



EXCEPTIONALISM AND RULES-BASED ORDER: FROM BIDEN TO TRUMP

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American exceptionalism

“The New World” set itself apart from the very beginning. “We shall be a city upon a hill – the eyes of all people are upon us,” said John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The year was 1630. In due course, the message was adopted by the new American state as “the shining city on a hill,” a beacon of hope, freedom, and moral integrity and a shining example for others to follow. This exceptionalism has been a distinguishing part of the American self-image up to our time (Wertheim 2017).

Generally understood, exceptionalism means that an individual, a society, an institution, or a movement is unusual or extraordinary, different from others. America was different. Especially after World War II, when the USA emerged as the largest and strongest nation by far, it was obvious for everybody to see. The new international order was unthinkable without American leadership. The USA was the indispensable one.

But American exceptionalism goes deeper than that. The USA is exceptional for what it *is*, not for the missions it undertakes. It is the constitution, the institutions, the values and the ideals that make up the essence of the exceptionalist mindset. This is what has set the country apart – in its own eyes. The fundamental narrative is philosophical, not political. It has survived the test of time, while the politics that spring from it have changed over the years (Restad).

The elite has defended this image by disciplining itself and not admitting or apologizing for what others have seen as crimes and breaches of good ethical conduct. “I will never apologize for the United States,” said presidential candidate George Bush after the USA shot down an Iranian passenger plane in 1988, killing all 270 on board, adding “I don’t care what the facts are” (The New Yorker). In 2013, Samantha Power assured the Senate of the same when she was being cleared as UN ambassador. Cross-examined by Marco Rubio, she also had nothing to apologize for on behalf of the USA—she couldn’t think of anything—and re-confirmed that “the country is a light to the world” (Chomsky and Robinson, p.14).

Strict discipline has cemented the notion of the USA as something unique, elevated above others. But there have been some strong deviating voices, too: in academic circles and in the media, self-critical analyses have gone further than in many European countries.

Before World War II, the perception of excellence made Americans distance themselves from the old world’s corruption and colonial entanglements. After the War, it was used to legitimize their own wars and interventions in other countries’ internal affairs. The belief in their own moral superiority was always there, convincing the rulers— but not always the ruled—that the USA had to lead the world by setting a good example and by using force if necessary.

The USA has never been isolationist. The good example has not been so evident either. The westward expansion was a colonial project, and the expansion from 13 colonies to controlling an entire continent did not happen peacefully. Despite this, the concept of isolationism still figures in American debate (Restad), and the good example got a follow-up in the notion of “soft power”—getting others to want what you want—which American leaders and intellectuals have used and refined in recent decades (Nye). Soft power is an instrumental relative of exceptionalism.

At the beginning of this century, when Russia was down, China was “biding its time”, and the USA was sole king on the hill, exceptionalism showed one of its rudest faces. When the US attacked Iraq in 2003, it redefined the right to use force to include preventive attacks, contrary to international law (Ackerman). The White House also rejected the Rome Statutes, which the International Criminal Court (ICC) is based on, stressing that no American citizen must be brought before such a court. Just before the showed war started, Congress passed a law authorizing all necessary means to free Americans that the court might detain.

Ethics and ideals aside, the special position rests on economic and military coercive power. Economic coercion is based on the dollar’s status as a reserve currency, the size of the American market, and the control over the international financial system. The latter dates back to the early 1970s when the USA broke with the gold standard. This unique position has been “weaponized” in the form of economic sanctions, which has become a big industry in the USA.

The military power is unmatched. The American defence budget is still three times larger than China's and more than two times larger than that of Russia and China combined. As a global military power, the USA is in a class of its own with 750 bases and support facilities around the world.

The liberal international order

The liberal international order that emerged after World War II, based on the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions—the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and what is now called the World Trade Organization (WTO)—was founded on human rights, democracy and market economy. Over time, more rules and institutions were added, based on liberal values and international law.

The USA was a driving force behind this order, and the Western European countries supported it. Those who accepted the Marshall Plan and aligned with the Americans were treated well. They clearly benefited from it and so did the USA. Accounting for 50 percent of the world economy and 6.3 percent of the world's population, it needed larger markets. Common interests grew. Europeans sought US protection, and the USA enlisted them in its fight against Soviet communism. Geir Lundestad called it “empire by invitation” (Lundestad).

Regimes and governments that opposed the USA lived dangerously. The list of US interference in other countries' domestic affairs is long. The decisive factor was whether the others were with them or against them, not what kind of governance they had. Authoritarian regimes that cooperated with the USA were accepted for what counted, i.e., being partners. In this respect, the USA was similar to other great powers. The difference was that the USA was more powerful. American interventions were more numerous and consequential.

But the USA stuck to its liberal profile. It was not politically correct to criticize a failed operation for breaches of international law and good ethics, and collaborating elites in other regions joined in, in a mix of military and economic dependence and political “bandwagon” effects. Criticism was limited to strategy and implementation, to charges that actions had been poorly planned or inadequately conducted. Thus, official USA held on to the fundamental narrative of its own exceptionalism. However, as international law expanded and the spotlight on US transgressions grew stronger, this became more challenging.

A rules-based order

When Trump became president in 2017, he departed from exceptionalism. One could see the outlines of something radically new, but they did not solidify. The period was too chaotic for that and the administration too dysfunctional. Instead, Biden picked up the thread from liberal internationalism, this time in a diluted form under the term “a rules-based order” (RBO).

When Biden spoke of RBO, it evoked associations with international law and liberal international order. The EU also referred to RBO in joint statements with the USA. The language was often too vague to be binding, but useful for concealing behaviour that violated international law. At times, RBO was linked to stability in international relations and used as a lever in the rivalry with other big powers. But with the exception of the UK, which typically followed the USA, most European countries still emphasized that international relations must be based on international law and marked this on various occasions (Dugard). So, what does the term “rules-based” mean?

The Biden administration described RBO as an order based on the same values as international law—primarily human rights and democracy—but omitted, on occasion, references to the legal documents that define what the obligations specifically entail and what mechanisms that were meant to ensure compliance with them. This opened a space where the rules of international law could be twisted and adapted to one's own preferences, and where double standards could emerge (Dugard).

In other words, RBO became an order that includes international law the way the USA applies it, i.e., in a way that aligns with its national interests. When the superpower behaves in this manner, it becomes easier for other big powers to do the same. Having acquired great power, it is tempting to stretch the boundaries of its use and legitimize what one sees fit to do. An important difference was that the USA tried to establish RBO as the new international standard while the others continued to refer to existing international law. When the latter deviated from the law, they did not try to rub the existing legal rules. They did not tamper with them as the USA has done.

Several factors explain why the USA tried to establish RBO. For example, the USA cannot criticize China's behaviour in the South China Sea by referring to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, for they have not signed it themselves. The same applies to many agreements in the field of humanitarian law: the International Criminal Court, the protocols to the Geneva Conventions on the laws of war from 1977, the landmine convention and the cluster munitions convention are on that list. The totality of missing ratifications, reinterpretations, and breaches of international law has grown so much that to explain and defend all of it became an overwhelming task. Better, then, to take evasive action and blur the gap between liberal aspirations and international legal records.

Kosovo, Iraq, Libya and the drone wars

The Kosovo, Iraq, Libya, and drone wars were justified as necessary preventive attacks. The USA also reserves the right to first use of nuclear weapons. American military documents claim that the plans for use of such weapons are in accordance with international law, while an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) states that it is difficult to imagine a use that does not violate international humanitarian law (ICJ). At Guantánamo, the rules for treatment of prisoners have been set aside (Amnesty International).

After vetoing a ceasefire in Gaza three times, the USA abstained from voting on S. Res. 2728 of March 25, 2024, which also demanded a ceasefire. Thus, the resolution passed – whereupon the White House claimed that it was not binding. It also said that recipients of American weapons must respect humanitarian law, but they had not seen any violation of it in Gaza (Ackerman). The law is not so important when you judge yourself.

Under RBO, the USA has claimed rules that do not exist. But those rules never achieved a status that enabled an international court to judge by them. The rules were too unclear for that (Dugard). Had RBO represented a distinct alternative set of rules, it could have been seen as an attempt to stretch existing international law in a new direction—international law is constantly evolving—but instead, RBO was used to obfuscate to make it easier to live with deviations from existing law.

Ukraine and Gaza

Two wars at the same time are not uncommon. This has happened many times since 1945. Well known examples are the Suez War and the invasion of Hungary in 1956; China against Vietnam and the Soviet Union against Afghanistan in 1979; the Kosovo and Kashmir wars in 1999; and today the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. The latter absorb the public attention. Other wars that do not involve any of the great powers—mainly African—are only noted in passing.

The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East have different roots. They are fought on different arenas and in very different ways. In both cases, the conflicts built up over many years, but those who took up arms to change the status quo—Russia and Hamas—prepared independently of each other. The one had no overview of what the other was doing. When simultaneous, separate wars compete for attention, inconsistent resort to legal and normative arguments are easily discovered and documented.

In Ukraine, international law is unequivocally on Ukraine's side. Russia has violated all international law: the UN Charter (1945), the Helsinki Final Act (1975), and the 1994 agreement that guarantees Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Nevertheless, the USA preferred to criticize Russia for violations of RBO without reference to legal sources. The goal was to establish RBO.

In the Middle East, the Biden administration was determined to exempt certain states, *in casu* Israel, from violations of international law. When the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for Benjamin Netanyahu, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, and Hamas leader Muhammad Deif, the USA characterized it as outrageous. Trump follow up with punitive measures (freezing of bank accounts, travel restrictions) against the court's staff and their families.

It is not a bold assumption that war crimes and crimes against humanity have been committed in both Ukraine and Gaza. South Africa has, furthermore, reported Israel to the ICC for genocide in Gaza. The USA has been eager to condemn the Russians and protect the Israelis. The double standards are so blatant that no application of RBO can conceal them.

RBO, the Helsinki Final Act, and the condemnation of authoritarian regimes

Biden also used RBO as a platform to condemn non-democratic regimes that did not cooperate with the USA. Countries not on the platform were condemned, isolated, and in many cases sanctioned for being authoritarian. Which they usually were, in some form.

In the Middle East, Israel is the only democracy and is supported on that basis (Economist Democracy Index). The others are treated depending on who is friend and foe. Partner countries like Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council are criticized to the extent that national interests are not at risk of being affected by countermeasures, while Iran is fair game.

The sanctions tell this story clearly. Trump imposed massive sanctions on Iran in 2018 and Biden added more, but none are directed at US partners in the region. China is sanctioned, but not Vietnam, etc. If sanctions pressure is juxtaposed to positions on the Economist's democracy index, the lack of consistency is striking.

Human rights are enshrined in the UN Charter, but the Charter says nothing about forms of government. The Helsinki Final Act, endorsed by all European states (including the USA) in 1975 tried to combine them, committing the signatories to respect each other's social, economic, and political systems while opening up for the promotion of human rights. Helsinki committees were established in many countries.

Today, this distinction has been erased. In Western ideological warfare, violations of human rights and authoritarian governance merge to become practically the same thing. This is for good reason as many rights are incompatible with authoritarian regimes. The fundamentally important freedom of expression not least.

But one possibility is lost: that an authoritarian system can be legitimate in its own population and develop greater respect for human rights over time. We all come from somewhere, and those stories are very different for different countries and regions. Human rights are universal, but our own democratic form of government is not necessarily a good benchmark for everyone else. The Western world has itself become a patchwork in this regard. Many states feel unfairly treated and humiliated when condemned for not being or becoming like Western countries. The recipe from Helsinki is far better.

In Western countries, there is high internal conformity pressure and strong condemnation of "others". Both conditions are driven by the war in Ukraine and the rivalry between the USA and China. Western societies are in combat mode to defend themselves and strike back against opponents who are seen to threaten them, and this has a restraining effect on public debate at home. In a book from 2009 on the geopolitics of emotions, Dominic Moisi describes the fear that prevails in the West, the humiliation that ravages the Middle East, and the hope that characterizes much of Asia (Moisi). These feelings have been amplified since then.

Status at the end of the road

Liberal internationalism was based not only on international law and liberal values but also on trade policy, preferably free trade; a financial system that worked well for many; and international institutions for the common good. RBO was a shaky successor to a liberal international order that "the indispensable" had managed for 75 years, in the name of exceptionalism. What is the status at the end of the road?

The USA has become protectionist – this applies to both political parties. Trade policy is characterized by tariffs and sanctions. BRICS is committed to free trade, and the EU has strong interests in the same, but the geopolitical rivalry between the USA and China casts a shadow over the free trade interests of European countries as well. The idea that economic cooperation is exploited for security reasons nurtures uncertainty and suspicion and casts a poisonous shadow over it.

Control of the financial system has been turned into a foreign policy weapon in the form of economic sanctions. Allies in Europe and Asia may be forced to comply through "secondary sanctions" (Ruys and Ryngaert). The US economy is no longer uniquely large and the dollar is not what it used to be—at the turn of the millennium, it accounted for 71 percent of the world's currency reserves compared to 58 percent now— but control of the financial system continues. The UN Charter legitimizes collective sanctions, but not unilateral ones. Unilateral and secondary sanctions are authorized neither by the UN Charter nor by the WTO.

The use of the special financial position is perceived as abuse by those it affects. Many countries have therefore called for an arrangement that benefits many and not just one. The sanctions against Russia after the invasion of Ukraine stimulated their efforts. BRICS has long urged others to use national currencies in their trade deals. For instance, ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations)—a large trading bloc with 11 members and a total of 600 million people—has developed plans for that. Others resort to barter agreements and experiment with cryptocurrencies to reduce their dependence on the dollar. China wants Saudi Arabia to enter the Shanghai oil exchange, which may hit the dollar seriously, but this remains in waiting.

Moves in this direction are likely to proceed because Western sanctions stimulate it and because the countries going for change are gaining in economic and political strength relative to the West. Currently, BRICS countries' GDP is growing by around 5 percent per year, while that of the USA and allied countries in Europe and Asia is growing by about 2 percent.

What happened to the institutions? While the Bretton Woods system ended 50 years ago when the USA abandoned the gold standard, the Bretton Woods institutions continue to exist. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund remain important, but the USA and others have been loath to yield to ongoing power shifts. In the World Bank, the US voting weight is still many times that of China and in both institutions, the USA can block proposals they do not like.

The World Trade Organization (WTO) has been sidelined. The dispute resolution mechanism is paralyzed for lack of new members in the organization's appellate body. Proposals for new judges, which could have given the organization a fresh start, have been blocked by the Americans. The entire organization suffers from this.

For Western countries, democracy is important as far as national governance is concerned, but not when it comes to global governance. There, they fight against democratic reforms. For BRICS and the global south, it is the opposite. For them, national governance is a non-issue—all adhere to the principle of non-interference in internal affairs and governments protect themselves behind it—while international rules and institutions are welcomed to promote cooperation between sovereign states, in a way that reflects their size.

BRICS and the 27 other countries that met in Russia in 2024 are working for a multipolar world, not a new world order to replace the Western one. For now, they do not have the power to do so – even if they wanted to. Among the major players, India best reflects the centre of gravity in BRICS. India supports all the key priorities and does not align itself with any side in the ongoing power struggle between the great powers. Its status and ambition as a sovereign and independent great power fit hand in glove with BRICS.

From Biden to Trump: From international order to great power politics

The transition from Biden to Trump is dramatic. Some people console themselves with the thought that it will settle down, for in his first presidential period he barked loudly but did not bite as hard when push came to shove. However, it is different this time.

Trump's opinions and instincts have not changed, but his political mandate and preparations have. Where he was previously surrounded by people who might restrain him, he is now recruiting like-minded individuals and loyalists who will help him "drain the swamp," i.e., oust the old guard and trim the state apparatus. The election gave him a mandate for this. It will lead to radical political upheavals.

In Donald Trump's vocabulary, there is nothing that resembles a new world order. There will be no more references to a rules-based order with the USA in the leading role. RBO was the last gasp of that mindset, a semantic-political exercise to save the skin of a liberal internationalism that was on its way out.

Trump also abandons the underlying exceptionalism. He rejects the moral and ideal self-image that the USA has cultivated for so long. His narrative resembles the realist reading of international politics, where states promote their interests as best they can in an anarchic world where alliances are shifting and the strongest wins. It also resembles geopolitical thinking, which is stripped of everything related to law and morality. But Trump dislikes alliances, which are important in the calculations of realists and geopoliticians, being more interested in pragmatic transactional politics.

Trump's logic is that of a great power, without reference to norms and rules applying to many others. In that sense, the USA will be like other great powers. The USA has been exploited by others and has declined, but under his leadership it will rise again and become richer and more powerful than ever before. The white, Christian cultural heritage will be treasured, and the USA will become the most successful country on the planet, for all to see and admire. Exceptionalism therefore continues as a political ambition and program, but the historical understanding of it as a timeless characteristic of the USA—as something the USA *is*—is gone. So, superiority must constantly be renewed.

War and peace in Trump's world

To make America great again, the relationship with the outside world must become less burdensome. Henceforth, allies and partners will be as valuable as they pay for American protection and as they buy American goods.

The answer is not that the famous two percent should become five – but perhaps that too. Trump actually calculates in another way, based on what it costs to keep American forces in other countries and continents. Europeans have a strong enough economy to pay what the American presence costs—if that is what they want—and if not, the USA can withdraw the forces. Thus, the USA goes into the black in any case. Similarly in Asia. In the final analysis, allies—primarily Japan, South Korea, and Australia—should pay for the Pacific Fleet and the nuclear umbrella, or the USA can withdraw the security guarantee and save on it (Ackerman).

His eagerness to end the wars in which the USA is involved springs from the same thinking. Wars cost, and to the extent that it succeeds in stopping them, it also gives political and personal feathers in the cap. In Ukraine, a ceasefire and peace agreement will be of the geopolitical kind: it will be about alignment of national interests.

In the Middle East, both Obama and Trump tried to cut the losses to focus on Asia, but something always got in the way. Trump has the same ambition now. The experiences of this century are unequivocal: where strong regional forces oppose, there is little external powers can achieve. The USA can occupy, bomb and win on the battlefield, but it has not been able to convert military-technological superiority into lasting political gain. This has been duly noted by more than Trump, but no one has managed to translate the lesson into successful, practical policy.

For the same reason, he will avoid involvement in new wars. In his first term, it was tough when Iran's legendary Qassem Suleimani was killed on Washington's orders, and Tehran responded by disabling a major Saudi oil facility for weeks. However, when it became clear that the crisis would pass without further escalation, he was visibly relieved. He had unusually kind words to say about Iran on that occasion. In the Middle East, such incidents can get out of control for all sorts of reasons, so foresight and crisis management skills are needed. However, the Trump team has limited diplomatic experience and is not known for flexibility and finesse.

None of this means that the Trump administration will deprioritize military power. On the contrary, Trump's first term showed that he is determined to stay militarily superior, as any serious presidential candidate must promise, but Trump may be even keener to ensure. Military superiority is important for deterrence and to remind the world that the USA is the strongest among the strong. States are known to adapt to power dynamics and tend—consciously or unconsciously—to comply with the strongest. Military strength can also be used for threats and blackmail. Karl Marx wrote that the most effective power is the structural one that works without being used. Trump probably agrees.

Economic coercion

Trump will use economic means of influence and coercion as best he can. In his first term, he made record use of the sanctions, and in the name of protectionism he is announcing tariffs against friends as well as foes – this time too. He is zero-sum oriented: The idea that everyone can lose from protectionist measures and win from cooperation is alien to him.

He will certainly do his utmost to maintain control of the financial system, as have all previous presidents. He has already threatened BRICS with a 100 percent tariff if they “try to create their own reserve currency or support another currency that could undermine the dollar” (Shakil, Reuters). Saudi Arabia is important in this context. In 1974, President Nixon sent his national security advisor Henry Kissinger to Riyadh to negotiate an agreement where the Saudis continued to conduct their oil deals in dollars in exchange for the USA guaranteeing the Saudi regime’s security – and it happened. In 2017, Trump’s first visit abroad went to Riyadh and he may do the same now, for in the meantime, Saudi Arabia has grown but more important.

The litmus test: domestic success

In dealing with Trump, Western leaders will be more accommodating than they were eight years ago. Not because they have become more friendly, but because they have more to gain from a good personal relationship with him.

Trump dislikes multilateral forums. NATO is a cardinal issue in that context: transatlantic security cooperation is at play and the outcome is wide-open. Drawing on a strong political mandate at home; on superior military force, but not on application of it on the battlefield; on bilateral agreements convenient for threats and blackmail; and on unpredictability generating nervousness and anxiety, he may go far. He appears unafraid of others, rude in his manners and loath of being stopped by law, ethics and customs. Altogether, it creates an awe that may be turned into a winning cocktail.

In Trump’s mind, the USA should become a showcase for the rest of the world to admire. His presidency is centred on domestic affairs. Not so unlike Ronald Reagan: he was credited for having restored America’s belief in its own vitality, and if you believe in the future, it becomes attractive to invest in it. Foreign policy is meant to contribute to this.

Biden said he would bridge the domestic political divides for the benefit of all but was nowhere near achieving it. Trump’s project may have equally poor odds, as he is himself a controversial and polarizing political figure of sorts.

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