discourses that formulate a geopolitical vision of American hegemony, superiority and national mission.¹³ “(...) there has remained a strong *belief* that the United States is an exceptional nation, not only unique but also superior among nations.”¹⁴

Rather than focusing on the past and contemporary writing and re-writing of American uniqueness however, this article is primarily interested in a critical analysis of the discursive performance, the political function that American exceptionalism fulfills in contemporary US foreign and security policy, and how this reflects back to changes or continuities in the dominant geopolitical imagination. Moving beyond the discussion if the United States actually constitutes a unique political entity or not, or how the belief in American uniqueness is discursively inscribed, allows the article to open up its critical research perspective to the issue of the political-functional aspect of American exceptionalism as a ‘thick signifier.’¹⁵ Drawing in part from Jef Huysman’s reconceptualization of security, the article thus analyzes the meaning of ‘American exceptionalism’ through its relation to other signifiers such as ‘American leadership,’ or ‘nation-building at home,’ in order to explore how it is politically organized as an expression of, and legitimization for US foreign and security policy. As Huysman has explained: “(...) one searches for key dimensions of the wider order of meaning within

which the framework itself is embedded.’¹⁶ Hence it is the political performance rather than the identity building function of American exceptionalism that provides the focus of a critical engagement with the subject.

Here, a critical discourse analysis reveals that as articulated by president Obama, American exceptionalism is a construct of geopolitical identity that draws both from the materiality of the superior power base of the United States, -economically as well as militarily-, and ideationally from the belief in the superiority of American values of freedom and liberty. This fusion of hegemonic identity and superior power in the discourse of American exceptionalism under Obama however, does neither constitute the United States as a ‘shining city upon a hill,’ as president Reagan did, nor as a crusading superpower, or ‘colossus,’ which embraces its ‘unipolar moment.’¹⁷ As such, Obama’s definition of American exceptionalism does not align directly with either of the two main strands McCrisken for example has identified in terms of influencing American foreign policy: Here, American exceptionalism politically manifests either as course of restraint of an ‘exemplar nation,’ and isolationist ‘Fortress America,’ or, as has been dominant at least since World War 2, as liberal, imperialist mission of the ‘leader of the free world.’¹⁸

Instead, we encounter a post-American exceptionalism where Obama attempts to recalibrate the American identity of unique superiority and global responsibility toward a grand strategy of engagement, ‘burden-sharing,’ and ‘leading from behind’ that aligns the United States closer with others, and engages it less direct militarily. This contradictory fusion of an hegemonic identity of American exceptionalism with a US foreign and security policy that anticipates, but has not yet fully arrived in a post-

American, post-hegemonic international system, marks the political significance and interpretive value of American exceptionalism under the Obama presidency. Thus, the article offers a critical reinterpretation of American exceptionalism as ideational foundation for US policy that questions the discursive linkage of ideational uniqueness and geopolitical hegemony.

President Obama and the production of American exceptionalism as geopolitical discourse

Despite their obvious differences in the treatment of the subject, both the texts by Toal and Putin demonstrated how expressions of American exceptionalism are fundamentally tied to a geopolitical vision of American leadership in the world, and the role the US president plays in articulating this vision. President Obama as head of state and government embodies, and at the same time articulates the American claim to leadership in world politics. As Ó Tuathail and Agnew have remarked, the US president plays a special role in American geopolitical discourse. “He is the chief *bricoleur* of American political life, a combination of storyteller and tribal shaman.”¹⁹ In this institutional role the president has the ability to frame the national narrative, and potentially recalibrate the articulation of geopolitical identity, if the Presidential discourse is reinforced and reconfirmed by sufficient levels of intertextual connectivity and finds recognition in popular, formal and practical discourses.²⁰

In its critical analysis, the article operates from a Foucauldian understanding of discourse as dominant definition of social reality through the nexus of power/knowledge that is manifest in both representations and practices. In fact, the

article suggests that it is the discursive interplay of the representation of the ideational character of America as ‘exceptional,’ and the political confirmation or contestation of this identity through the practice of US foreign and security policy, -most importantly in the form of military intervention-, that the former attains its political significance.²¹ Thus, it is the representations and practices the president of the United States employs to define the geopolitical identity of the United States and to orient US foreign and security policy that are a crucial in understanding the mutual implication of identity and politics in geopolitical discourse.

A critical analysis should thus move beyond the emphasis on distinctiveness that tends to reproduce the American exceptionalism discourse as one of two extremes: missionary or exemplary, crusading or isolationist, active or passive. A critical examination should instead approach the wider geopolitical contextualization of American exceptionalism, and how it can be used as a useful lens of interpretation for the trajectory of US foreign policy, the continuity, or change of dominant concepts of geopolitical imagination, and the formulation and reformulation of American leadership and US policies among shifting perceptions of identity and power in the international system. Under Obama, both the U.S. Department of Defense and the National Intelligence Council of the United States for example have released official documents stressing the changing parameters for American leadership in an increasingly multipolar international system.²²

In terms of content, the exchange between president Obama and his Republican challenger Mitt Romney about the nature of American exceptionalism during the presidential campaign of 2012, offers a valuable opportunity to analyze the link between exceptionalist rhetoric and diverging visions of American leadership and US foreign

and security policy that underlined the contested nature of American hegemony under Obama. Obama's conflicted reformulation of American leadership, between an acknowledgement of American exceptionalism, and a US foreign and security policy that seeks rather less than more engagement and military commitment has also been on display on Libya, where America led 'from behind,' the original non-intervention against the Assad regime in Syria, and more recently in the caveated response against Russian actions in Ukraine, and the advance of ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria, where Obama categorically ruled out the presence of 'boots on the ground.' However, Obama is unable to resolve the fundamental contradiction entailed in his course of post-American exceptionalism, as the severe criticism of his handling of the Syria crisis, and sinking approval ratings on foreign policy have demonstrated.

President Obama frames the exceptionalism of America, as he defines it, its outstanding military and economic power, and centrally its constitutionally enshrined values of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law primarily as unique opportunity of the United States to shape the international environment through a grand strategy of cooperative engagement. Under president Obama, American exceptionalism is thus being redefined to operate within a more cooperative, less military power centric approach to world politics. This reflects a world in which the United States is likely to remain the most powerful, but not the sole dominating actor in international affairs. Accordingly, Obama's foreign policy oscillates between traditionally liberal, internationalist goals, and realist power calculations of US involvement. Under Obama then, the discursive interlinkage of American exceptionalism and American hegemony reveals a contradiction rather than confirmation of American separation and uniqueness, both

ideationally and politically. It is an American exceptionalism for the post-American century.

American Exceptionalism and American Leadership: The hegemonic Imagination of the United States in World Politics

One of most powerful and enduring of America's national myths is the belief that America is different from the rest of the world.²³ American exceptionalism provides a key component for the geopolitical imagination of the United States and the articulation of the country's identity in world politics. The conventional definition of American exceptionalism states that a special and unique set of social, political and economic features elevates the historical development of the United States above and beyond that of other nations. Frequently, a historic imagination of the United States as 'new' entity in world politics, and its 'unique' political origin are brought forward to construct an exceptionalist genealogy of the United States from the first Puritan settlements and the American Revolution all the way to the present day.²⁴ Fabian Hilfrich for example notes that: "Enlightenment thought and the American Revolution completed the secularization of exceptionalism by postulating that the democratic foundations of the United States were the distinguishing features of its uniqueness."²⁵

In this reading, American exceptionalism is the ultimate expression of the difference of the United States and its political, social and economic otherness. The uniqueness and superiority of capabilities in turn, in particular in the military realm, and the ability of the United States to control the 'global commons' of sea, air and cyber space is seen as the ultimate definition of US hegemony, or primacy.²⁶ Stephen Brooks for example

identifies the ongoing global military preeminence of the United States as the most visible proof that American exceptionalism under president Obama is still a reality: “(...) one would still be justified in speaking of American exceptionalism on the basis of its military capabilities alone.”²⁷ As Simon Dalby has noted: “Geopolitics is about the political organization of space, and about how this is conceived, represented and used in political discussion.”²⁸ The ability for global power projection and the reorganization of political space through military force, and its linkage to a key concept American national identity underlines how exceptionalism and hegemony reproduce each other discursively as defining feature of American geopolitics. The uniqueness of identity and the superiority of power become virtually indistinguishable in a geopolitical imagination that equals American exceptionalism and American leadership. At the same time, the core ‘American’ values of freedom, individualism, democracy, the rule of law, and a free-market society are understood by Americans as a universal formula for peace and prosperity that ideally all mankind should adopt.²⁹ Seymour Martin Lipset for example relates the enduring myth of American exceptionalism to the American creed of liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism and laissez-faire.³⁰

This missionary element and conviction in the singularity and superiority of America’s greatness and its universal values in the exceptionalism myth have often been invoked in the past to provide a reasoning for the hegemonic role and dominant place of the United States in world politics, in particular since the end of the Cold War. Neo-conservative thinkers like Charles Krauthammer, Robert Kagan and William Kristol spoke of ‘benevolent hegemony,’ or the ‘unipolar moment’ in order to define the newfound singular and superior US role in world politics.³¹ However, this belief in American exceptionalism really represented a bi-partisan consensus in the desirability,

efficacy and moral righteousness of global US leadership.³² Madeline Albright famously expressed this conviction in the virtue of American exceptionalism in front of the background of military strikes against Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 1998:

If we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see further into the future than other countries, and we see the danger here to all of us.³³

In 1995, the *National Security Strategy* of president Bill Clinton stated: "Never has American leadership been more essential — to navigate the shoals of the world's new dangers and to capitalize on its opportunities."³⁴ Under his successor George W. Bush, America's ambition for global leadership and the promotion of its exceptionalist, universalist values was articulated as an expansive geopolitical agenda for the spread of freedom and democracy:

It is the policy of the United States to seek and support democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world. [...] The United States must defend liberty and justice because these principles are right and true for all people everywhere.³⁵

American exceptionalism as a representation of American distinctiveness, separation and superiority had been translated into a geopolitical vision of American primacy and preemptive warfare.³⁶ While accentuated differently between Clinton's liberal interventionism and the unilateral primacy of the Bush administration, this fundamental belief in America's exceptional leadership role in the world, based on its unique values

and the unique resources at its disposal, most notably the country's unparalleled global military supremacy, would centrally inform the foreign policy discourse in the twenty years between 1989 and the election of president Obama in 2009.

However, with the onset of the global financial crisis, the difficulties of the United States in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and mounting domestic challenges from providing affordable healthcare to public indebtedness, the equation of American exceptionalism and American global leadership has come under scrutiny. Increasingly, the question seems to be if America can still afford to be the 'indispensable nation,' and if its exceptionalism automatically means that the United States must act as 'policeman of the world.' Prominent critics of US hegemony in international relations have postulated that Americans should disentangle their belief in the nation's exceptionalism from a conviction in the wisdom of global military primacy and interventionism.³⁷ In the words of Andrew Bacevich for example, the United States should 'exemplify' and 'illuminate' the world through its 'self-mastery' instead of trying to 'compel' and 'enforce' others.³⁸ Prominent Realist IR scholars like Stephen Walt suggest the United States should pursue a grand strategy of 'offshore balancing' and remove its forward presence of permanently stationed troops from Asia and Europe.³⁹ As Walt has explained: "U.S. foreign policy would probably be more effective if Americans were less convinced of their own unique virtues and less eager to proclaim them."⁴⁰

Some conservatives, especially in the libertarian Tea Party wing of the Republican Party share this view of a more limited role of the United States in world affairs. Senator Rand Paul for example is a prominent proponent of 'non interventionism.'⁴¹ This policy would drastically reduce military expenditures, liquidate the overseas empire of US

bases, and avoid armed interventions at all cost. This passive exceptionalism however, which would seek to preserve the perceived uniqueness of the United States through a policy of disengagement from the world is still a minority position at the fringes of US foreign policy discourse. It is frequently associated with the stigma of isolationism of the 1930s, and partially seen as outright ‘un-American.’⁴² Indeed, it was president Obama’s alleged weakening of America’s outstanding power and its exceptional status that provoked some of the most severe criticism of his administration. Yet, while president Obama emphasized American exceptionalism in a way that seemed to repudiate Republican ideas of American leadership, this did not happen as an ideological confrontation of active, missionary primacy versus passive, exemplary isolationism, but rather as an alternative formulation of American leadership.

No Apology: Obama, American Exceptionalism and the contested Vision of US Hegemony in domestic Politics

Asked by a European reporter in 2009 at a NATO summit press conference in Strasbourg if he believed in American exceptionalism, president Obama stated that he believed in it, like the British would believe in British exceptionalism, or the Greeks in Greek exceptionalism.⁴³ This remains quite a remarkable contextualizing statement from an incumbent US president about the uniqueness of the identity of the United States in world politics. Subsequently, it was widely reported in the media, and drew heavy criticism from Republican circles. However, and often overlooked, it was in the same statement that president Obama also declared that the United States was ‘objectively’ exceptional in several ways:

(...) the United States remains the largest economy in the world. We have unmatched military capability. We have a core set of values that are enshrined in our Constitution, in our body of law, in our democratic practices, in our belief in free speech and equality, that, though imperfect, are exceptional (...).⁴⁴

Where president Obama did deviate from the established exceptionalist consensus of the 1990s and 2000s was that he did not unanimously endorse American exceptionalism as vision of American global primacy and unipolarity:

I see no contradiction between believing that America has a continued extraordinary role in leading the world towards peace and prosperity and recognizing that leadership is incumbent, depends on, our ability to create partnerships because we can't solve these problems alone.⁴⁵

Instead of focusing exclusively on the sole status of the United States as 'indispensable nation,' and its unique superiority of power and the singularity of its values, Obama argued for an exceptionalism of America's role in the world that acknowledged the unique potential the US had in establishing cooperation with others in order to achieve global outcomes.⁴⁶ This went directly against the Jacksonian unilateralism that dominates foreign policy views in large parts of the Republican Party and the strong emphasis on outstanding military power that began under Ronald Reagan.⁴⁷ Here American exceptionalism stands symbolically for an unapologetic support of American primacy, military preeminence, and unilateral assertiveness. The Republican discourse also strongly associates exceptionalism with the belief in a new 'American century' and the rejection of any notion of even relative decline. American exceptionalism had thus

become a contested issue in domestic American politics. It was a contest about which geopolitical vision of leadership should guide the nation into the future: president Obama's approach of cooperative engagement, or the Republican vision of American primacy.

During the presidential campaign of 2012, American exceptionalism then fully emerged as a major foreign and security policy issue on the public scene, between president Obama and his Republican contender Mitt Romney. Romney, who had publicly declared to be a firm believer in American exceptionalism, repeatedly criticized Obama for 'apologizing for American values'.⁴⁸ President Obama's approach to international relations and foreign policy was seen as deeply flawed by conservative critics because it was supposedly not rooted in the belief in American exceptionalism and singular leadership, but motivated by a negative view of the international role the United States had played in the past. A president, who frequently stressed international cooperation and multilateral approaches to global governance, and who had distanced himself from the unilateralism associated with the previous Bush administration, was criticized for going on an alleged 'apology tour' around the world, when he first came to office.⁴⁹ In his bestselling book, titled *No Apology*, the Republican Presidential candidate had thus explained:

I reject the view that America must decline. I believe in American exceptionalism. I am convinced that we can act together to strengthen the nation, to preserve our global leadership, and to protect freedom where it exists and promote it where it does not.⁵⁰

Romney's vociferous confirmation of American exceptionalism actually reiterated a neoconservative vision of global leadership, based on America's military capability for global power projection, including regime change in so called 'rogue states'.⁵¹ This was not surprising, given that the chief advisor on foreign affairs for Romney's campaign was Robert Kagan, a major neoconservative scholar, who remained a staunch advocate of US hegemony and unipolarity as only guarantee for the survival of the liberal world order, and thus for the maintenance of great power peace, the spread of democracy, and economic prosperity.⁵² For president Obama's conservative critics, American exceptionalism represents an item of faith, defining America's national greatness, and the ideational foundation that should animate the country's expansive grand strategy of unapologetic American leadership. A policy that was seen as moving away from US hegemony therefore appeared as antithesis to American exceptionalism.

Fears that president Obama, due to his 'exotic' upbringing, multicultural background, and ideological disposition, was somehow 'un-American,' were frequently raised on the American Right, and were especially pronounced during the Presidential campaign of 2012.⁵³ Beyond a mere dispute about politics, the foreign and security policy of president Obama was scrutinized for being anti-exceptional, and therefore anti-American by its very design.

President Obama and American Exceptionalism in a post-American World: Leading through Engagement

In contrast to the exceptionalist vision of American primacy favored by the Republican establishment, the foreign and security policy of president Obama seems in many ways

influenced by what Fareed Zakaria dubbed, the ‘post-American world.’ In this scenario the ‘rise of the rest’ is perceived to shift the global geopolitical balance of power into an increasingly multipolar order, while the United States is expected to remain the most powerful and influential player in global affairs for the foreseeable future. This transformation is reflected in the way Obama defined American exceptionalism and utilized it to orient US foreign policy. It is an exceptionalism for an increasingly complex and interdependent world in which the meaning of global leadership is less defined by imposing one’s will on a political opponent, and more associated with organizing working international relationships on issues from climate change to trade agreements. As Zakaria would formulate back in 2008: “At a military-political level, America still dominates the world, but the larger structure of unipolarity -economic, financial, cultural- is weakening.”⁵⁴

Here, more countries than ever before have a say in global governance, and require attention, respect and understanding. As president Obama has remarked during a G-20 summit in London, the world has changed: “If it’s just Roosevelt and Churchill sitting in a room with brandy, [...] that’s an easier negotiation. But that’s not the world we live in.”⁵⁵ In fact, this assessment of a geopolitical rebalancing has already entered official policy documents, such as the Pentagon’s 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review*: “(...) the United States will remain the most powerful actor but must increasingly work with key allies and partners if it is to sustain stability and peace.”⁵⁶ It is also a regular feature in the US National Intelligence Council’s long-term grand strategy forecasts, where a ‘global multipolar system is emerging with the rise of China, India, and others.’⁵⁷

While tacitly acknowledging these post-American dynamics, Obama has frequently maintained a commitment to America's global leadership and military preeminence, for example in his State of the Union Address in 2012 when he proclaimed: "(...) America remains the one indispensable nation in world affairs – and as long as I'm president, I intend to keep it that way."⁵⁸ Here, the president invoked the famous exceptionalist description of the singular, hegemonic role of the United States in world politics that had been used by Albright and Clinton during the 1990s. The global financial crisis and the debate about American decline have apparently also not fundamentally discredited the idea of American exceptionalism, or displaced it as a powerful myth about America's role in the world. In a 2011 Pew research poll, nine out of ten Americans, across party lines, said the United States either stood above all other countries in the world (38%) or was one of the greatest along with some others (53%).⁵⁹

At his second inaugural address in 2013 Obama also again referred to the exceptional identity of the United States, directly quoting from the Declaration of Independence and thus directly connecting to the historic genealogy of American exceptionalism:

What makes us exceptional -- what makes us American -- is our allegiance to an idea, articulated in a declaration made more than two centuries ago: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.'⁶⁰

Finally, in his much-anticipated declaration of the 'Obama doctrine' at West Point on May 28, 2014, the president explained that: "I believe in American exceptionalism with

every fiber of my being.”⁶¹ However, and in a marked departure from the previous Bush administration, Obama at the same time initiated a profound rhetoric shift away from the pairing of exceptionalism and a dominant focus on the singularity of American leadership, the preeminence of military power and the Global War on Terror. This was still the lens through which the former president had seen America’s role in the world, a country shaped by what Bush called the ‘defining ideological struggle of the 21st century’.⁶² Where Bush envisioned the United States committed in an open-ended confrontation against extremists, which ‘despise freedom’ and ‘despise America’, Obama frequently invoked the picture of ‘turning the page after a decade of war.’⁶³

A central point in Obama’s speeches and statements was that the United States was strongest, when it could lead through the power of its example, not alone the example of its power. “Recent events have shown us that what sets us apart must not just be our power — it must also be the purpose behind it.”⁶⁴ This key theme also entered the text of the *National Security Strategy* of 2010: “Our moral leadership is grounded principally in the power of our example—not through an effort to impose our system on other peoples.”⁶⁵ At West Point Obama declared: “(...) what makes us exceptional is not our ability to flout international norms and the rule of law; it is our willingness to affirm them through our actions.”⁶⁶

In essence, president Obama connects a belief in the exceptionalism of the United States and its ‘unique’ strengths and values with a careful appreciation for the scope and limitations of US power. The latter, according to Obama, required the integration of the United States in a cooperative, international order, and the sharing of costs, both economically and militarily, with allies and partners. Thus, Obama’s definition of

American exceptionalism and its discursive linkage to US policy reveals a paradox between the ideal of American uniqueness and singularity, and the practical requirement of greater engagement, and a less exposed, less hegemonic American role in world politics.

Leading from Behind in Libya

The military intervention in Libya saw the United States act in a way that corresponded to the reframing president Obama undertook in orienting the country's geopolitical identity. While still 'exceptionally' powerful and acting in defense of its 'unique' values, Obama's America did not seek the spotlight in directing a new campaign against yet another dictator in the Middle East. Rather, it sought to exercise its leadership role in a more limited fashion, and operate primarily through allies and partners. In arguing for America's involvement in Libya the president again linked American exceptionalism and American leadership:

To brush aside America's responsibility as a leader and — more profoundly — our responsibilities to our fellow human beings under such circumstances would have been a betrayal of who we are. Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different.⁶⁷

While its unique and superior military assets were providing the opening round of strikes against the Gaddafi regime, and the support of the United States was decisive in securing a vote sanctioning the intervention by the UN Security Council, the United States soon withdraw and let others, notably France and the United Kingdom take the

lead in operating militarily against Gaddafi. This new, more cooperative, and at the same time more limited and restrained approach would become famous as ‘leading from behind.’ The term is attributed to an unknown member of the Obama administration, and it found a wide media echo, in particular after it featured prominently in an article by the *New Yorker*.⁶⁸

The public and expert reaction to ‘leading from behind’ was so strong, because the term seemed to encapsulate a new geopolitical vision, a new way the United States exercised its power, and understood its hegemonic position in world politics. As Ryan Lizza, the author of the *New Yorker* article put it: “(...) at the heart of the idea of leading from behind is the empowerment of other actors to do your bidding (...).”⁶⁹ At the same time, the advisor who coined the phrase admitted: “It’s so at odds with the John Wayne expectation for what America is in the world.”⁷⁰

In his cover letter to the 2012 *Defense Strategic Guidance*, Obama would refer to the Libya campaign, and the ‘growing capabilities of allies and partners’ to illustrate his vision of ‘burden-sharing.’⁷¹ To Republicans however, ‘leading from behind’ represented further proof that Obama’s vision consisted of diminishing US power in the world, and to accept American decline.⁷² George Bush had formulated a vision of American exceptionalism as an unquestionable global leadership role of the US in an expansive agenda for global transformation through overwhelming military force in the Global War on Terror. Obama’s ‘leading from behind’ appeared as remarkable reformulation of American exceptionalism and US hegemony that incorporated the professed uniqueness of American power and values into a cooperative context of ‘limited engagement.’

Obama's policy of letting allies and partners do the military heavy-lifting on Libya was also the result of a new awareness in the United States concerning the cost of military intervention, in both blood and treasure. As the *Washington Post* wrote on March 4, 2014:

In Washington, among policymakers, the Afghan war is increasingly discussed with exasperation, like a curse. It is the type of warfare the United States must avoid at all cost, president Obama argued during his State of the Union address.⁷³

One of the primary concerns of the Obama administration was to avoid further military entanglements of the kind of the Iraq occupation and the counter-insurgency operations undertaken in Iraq and Afghanistan, which claimed the lives of thousands of American servicemen and -women and cost billions of US\$. Congressionally mandated sequestration, a policy move officially opposed by Obama, and its impact on defense spending would further limit the willingness and capabilities of the administration to undertake large-scale ground operations. As part of the Pentagon budget proposal for 2015, Chuck Hagel announced further cuts to the American Armed Forces, bringing the U.S. Army down to its 'smallest number of troops since before the Second World War,' as it was widely reported.⁷⁴ Instead, low-cost drone strikes and small-scale covert special operations would become the hallmark of counter-terrorism policy under Obama, demonstrating a new 'light footprint' approach of American hegemony.⁷⁵

On Libya, the discursive re-framing Obama applied to the world political role of the United States was matched to a new material reality of less exposed U.S. assets, and greater constraints on the use of military power, in order to save money. Was this

process primarily driven by a classical realist cost-benefit analysis? It is possible, however given the contextualization of American foreign and security policy, both before and after the Libya intervention, it seems more likely that Obama appropriated the argument of risk and cost to further augment a strategic course of limited engagement and restraint that he had advocated early on, long before the Pentagon entered its 'age of austerity,' and which continues to shape his policy choices. If US policy were exclusively driven by the impulse to save cost and minimize exposure however, Obama, despite some political risk both at home and abroad, could have simply ruled out military intervention. Such a realist 'off-shore' balancing approach however does not actually match Obama's vision of hegemony. Against Gaddafi America may have led from behind, but it did not stay home.

While probably not the sole drivers of U.S. policy under Obama then, both the technology of remote drone strikes, and an era of defense budget cuts fall in line with an America that seeks to reframe, but not relinquish its global leadership role. Viewed from a critical perspective, the practice of military intervention, and the technological and economic parameters of American power are not separate, non-discursive entities, but reinforce existing discourses that in turn provide the rationale for limited U.S. action, as for example over Syria. Obama has embraced rather than opposed these changes to America's military posture and national security, yet he failed to embed them in a convincing narrative about America's leadership role in the world.

Still, this approach of limited engagement seems remarkably realist, coming from a Democratic President. The actual sharing of responsibilities appears to be much less informed by traditional, liberal concepts of collective security arrangements, and more

in line with the idea of ‘coalitions of the willing,’ whose purpose is first and foremost to serve the interests of the United States, in this case for regional security and cost-saving.⁷⁶

In his liberal analysis of Obama’s foreign policy, Timothy Lynch alluded to this tension, when he characterized Obama as a liberal, closer to Reagan, who was in pursuit of a ‘minimalist strategy’ to remake the world.⁷⁷ The contradictory fusion of realist restraint and liberal engagement was well on display on Libya, where Obama directed a military campaign that seemed in equal parts focused on the promotion of American values, and the limitation of U.S. involvement. Neither applying liberal institutionalism, nor realism can then fully account for the conduct of the Libya intervention. It is precisely this contradictory fusion of competing foreign policy traditions in Obama’s definition of American exceptionalism that makes the exercise of American leadership under his presidency so controversial, and equally disappointing to humanitarian interventionists, neoconservative hawks and long-term critics of American primacy. However, as the Syria episode would demonstrate, any reframing of American exceptionalism and difference would still have to occur within the established geopolitical imagination of American leadership and could not successfully be brought in line with a political practice that would fail to document the exercise of US hegemony and military power.

American Exceptionalism and Syria: Team America no longer wants to be the World's Police

There seems to exist a general weariness in the United States about the country's global commitments, disillusionment with military interventions and their political outcomes, and a heightened awareness for the complexity of world politics in the 21st century. As one newspaper article headline put it: "Team America no longer wants to be the World's Police."⁷⁸ A much reported Pew research poll of 2014 found that 52% of Americans said the US should 'mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own' — the first time since 1964 than more than half the public held that view.⁷⁹

The president acknowledged this national fatigue, when he directly quoted from a veteran's letter addressed to him, during his nationally televised address on Syria in 2013: "This nation is sick and tired of war."⁸⁰ But while in this speech Obama reemphasized his focus to end America's wars, not to start new ones, and to focus on rebuilding the nation at home, he did invoke the image of American exceptionalism as a special responsibility for the United States to act when its unique values were violated, as with the gas attacks attributed to the Assad regime in Syria. On the other hand, the president went to great lengths to distinguish a possible military intervention in Syria from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, from the beginning ruling out the possibilities of ground invasion, regime change, or even a prolonged air campaign like in Kosovo, or Libya. This caveated, limited and cautious link between exceptionalism and US policy that Obama demonstrated in his speech was then effectively severed by the fact that he postponed seeking an authorization for military strikes from Congress, a vote he was

likely to have lost, and instead opted for a diplomatic solution in accordance with Russia. President Obama closed his remarks on Syria with the following:

America is not the world's policeman. Terrible things happen across the globe, and it is beyond our means to right every wrong. But when, with modest effort and risk, we can stop children from being gassed to death, [...], I believe we should act. That's what makes America different. That's what makes us exceptional. With humility, but with resolve, let us never lose sight of that essential truth.⁸¹

The image of American exceptionalism in Obama's speech implied a special responsibility of the United States to commit its outstanding military assets when its unique values were violated, however a policy that would demonstrate this exceptional responsibility failed to materialize. While president Obama has worked towards redefining American exceptionalism along the lines of engagement and multilateral cooperation, it remains an image that is fundamentally tied to an image of American leadership through military preeminence. On Libya, Obama could reconcile this tension, encapsulated in the phrase 'leading from behind.'⁸²

On Syria however, the president could not provide an image of determined leadership. The implied consequences for crossing the 'red lines' Obama set up, did not result in military action by the United States, and 'red lines' has become a symbol for the perceived weakness of the United States under Obama among conservative critics, foreign policy experts, and the media.⁸³ And even though a majority of Americans favored a diplomatic solution in Syria, the dominant impression was that Obama and the

United States had been diplomatically outmaneuvered by Putin.⁸⁴ A CBS/New York Times poll, released on 25 September 2013, revealed that just 37 percent approved of president Obama's handling of the Syrian crisis. His general approval ratings on foreign policy also dropped significantly over the course of the Syria episode.⁸⁵ This indicates that any redefinition of American exceptionalism in the context of current US foreign policy has its limits. As Kagan has remarked in the *Washington Post*, while according to polls Americans in general favor a focus on 'nation building at home' and 'leading from behind,' the geopolitical image of exceptionalism, leadership and indispensability has also been a source of national pride and self-confirmation: "To follow a leader to triumph inspires loyalty, gratitude and affection. Following a leader in retreat inspires no such emotions."⁸⁶ It seems that while the image of American exceptionalism can be instrumentalized to define a style of American leadership that shares responsibilities with others, rather than only relying on the United States to act as the 'indispensable nation', it cannot be reconciled with a perceived absence of leadership.

Ukraine and ISIS: American exceptionalism reconfirmed?

Recent US actions in response to the Russian annexation of Crimea and the advance of the ISIS terror organization in Iraq and Syria seem to suggest a reconfirmation of American exceptionalism and a more forceful American leadership role under Obama. In response to the Ukraine crisis Obama has pledged 1 billion US dollars for a military program of reinforcements in Europe, and about 500 American troops each have been sent to Poland and the three Baltic states on a rotational basis.⁸⁷ Against ISIS, the United States has forged an international coalition with Arab and European participation, and launched a military campaign of airstrikes and assistance to Kurdish

groups.⁸⁸ However, at closer examination both cases actually reveal the conflicted leadership role of the US under Obama that lacks a clear confirmation of American exceptionalism as geopolitical vision of hegemony and military supremacy.

On Ukraine for example, president Obama, although hailing a ‘unified response’ led by the United States has largely taken a backseat diplomatically, and let the German chancellor Angela Merkel act as main interlocutor of the West, who negotiated most frequently directly with Vladimir Putin.⁸⁹ Beyond economic sanctions Obama did also not seek an escalation of confrontation with Putin’s Russia; there was no suspension of the NATO-Russia act of 1997, nor was there substantial US shipments of armaments in support of Ukrainian forces fighting pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine. And as the White House declared, the reassurance of America’s Eastern European NATO allies would not ‘come at the expense of other defence priorities, such as our commitment to the Asia Pacific rebalance.’⁹⁰

On ISIS, Obama has categorically and repeatedly rule out the possibility for American ‘boots on the ground.’⁹¹ The US military strategy against the Islamist fighters has so far been limited to air strikes, and weapons shipments and training for the Iraqi army, and Kurdish fighters in Iraq and Syria. In the speech announcing the new campaign against ISIS, Obama again reiterated the belief in American exceptionalism and the resulting claim to world leadership:

America, our endless blessings bestow an enduring burden. But as Americans, we welcome our responsibility to lead. From Europe to Asia, from the far reaches of Africa to war-torn capitals of the Middle East, we stand for freedom,

for justice, for dignity. These are values that have guided our nation since its founding.⁹²

At the same time, Obama would demonstrate the discursive link of American exceptionalism and a grand strategy of cooperative engagement, which positioned the leadership role of the United States in a way that stressed both its global commitment, and its greater military restraint and reliance on others:

“(...) this is not our fight alone. American power can make a decisive difference, but we cannot do for Iraqis what they must do for themselves, nor can we take the place of Arab partners in securing their region.”⁹³

As with the Libya intervention, it seems that Obama’s stand is in equal parts motivated by limiting American involvement and by fighting ISIS and promoting US security interests. America’s actions then are not the product of a coherent ‘strategy,’ one which Obama at first admitted he did not even have, but testament to an unresolved tension of having to promote America’s ‘unique’ liberal values through limited means. The geopolitical vision of American leadership Obama presents, and that he frequently connects to the uniqueness and superiority of the United States materializes in a policy course that acknowledges the limits of US power, rather than the exceptional potential to remake the world in America’s image.

Conclusion

Obama's skepticism about the efficacy and desirability of military interventions and regime change, his emphasis on 'nation-building at home', the now famous 'leading from behind' approach of his administration in the Libya intervention of 2011, and the president's own statements on the subject, all raise the question, if American exceptionalism functions as a key ideological concept that underlies a 'missionary' US foreign and security policy and expansive, imperial agenda. At the same time, the use of exceptionalist rhetoric in the Syria episode, or the military intervention against ISIS do not suggest that the United States has entered a phase of neo-isolationism, or that the president is trying to redefine the country's exceptional identity towards a passive 21st century version of the 'shining city upon a hill.'

President Obama does not associate 'American exceptionalism,' the belief in the distinctiveness and singularity of the United States with a vision of unilateral military primacy, global interventionism and unipolar hegemony, as Putin implied. This hegemonic, exceptionalist vision however is still very much en vogue with large parts of the Republican Party and influential neoconservatives, as the Romney presidential campaign has demonstrated. There is an unbroken belief in the establishment of the Republican Party in the 'missionary' strand of American exceptionalism and the prospect of yet another American century. As the Romney-Obama debate demonstrated however, the political meaning of American exceptionalism is not limited to an exchange of missionary versus exemplary exceptionalism, between the crusading superpower and the 'shining city upon a hill' that seeks to merely illuminate the world. Instead, American exceptionalism acquires its meaning in contemporary geopolitics as

an expression of the hegemonic imagination of the United States that fuses the superiority of material power with the uniqueness of identity.

Investigating American exceptionalism in the context of a dominant geopolitical vision of American leadership reveals how this key concept of identity construction is bound up with the practice of US foreign and security policy and the discourse of the country's grand strategy. Rather than engaging in debates about American separation and uniqueness that only serve to reproduce the discursive trap of exceptionalism, it is the question how the United States uses the geopolitical imagination of American exceptionalism in defining its leadership role that makes the concept a phenomenon of political significance. Such an understanding could prove a fruitful reconceptualization for critical investigations into a subject that has become something of a cliché in the literature, and renew the interest in the explanatory value of American exceptionalism beyond a reproduction of its Puritan-republican genealogy and repetitive debates of isolationism versus primacy.

Further research should be undertaken to contextualize Obama's post-American definition of American exceptionalism with previous US presidents and their definition of American world leadership. Jimmy Carter's 'malaise speech,' George H. Bush's problem with the 'vision thing,' and Bill Clinton's liberal vision of globalization and engagement all produced various charges against a lack of leadership and the failure to formulate grand strategy. Comparing Obama's stand to past presidents would further serve to probe the validity of the primacy vs. isolationism narrative in the analysis of American exceptionalism, and to examine the uniqueness of his post-American approach. Looking forward, it will be fascinating to observe if the next president of the

United States, be it Republican or Democrat, will continue on the trajectory Obama has set, or if there will be a reconfirmation of American exceptionalism and primacy in rejection of Obama, similar to Obama's rejection of George W. Bush. This will also help to determine if Obama's vision of America's role in the world was primarily a matter of personal conviction, as charged by his Republican critics, or what seems more likely, a reflection of a broader shift in geopolitical trends that will continue to inform US policy in the future.

Obama's geopolitical vision does not mean that the United States has forsaken its claim to American leadership in world politics altogether, or that it no longer employs the tools of American primacy. The escalation of American drone strikes in the Middle East, and the latest attacks on ISIS have demonstrated how Obama's reformulation of American leadership is centrally concerned with minimizing the risk of American military losses and managing costs, while the US still operates in a global context of power projection capability and national security interests. Obama's America clearly has not undertaken a fundamental shift towards either a vision of cooperative security, or even isolationism.

The original non-intervention on Syria has also illustrated that the identity of America as an exceptional leader in world politics and policies that counteract this identity cannot be bridged indefinitely within the existing paradigm of geopolitical identity. This conflict between the hegemonic imagination of American leadership and the practice of cooperative engagement and military restraint under Obama raises the question about the limits of reframing American exceptionalism, and the potential future breaking point of the existing hegemony discourse. The real question then seems to be, not if the

United States embraces an exemplary or missionary exceptionalism, but if the president's geopolitical vision of American leadership can match the future expectations about American exceptionalism, both at home and abroad.

President Obama uses the image of American exceptionalism and hegemony to advance policies actually designed to lessen the burden of American leadership, thus inverting the conventional linkage of exceptionalist rhetoric and hegemonic practices expressed through foreign interventionism and the use of military force. Discounting its Republican critics, this approach of 'leading from behind' and Obama's vision of cooperative engagement have found tacit popular support. Yet, Obama's vision also contains a fundamental, unresolved conflict between the idea of American uniqueness and global responsibility and a policy course that stresses the limits rather than the strengths of American power and engagement. Instead of formulating American exceptionalism as a geopolitical vision of global unipolar primacy, Obama employs the concept to reassure Americans of their country's continued greatness and importance, while he at the same time attempts to bring American leadership closer in line with an increasingly multipolar world order. This is the peculiar and paradoxical character of post-American exceptionalism under president Obama.

NOTES

¹ Vladimir Putin, 'A Plea for Caution From Russia,' *New York Times*, September 12, 2013, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/putin-plea-for-caution-from-russia-on-syria.html?_r=0>.

² Gerard Toal, "In No Other Country on Earth": The Presidential Campaign of Barack Obama,' *Geopolitics* 14/2 (2009) pp. 376-401.

³ Nayak and Malone have described that in the fields of History, IR, American Studies, and American Politics, there is agreement on the 'essence' of American exceptionalism as: "an unwavering belief in the uniqueness of the United States and a commitment to a providential mission to transform the rest of the world in the image of the United States." Meghana V. Nayak and Christopher Malone, "American Orientalism and American Exceptionalism: A Critical Rethinking of US Hegemony," *International Studies Review* 11 (2009), p. 260.

⁴ Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).

⁵ Nayak and Malone (note 3) p. 260; p. 271.

⁶ Cf., Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996); Deborah Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998); Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).

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⁸ Ceaser (note 7) p. 8.

⁹ Toal (note 2) p. 379.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 381.

¹¹ Nayak and Malone (note 3) p. 271.

¹² McCrisken (note 7) p. 2.

¹³ Cf., Ceaser (note 7) pp. 13-21; Nayak and Malone (note 3) p. 260.

¹⁴ McCrisken (note 7) p. 4.

¹⁵ Jef Huysman, 'Security! What Do You Mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier,' *European Journal of International Relations* 4/2 (1998) pp. 226-255.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 231.

¹⁷ Cf., Niall Ferguson, *Colossus. The Rise and Fall of the American Empire.* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005); Ronald Reagan, Farewell Address to the Nation, January 11, 1989, available at <<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1989/011189i.htm>>; Charles Krauthammer, 'The Unipolar Moment', *Foreign Affairs* 70/1 (1990/1991): pp. 23-33.

¹⁸ McCrisken (note 7) p. 2.

¹⁹ Geraóid Ó Tuathail and John Agnew, 'Geopolitics and Discourse. Practical geopolitical reasoning in American foreign policy,' *Political Geography* 11/2 (1992): 190-204, 195.

²⁰ Geraóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Simon Dalby and Gearóid Ó Tuathail, "Introduction: Rethinking Geopolitics," in *Rethinking Geopolitics* eds. Simon Dalby and Gearóid Ó Tuathail (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 5-7; Ó Tuathail and Agnew (note 5), pp. 195-196.

²¹ As Peoples and Vaughan-Williams have commented in their analysis of Foucault: "In a general sense, 'discourse' is the context within which regimes of truth come to be. (...) in Foucauldian terms, discourse is understood as series of practices, representations, and interpretations through which different regimes of truth [...] are (re)produced."

Columba Peoples and Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Critical Security Studies: An Introduction* (Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 65.

²² Cf., National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds* (Washington DC: NIC, 2012); U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington DC: DoD, 2010), p. 57.

²³ Cf., Neil Renwick, *America's World Identity* (New York: St. Martin's Press 2000) p. 202.

²⁴ Cf., Madsen (note 6); Lipset (note 6); Robert R. Tomes, 'American Exceptionalism in the Twenty-First Century,' *Survival* 56/1 (2014) pp. 27-50. Agnew provides an insightful critical analysis of this historicism in the political geography of American exceptionalism and contrasts it with a world political economy perspective, see John Agnew, 'An excess of 'national exceptionalism': towards a new political geography of American foreign policy,' *Political Geography Quarterly* 2/2 (1983) pp. 151-166.

²⁵ Fabian Hilfrich, *Debating American Exceptionalism* (New York: Saint Martin's Press 2012) p. 78.

²⁶ Cf., Barry R. Posen, 'Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony,' in Paul J. Bolt, Damon V. Coletta, and Collins G. Shackelford Jr. (eds.), *American Defense Policy* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press 2005) pp. 248-268.

²⁷ Stephen Brooks, *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Obama* (New York: Routledge 2013) p. 82.

²⁸ Simon Dalby, 'Geopolitics, the revolution in military affairs and the Bush doctrine,' *International Politics* 46/2-3 (2009) pp. 234-252, p. 234.

²⁹ See Robert Kagan, *The World America Made* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 2012). President Obama apparently based some of his remarks in his 2012 State of the Union Address, where he spoke out against American decline, directly on Kagan's argument for continued US leadership in a liberal world order that is anchored in American power and values, see Daniel Halper, 'What Obama's reading,' *The Weekly Standard*, January 27, 2012, available at <<http://www.weeklystandard.com/keyword/Robert-Kagan>>; see also Sevasti-Eleni Vezirgiannidou, 'The United States and rising powers in a post-hegemonic global order,' *International Affairs* 89/3 (2013) pp. 635-651, p. 637.

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³² In this context see in particular, Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars* (New York: PublicAffairs 2008).

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³⁴ Bill Clinton, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* (Washington DC: The White House 1995) p. i.

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