

Research Article

En Route from American Exceptionalism to Institutional Hegemony: A Theoretical Study with a Neoclassical Realistic Approach

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Abstract

This paper explores how American Exceptionalism has influenced U.S. grand strategy in maintaining its institutional hegemony. It presumes that, since World War II, the U.S. has led a global order founded on multilateral agreements, liberal values, and international institutions, sustained by its tradition of exceptionalism. The study examines how this ideology has shaped U.S. strategic culture and policy-making, reinforcing its dominance across economic, political, security, military, and institutional arenas worldwide. This paper utilizes a neoclassical realist framework to analyze the interplay between global systemic forces and domestic influences in shaping U.S. grand strategy and its institutional hegemony. By synthesizing various hegemonic theories, including realist hegemonic stability theory, liberal institutionalism, and Gramscian cultural perspectives, the study introduces the concept of "Institutional Hegemonic Resilience," emphasizing on the United States' capacity to adapt and sustain its leadership within an increasingly dynamic global landscape. The paper highlights the profound and enduring influence of the ideational features of American Exceptionalism on U.S. foreign policy, demonstrating how this ideological framework has shaped the nation's strategic approach to maintaining its dominance across economic, political, military, and institutional dimensions. The synthesis of theories on hegemony, brings out the power elements in hegemonic dynamics (as in the Hegemonic Stability theory), the ideational importance of socio-political traditions such as the notion of American Exceptionalism (the Neo-Gramscian perspective) and the vitality of international institutions and the resilience they offer (as in Liberal Institutionalism). The analysis underscores the central role of American Exceptionalism in preserving U.S. hegemonic leadership, illustrating how it enables the United States to effectively navigate shifting international dynamics while reinforcing its global preeminence.

Keywords

American Exceptionalism, Institutional Hegemony, Neoclassical Realism

1. Introduction

1.1. A Study of Concepts

This paper intends to identify how the notion of American Exceptionalism and its different narratives have played a key

role in the strategic culture of America, thus shaping its grand strategies throughout time to create an economic, political, security, military and institutional hegemonic dominance in the world arena. The essential question here is that, how does

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the ideology of American Exceptionalism effect and play out in the US Grand Strategy for maintaining and furthering its Institutional Hegemony? To answer this question, a theoretical analysis of the concept of hegemony and institutional hegemony has been applied. To do so, a theoretical perspective towards the subject in study was inevitable; therefore, through a brief comparison with competing theories, the umbrella of realism – and to be more precise – Neo-Classical Realism was chosen for this research. In addition, based on the assumptions made, three main conceptual foundations of this research—American Exceptionalism, Grand Strategy, and (Institutional) Hegemony—were identified to help the classification and process of the research. The research modality was based on the three principal dimensions of roots, means, and ends, as a simplistic setting for the aforementioned conceptual indicators of all three facets.

In this respect, a thorough definition of key concepts and terms is provided. The concept of American Exceptionalism, as a central ideological tradition, will be examined from multiple perspectives, including some that may appear contradictory. Key indicators were derived from this notion to facilitate its analysis across diverse contexts. The concept of Grand Strategy will then be defined from various perspectives related to the respective schools of thought. This notion will narrow down to the US account; thus, the strategic culture of this state is studied with full consideration of American Exceptionalism and its vital role in that culture. Finally, the concept of hegemony is analyzed from the perspective of related theories. The contribution of hegemonic theories in American strategic culture and the importance of institutional hegemony in the liberal world order, mainly established by the US and its like-minded states, will be touched upon.

Neoclassical Realism illustrates how domestic factors such as culture, ideas, and identity—embodied in American Exceptionalism—have significantly influenced the United States' formulation of national interests and grand strategy. This influence contributed to the creation of a hegemonic, institution-based order led by major powers, particularly in the aftermath of the World Wars and the rise of the United States.

To begin with, all ideas on American Exceptionalism (as the roots), the norms of this concept, the missions, the cultural identity aspects, and civilization borrowing its spirit from the notion are one side of this tridimensional template. For this purpose, a review of the notion, its indicators, and the spectrum of narration are defined.

The “Means” are the mediums which take the ideas of the exceptionality and compose a grand strategy derived from the ideological and domestic components of American Exceptionalism, as neo-classical realism would take into account. Grand strategy defines the overall, underlying approach, attitude, guidelines, and policies at the macro level, embedded in a certain worldview or theoretical opinion, aimed at a specific purpose that provides a state with its ultimate goal to achieve, be it the Institutional Hegemony of the United States

in the global arena. The American strategic culture is examined in light of American Exceptionalism.

Institutional hegemony plays the role of “Ends” in this matrix, which has been defined as the predominance practiced in order to preserve the current “World Order” and maintain its own position as the hegemon, through the channel of institutionalizing, thus legitimizing its power. This is achieved by hegemon through coercion and consent, the perfect combination of hard and soft powers. To provide the best explanation for the American practice of the concept in the current institutional world order driven by liberal and capitalist schemes, theoretical approaches to the notion of hegemony have been revised only to bring about a synthesis of three theories: liberal institutionalism, hegemonic stability, and (neo-) Gramscianism.

The theoretical analysis centers on a comprehensive review and reinterpretation of key texts and perspectives related to the concept of hegemony. To achieve a nuanced understanding of institutional hegemony, this research integrates insights from Hegemonic Stability Theory, Institutionalism and its branches, and the Neo-Gramscian perspective. These frameworks collectively explain how the United States established and sustained institutional hegemony following World War II and why it remains influential today. Grounded in the premise that the U.S. grand strategy is deeply rooted in American Exceptionalism, the study intertwines the core theoretical elements of power, institutional mechanisms, and culture. By doing so, it bridges the principles of constructivism, liberal institutionalism, and the traditional power dynamics of realism to illustrate how American Exceptionalism is embedded within American strategic culture to maintain and reinforce institutional hegemony.

This analysis operates within the framework of neoclassical realism. If we accept that a state's grand strategy emerges from its strategic culture and serves as a means to achieve, sustain, or expand power within the international system—while simultaneously being shaped by the system and the actions of other agents—then this aligns with the paradigm of neoclassical realism. In essence, the grand strategy transforms a state's ideational power, such as American Exceptionalism, into specific global behaviors, manifested as institutional hegemony.

1.2. Neo-Classical Realism: Connecting the Roots, Means and Ends

We believe that neoclassical realism provides the best explanation for the discussion in this paper. If we accept that the grand strategy is derived from the strategic culture of a certain agent of the international system, be it the state, and a means to achieve, maintain, or expand power in the system as the ultimate end, which at the same time is strongly influenced by the system itself and the actions of the other agents, then we can come to end with the paradigm of neoclassical realism. We consider American Exceptionalism as the backbone and

essence of American strategic culture, consisting of all the ideas and identity implications of that tradition [1].

Meanwhile, we take for granted that the grand strategy of the United States has been at work to preserve and expand its hegemony, at least after World War II, and the critical juncture of the rise of the liberal world order, the establishment of its institutions and rules-based system, and its consolidation throughout decades to follow. Considering that the international system has also been a defining factor in how the grand strategy has formed, continued, or changed, brings us to the point where neoclassical realists tend to meet. To better understand this discussion, we examined Figure 2.

Neoclassical realism explains how the culture, ideas, and identity issues of each state at the domestic level can and will be vital to the state's definition of national interests and grand strategy. This is the departure point of this theory from clas-

sical realism. As Dueck rightly points out, the realist premises that changes in grand strategy are shaped by material or structural pressures at the international level and domestic-level differences tend to lose any explanatory power when faced with the pervasive pressures of international competition [2]. So, to say, "Strategic Culture" itself is a rather new phrase and although the traces of culture in strategy could be seen in classical works, but the theory of strategic culture was first developed in 1977, by Jack Snyder. Going back to Dueck again, he defines strategic culture as a set of interlocking values, beliefs, and assumptions that are held collectively by the people of a given state that relate to political and military strategic affairs, and that are passed on through socialization' [2]. This is where American Exceptionalism, the deeply rooted cultural value it bears, and its role in American grand strategy falls exactly into place.

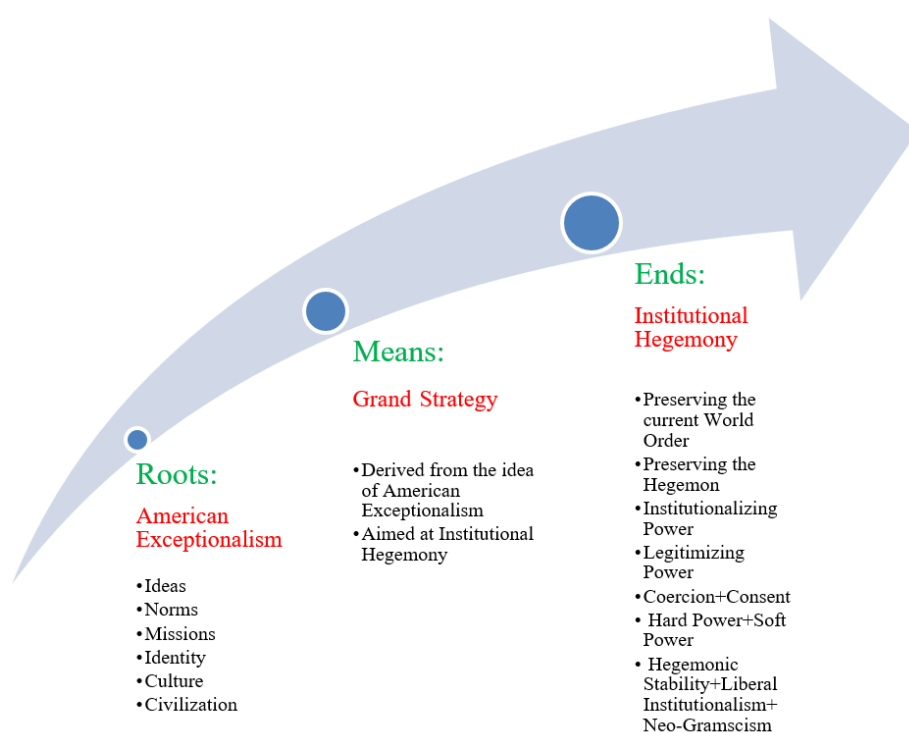


Figure 1. Neoclassical Realism explains how the culture, ideas and identity issues of the United States at the domestic level - i.e., American Exceptionalism - has been vital in the US definition of national interest and grand strategy. This in turn, has resulted in the establishment of an institution-based hegemonic order led by the great powers in the direct aftermath of the World Wars and by the United States in the current hegemonic order, hence its institutional hegemony [1].

2. Methodology

A critical approach to contextual-theoretical analysis was adopted in the scope and essence of this study. The applied method inevitably falls under the qualitative approach of the social sciences. As this study's intellectual journey is fundamentally based on qualitative research and methodology, a conclusion on the probable continuities and changes as well as

possible scenarios will be drawn from the analysis and qualitative data provided.

The definition of key terms allows us to code the main concepts that will be necessary in the qualitative methods used. To explore this methodology further, we delicately dodged epistemological disputes. As Lune and Berg define in their handy textbook, 'qualitative research refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things.' [3]. Therefore, this is all

about the quality. In this study, all concepts were deeply qualitative.

3. Discussion

3.1. American Exceptionalism: First Emergence

The idea of American Exceptionalism, often credited to Alexis de Tocqueville, has the meaning of being unique in relation to all other nations. Tocqueville then extended the concept to include American Exceptionalism by showing how the United States has no feudal history while other countries do, which inherently brought in the notion of exceptionality in this sense. Alexis de Tocqueville used the term "Exceptional" in his famous *Democracy in America*: "The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no other democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one" [4]. There have been lots of work done in relation to defining and capturing the essence of American Exceptionalism and its main components, the way it shapes alongside other factors, the American "Identity" and US public discourses and as a result its domestic and foreign politics, how it forms public opinion, voting behavior and acts in presidential elections.

3.2. Defining American Exceptionalism

The concept of American exceptionalism is deeply rooted in European intellectual, political, and social developments, particularly during periods of upheaval, industrialization, and the decline of the church and monarchy's power. The founders of America's colonies were products of European education and culture, shaped by European intellectual traditions, such as the English Revolution, the Whig tradition, and Enlightenment ideas from England, Scotland, and France. As Hodgson argues, "the American Republic was a blend of historical components practiced on the 'Newland,'" and those who came to America brought with them European ideals, fears, and prejudices [5].

Moreover, America's institutional foundations can be traced back to Europe's century-long struggle with dysfunctional institutions. For instance, political institutions like the Magna Carta (12th century England) were contractual agreements between kings and representatives, laying the groundwork for later democratic governance [6]. The American Revolution was not a radical departure from European political traditions but rather a fracture from colonial rule.

American exceptionalism encompasses a variety of ideas, doctrines, policies, and actions, often centered on the belief that the U.S. differs fundamentally from other nations because of its unique origins, national credo, historical evolution, and distinct political and religious institutions [7]. Scholars have debated whether this uniqueness is praiseworthy or mythical. Ceaser notes that the term refers to a "family of concepts," and

its meaning varies depending on the context or analyst's perspective [8].

Generally, definitions of American exceptionalism boil down to two ideas: (a) the U.S. is "different" or (b) the U.S. is "special" [8]. This belief in the U.S.'s special status among nations often implies superiority and a sense of global responsibility [9]. Some scholars classify American exceptionalism into four categories: "distinctive" (different), "unique" (anomalous), "exemplary" (a model for others), and "exempt" from historical rules [8].

The U.S. is seen as exceptional partly because of its values—liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, democracy, and laissez-faire economics [10]. These values, shaped by a unique historical context—lacking a feudal past or aristocracy and marked by events such as the American Revolution—reinforced a strong sense of individualism and limited government [11]. This "specialness" also implies a mission to spread these values globally, often leading to aggressive policies and interference abroad.

Historically, this exceptionalism manifests in the U.S.'s tendency to exempt itself from international laws and norms, maintaining double standards [12]. Some scholars also view American exceptionalism as a form of Orientalism, framing the U.S. in opposition to the "other" [13], reinforcing distinctions between the "West" and "non-Western" others.

3.3. Neoclassical Realism: Taking American Exceptionalism to US Foreign Policy

While no single theory can fully capture the complexities of an idea explored in research, neoclassical realism emerges as the most fitting framework for this study, contributing meaningfully to the central research question. Alternative theories fall short in addressing the nuanced dynamics of international politics and foreign policy. Constructivist, systemic, and unit-level theories, along with paradigms like liberalism and functionalism, often fail to provide a comprehensive perspective. Similarly, classical realism and neo-realism focus exclusively on systemic factors, overlooking the internal dynamics of individual units and their role as agents within the global structure. Conversely, unit-based theories disregard the significance of the global system and its reinforcing mechanisms. As a result, neither approach alone adequately explains the interplay between international politics and foreign policies shaped within this system. Scholars, such as Robert Putnam, have highlighted the limitations of relying solely on one theoretical explanation for foreign policy. Putnam, for instance, proposes that American policymakers navigate a "two-level game" [14], balancing domestic and systemic variables. This dynamic underscores the need for a theoretical framework as neoclassical realism, which effectively incorporates both national and sub-national components into the analysis.

Consequently, neoclassical realism seems to best embody the foreign policy of the United States and the role of Amer-

ican Exceptionalism in foreign policy analysis [1]. This type of realism shares a range of fundamentals with other branches of thought in the paradigm, meaning that the core elements of the realist worldview are naturally present to make it a realist approach. However, neoclassical realists have provided a more comprehensive perspective on international relations and how states act in this context. The school synthesizes classical realism and neo-realism in the sense that it combines classical realism's reliance on state-level importance and the neo-realist approach to the systematic forces that shape the act of states.

Gideon Rose who coined the term 'neoclassical realism,' argues, "the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities" [15]. This aspect of theory greatly resembles neo-realism. An important feature of neoclassical realism is attributed to state-level variables in the formation of foreign policies and state strategies. It emphasizes the practice of the state in the global arena as the key factor in defining its foreign policy in the long run and, thus, its grand strategy so to say.

Of course, for a neoclassical realist, the international system has its most effect on how states act and determine the extent of power and the threats each state faces due to its capabilities, in an anarchic system; therefore, it departs from the classical version of realism only taking into account the states and their national interests in a rather normative, traditional "thrive for survival" way. However, neoclassical realists also partway with neorealists in the degree of vitality they grant to how and why individual states pursue particular foreign policies. This means that each state reacts to the world, or rather, to systematic dynamics in its own specific way, defined by the 'intervening variables' of domestic factors. Foreign policy decision making thus becomes an act of domestic perception, identity, state political structure, and other sub-state features. Leadership and elite power in a state play a key role in the decision-making process and the final determination of foreign policy acts and grand strategy formations [1].

Neoclassical realists wanted to retain the structural arguments of neo-realism. However, they also want to add to it an instrumental (policy or strategy) argument regarding the role of state leaders in which classical realism places its emphasis. Neoclassical realists argue that 'anarchy gives states considerable latitude in defining their security interests, and the relative distribution of power merely sets parameters for grand strategy' [16]. In other words, the anarchy and relative power of states do not dictate state leaders' foreign policies. However, neoclassical realists also argue that 'leaders who consistently fail to respond to systemic incentives put their state's very survival at risk' [16]. That is, the international structure (anarchy and balance of power) constrains states, but it does not ultimately dictate leadership policies and actions.

Neoclassical realists focus on explaining what goes on in

terms of the pressures of international structure on the one hand and the decisions made by state leaders on the other. Neoclassical realism also seeks to introduce an element that all other realists ignore or downplay in their analyses, namely, the internal characteristics of states. Neoclassical realism seeks to explain why, how, and under what conditions the internal characteristics of states—the extractive and mobilization capacity of political-military institutions, the influence of domestic societal actors and interest groups, the degree of state autonomy from society, and the level of elite or societal cohesion—intervene between the leaders' assessment of international threats and opportunities and the actual diplomatic, military, and foreign economic policies pursued by the leaders [16].

Gideon Rose first used the term in his 1998 review article, *Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy*. He identified neoclassical realism as a specific approach.

(...) incorporates both external and internal variables, updating and systematizing certain insights drawn from classical realist thought. Adherents argue that the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy are driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities. This is why they are realists. However, they argue that the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level. For this reason, they are neoclassical [15].

For these reasons, neoclassical realists believe that understanding the links between power and policy requires a close examination of the contexts within which foreign policies are formulated and implemented. Furthermore, neoclassical realists consider a variety of domestic factors that contribute to the idea of a "domestic transmission belt" and research a number of domestic variables that could modify the state's foreign policy decisions [17]. The role of second-image variables such as state institutions, political parties, and interest groups has been explored in some of their works, whereas others have been more interested in redeeming normative elements of classical realism than in explaining particular instances of foreign policy.

Nevertheless, three main areas of interest can be identified using the neoclassical realist approach. The first is the *perception of power* among political elites and its impact on foreign policy making. Second is the *state's domestic characteristic*, including the effectiveness of its institutions and the game of different interest groups. The third is the *quality of political leadership* and its ability to "extract" and mobilize different components of the state's power [18].

Neoclassical realism proposes a specific synthesis of concepts from both classical and structural streams of the realist paradigm. It appreciates Morgenthau's consideration of the dynamic nature of politics and complex sources of power. Furthermore, it declares a departure from structural realist assumptions about the rationality of states as international

actors and considers foreign policymaking to be a more complicated process [18]. Nevertheless, neoclassical realism accepts the basic assumptions of structural realism that a state's position in the structure of the international system may effectively limit its foreign policy ambitions. This emphasizes that systemic determinants are filtered by a variety of domestic variables yet accept both the existence and impact of systemic constraints.

The theoretical framework presented by neoclassical realists integrates insights from both constructivism (ideas/culture) and discursive institutionalism (national discourse) into the realm of realism to include domestic-level factors when explaining adjustments in policy choice [19]. This can be summarized as in the following figure, showing how domestic-level factors act as filters through which the systemic factors are translated into strategic choice (See Figure 2).

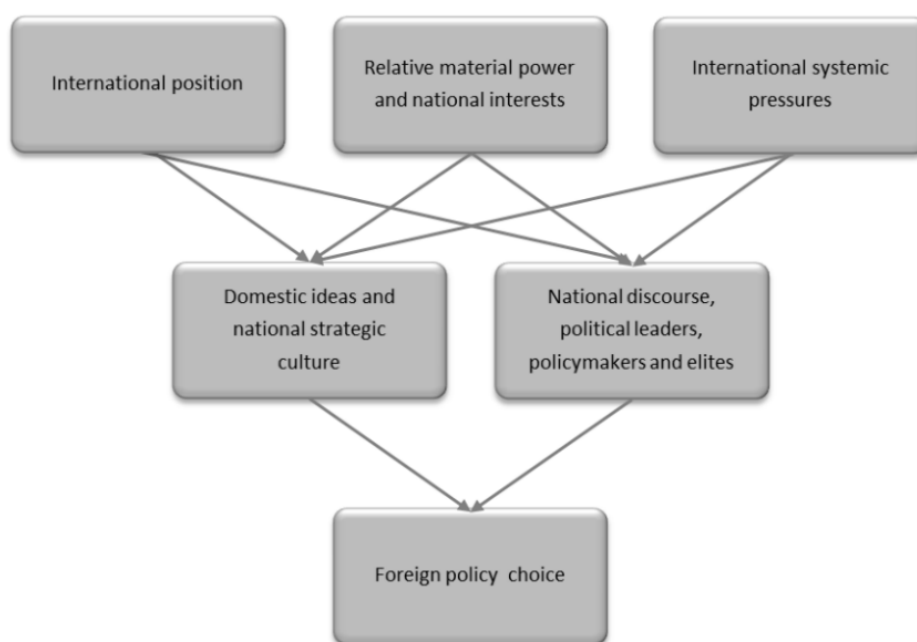


Figure 2. The neoclassical realist framework of strategic choice [19].

3.4. The United States Strategic Culture in Light of American Exceptionalism

The concept of grand strategy, as defined by Brands, refers to a purposeful and coherent framework that guides a nation's foreign policies. It is not a reactive approach to events but an intellectual architecture aimed at achieving long-term objectives [20]. Leaders engaged in a grand strategy do not simply respond to challenges on a case-by-case basis, but instead align their nation's actions within a larger vision. However, grand strategies are formulated in a dynamic and constantly changing world, where challenges, threats, and opportunities are fluid and human intentions are shifting. While the core aspects of a nation's political culture, identity, and history remain relatively steady, foreign policy decisions and strategic choices must be adapted to the changing international landscape.

The formation of a grand strategy, especially in the case of the United States, is influenced by a complex set of factors, including national identity, ideology, and strategic culture, concepts that fall under the methodological framework of neoclassical realism. This approach argues that foreign policy

decisions are shaped not only by material variables, but also by more abstract domestic influences, such as political culture and identity, as Quinn puts it, the "National Ideology" concept. Neoclassical realism emphasizes that, while external factors matter, internal factors are equally important in shaping a nation's approach to the world, [21]. In the U.S., strategic culture plays a significant role in shaping foreign policy, often defined as the evaluation of national security, the domestic and international context, and the prevailing national ideology. Scholars such as Quinn and Dueck have highlighted how U.S. foreign policy often mirrors its deeply embedded political culture [22].

As part of its grand strategy, the strategic culture of the United States is characterized by a strong connection between its national identity and foreign policy choices. While material power has expanded U.S. interests globally, the nation's political culture continues to shape its foreign policy decisions. Dueck notes that while the U.S. could have taken different paths throughout its history, its political culture has consistently influenced its choices, often aligning them with American ideals [23]. This notion implies that foreign policy is not only a reflection of global circumstances, but also a projection of the U.S.'s internal values and beliefs.

However, strategic culture is not a static or fixed concept. While it influences decisions, it is also subject to interpretation and change. Scholars have criticized strategic culture as too subjective and fluid, making it difficult to pin down as a reliable explanation for foreign policy behavior. Despite these criticisms, strategic culture remains essential for understanding how a nation's political identity and historical experiences shape its grand strategy. For example, US foreign policy often reflects deeply ingrained cultural and historical patterns, even when major policy shifts occur [24]. The influence of strategic culture in the U.S. is not always obvious but can be observed in the underlying assumptions and choices made by American policymakers.

One key aspect of U.S. strategic culture is the role that history plays in shaping its grand strategy. The Historian Walter Russell Mead has been instrumental in highlighting the historical traditions that have influenced American foreign policy. Mead categorizes these traditions into four distinct schools of thought: Hamiltonian, Jeffersonian, Jacksonian and Wilsonian. Each tradition reflects different priorities in foreign policy, from fostering economic alliances (Hamiltonian) to promoting democracy globally (Wilsonian), safeguarding democracy at home (Jeffersonian), and focusing on national security and economic well-being (Jacksonian) [25]. These traditions have been present throughout American history, shaping foreign policy from the early days of the republic to modern times.

While Mead acknowledges the importance of domestic variables in shaping foreign policy, he also stresses that U.S. foreign policy is often a reaction to international challenges and opportunities. The fluidity and inconsistencies observed in U.S. foreign policy are, in many cases, a reflection of the tension between its strategic traditions and the demands of the global environment. Nevertheless, these traditions are deeply rooted in the American sense of national identity, which is shaped by the historical experience of the nation and long-standing belief in American exceptionalism.

American exceptionalism is a fundamental component of the U.S. strategic culture. This concept embodies the belief that the United States is unique and distinct from other nations, and possesses a special role in the world. It has shaped U.S. foreign policy, particularly in the post-World War II era when the U.S. emerged as a global power. The formation of international institutions after the war was heavily influenced by the American ideals of peace, liberty, human rights, and democracy. These institutions, although framed as public goods for the global community, were also designed to promote U.S. interests and maintain their dominant position in the international order. The U.S. used its power and influence to build a system that reflected its values, often justifying its interventions in the internal affairs of other states by appealing to the promotion of democracy and human rights [25].

In particular, the Wilsonian tradition has had a profound impact on U.S. foreign policy, promoting the idea that the U.S. has both a moral obligation and a practical interest in

spreading democratic values worldwide. Mead argues that Wilsonian beliefs led to the creation of international institutions that supported democracy and stability based on the assumption that non-representative governments were inherently unstable and that shared values would promote peace [25]. While this approach has been influential, it has also been criticized for being selective in its application, often serving U.S. strategic interests more than the universal principles it claims to uphold.

Despite ongoing debates about the extent and expression of American exceptionalism, it remains a central element of the U.S. strategic culture. Both idealist and realist perspectives in the U.S. political system have their own interpretations of exceptionalism. Idealists emphasize the U.S.'s role as a moral leader and global force for good, while realists focus on the practical benefits of maintaining U.S. dominance and security. Both perspectives are rooted in the belief that the U.S. is fundamentally different from other nations, whether this difference is seen as a moral obligation or a strategic advantage.

In conclusion, the U.S. strategic culture, deeply intertwined with the notion of American exceptionalism, shapes its grand strategy and foreign policy. While strategic culture is fluid and adaptable to changing global circumstances, it remains anchored in the nation's political identity, historical traditions, and deeply held beliefs regarding its role in the world. From its founding traditions to its post-World War II global leadership, U.S. foreign policy has consistently reflected the influence of its strategic culture, driven by the belief in its unique mission to promote democracy, security, and prosperity.

In this section, authors are advised to provide a thorough analysis of the results and make comparisons with relevant literature, not a short summary or conclusion. Any future research directions could also be stated in the discussion.

4. A Theoretical Approach to Hegemony

Hegemony, a term rooted in classical Greek philosophy, has evolved in various ways to reflect different perspectives on international relations, especially after World War II. Originally used by Thucydides in the History of the Peloponnesian War, hegemony referred to *leadership* through consent, not force, distinct from political control or authority [26]. Modern theories continue to draw on this concept, viewing hegemony as the status of order rather than authority or complete anarchy. It occupies a middle ground between absolute control and the Hobbesian anarchy, where "a state of war of all against all" prevails [27]. Various schools of thought in international relations agree that hegemony involves influence and leadership, without the direct power to command obedience.

Of the main attempts to approach hegemony, the Gramscian school, usually associated with Marxist views, predominates as the earliest and most referred school. Later, Liberal Institutionalists, mostly attributed to Keohane and Nye, considered international institutions as the crystallization of the hegemon

and eventually came up with the notion of institutional hegemony. Realists also have their own take-on hegemony, inherently associated with power. Nevertheless, these schools of thought agree that there is an asymmetrical relationship between formally equal states. Moreover, the conceptual frameworks applied by these schools are not exclusive.

Although Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci's insights are applicable at the domestic level, the concepts can be extended for use in the international sphere. Gramsci used "*cultural hegemony*" to explain why the Russian Revolution failed to spread westward [28]. He argued that the leading class – had acquired and maintained dominance by using a subtle mix of arguments and impositions, which convinced the working class to be under rule and accept the status quo. Therefore, Gramsci depicted an order in which socio-economic relations were asymmetric yet stable but in which all classes were formally equal and had no authority over the other [29]. Marxist theorists such as Gramsci and Wallerstein add the component of capitalism to the notion as a world economic system designed to maintain and prevail the dominance of the hegemon. To Wallerstein, hegemonic states enforce the capitalist ideology and are dominant in "agro-industry, commerce and finance." [30] This is while Realism, as assumed, attributes hegemony to the concept of power. Military capabilities became the main source of hegemony, followed by economic and cultural might, which, compared to other states, became prevalent.

Under the realism paradigm, falls a prominent theory of Hegemonic Stability, embedded mostly in the neorealist school of thought and influential for much of the 1970s and the 1980s. Considering power as the main advantage of the hegemon in the international system, Kindleberger's (1973) argument was that hegemonic power (defined by military and economic dominance) could play a stabilizing role in the international system by providing collective goods and preventing global economic crises [31]. He argued that a hegemonic leader is necessary for maintaining a liberal economic order, setting international standards of conduct, and ensuring that other states follow these rules [31]. Hegemonic structures of power, dominated by a single country, are seen as conducive to the development of strong international regimes in which rules are clearly defined and obeyed [32].

Despite the apparent benefits of hegemonic leadership, critics such as Duncan Snidal have questioned the validity of Hegemonic Stability Theory. According to Snidal, the theory that a dominant hegemon leads to desirable collective outcomes is flawed. He argues that in the absence of a hegemon, international cooperation may not necessarily diminish and the stability of the system may even improve [33]. Snidal's critique highlights the limitations of the theory, particularly its overreliance on hegemonic power as a stabilizing force, and emphasizes that global cooperation can persist even as a hegemon's power declines.

The decline in American power, especially after the 1980s, further challenged this theory. Scholars and policymakers

were concerned about international stability in a world "after hegemony" [34]. The U.S.'s use of its hegemonic power to pursue national interests, rather than global public goods, led many to question the extent to which the U.S. was truly acting as a stabilizing force. For instance, during George W. Bush's presidency, the U.S. engaged in unilateral military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan without the explicit consent of its closest allies in Europe. Similarly, during Donald Trump's presidency, his isolationist policies and unilateral decisions, such as withdrawing from multilateral agreements, further eroded the notion that U.S. hegemony was serving global stability.

The limitations of the Hegemonic Stability Theory become even more apparent when considering the domestic factors that shape the hegemon's behavior. While the theory focuses on the hegemon's external role, it often overlooks the importance of domestic politics, political identity, and strategic culture in shaping foreign policies. Mead (2001) identified four distinct traditions of American foreign policy: Hamiltonians, Wilsonians, Jeffersonians, and Jacksonians. In recent decades, the tension between the Wilsonian ideals of international rule-based order and Jacksonian nationalism, which prioritizes domestic security and economic development, has shaped U.S. foreign policy. For example, under Trump, Jacksonian nationalism took precedence, leading to a more isolationist approach that undermined the idea of the U.S. as a global leader promoting collective goods.

One response to the limitations of Hegemonic Stability Theory is the incorporation of institutionalism. Bailin argues that institutional mechanisms can allow other powers within the international system to collectively manage global economic crises and maintain a liberal economic order, even in the absence of a hegemon. Bailin's synthesis of Hegemonic Stability with institutionalism suggests that the global order created by the hegemon can be preserved through the engagement and cooperation of other powers, as the intertwined economic and trade systems incentivize states to maintain stability [35].

On the other hand, the Gramscian account of hegemony brings in elements of values, soft power, and culture in the form of multilateral institutions that subjugate and dominate others in ways that they themselves are willing to submit to them. From a Gramscian perspective, hegemony is not solely about military or economic dominance but also about cultural and ideological leadership. Gramsci developed the concept of "*cultural hegemony*" to describe a situation in which the ruling class maintains its dominance not only through force but also through the consensual submission of subordinate classes. Applied to international relations, this theory emphasizes the role of soft power and values in maintaining hegemonic dominance. Multilateral institutions established by the hegemon perpetuate the hegemonic order by embedding the values and norms of the hegemon into international practices. These institutions appear flexible and open to choice; however, in reality, they are highly constraining, often limiting even the hegemon's actions. For example, the U.S. was constrained by

international institutions, such as the Human Rights Council, leading to its decision to withdraw from such organizations [36].

Franziska Böhmer further developed Gramscian analysis by emphasizing the importance of legitimacy in hegemony. According to Böhmer, hegemonic power is effective when it combines coercion with consent to create a form of legitimate authority. This legitimacy is maintained through cultural texts and norms as well as through force, enabling the hegemon to exercise power without relying solely on military or economic strength [37]. Neo-Gramscian theorists, such as Robert Cox, have extended this analysis to the international arena, focusing on the role of civil society and ideological consent in maintaining the global order. Cox's critical perspective on hegemony breaks with the static view offered by realist theorists such as Waltz and Keohane, instead emphasizing the dynamic interplay of stability and change within the world order [37].

In conclusion, Hegemonic Stability Theory offers valuable insights into the role of hegemonic power in maintaining international stability, but it has significant limitations. This theory's emphasis on the necessity of a dominant hegemon overlooks the potential for cooperation and stability in a multipolar world. Critics, such as Snidal, have shown that international cooperation can persist even in the absence of a hegemon, while the decline of American power has raised questions about the viability of U.S. hegemony. Additionally, domestic factors, such as political identity and strategic culture, play a crucial role in shaping hegemonic behavior, which Hegemonic Stability often fails to account for. By incorporating insights from institutionalism and Gramscian theory, a more nuanced understanding of hegemony emerges, one that recognizes the importance of soft power, values, and legitimacy in maintaining global order.

After all, to reach a comprehensive understanding of the institutional hegemony considered, this paper has brought the teachings of Hegemonic Stability, Institutionalism and its subordinates, and the Neo-Gramscian account of hegemony together to explain how the institutional hegemony of the United States has worked post-World War II and continues to remain relevant ever since, with the grand strategy rooted in American Exceptionalism, the three main theoretical concepts of power, institutional mechanisms, and culture are going to work alongside throughout the research to bridge the ideas of constructivism, liberal institutionalism, and traditional power politics of realism, in order to grasp a concise grip of how American Exceptionalism is interpreted in the American strategic culture to help maintain and strengthen its hegemony institution-wise.

To synthesize the teachings of realist power-based hegemonic stability with the liberal arguments of institutionalism and the Gramscian cultural approach to hegemony, this study proposes a new notion of Institutional Hegemonic Resilience". Although the theories discussed above have sought to explain the dynamics of hegemony within the international system,

they exhibit certain limitations in their analysis. The post-WWII order saw the persistence and stability of U.S. hegemony, despite the numerous changes that took place. However, the hegemon did not act in isolation; the contributions of other major powers have been crucial in this regard. The institutionalized hegemony, shaped by the policies of this collective group, ultimately gave rise to specific institutional mechanisms and dynamics that facilitate the management and preservation of the liberal capitalist order.

4.1. Hegemony in the Neo-Classical Realist Framework

The teachings of neoclassical realism define the process of grand strategy formation in a manner that allows it to extract its resources from both the international system and the domestic components of the agent or unit. In this respect, there is a synthesis of ideational and systematic imperatives that forms a grand strategy. What is essential in attributing this school of thought to the foreign policy and strategy-making of a hegemon is the weight of power the school considers for the state in forming it and the extent of imposing that power and influencing the international system.

In this case, the system structure is the preeminent variable; a state requires a near-monopoly of power in the international system to pursue a grand strategy that goes against its interests, as defined by that structure. In such a situation, the structure of the system is defined by a single unit that uses its power to pursue particular contra-realist ideas [38]. The most vivid example in the Westphalian era would be the United States' institutionalization of its endless power after the Second World War. In fact, neoclassical realism gives us the chance to understand why a hegemon will construct international institutions and apparently turn to cooperation and "limiting" its power to have international policy-making processed and made through international rules and institutions.

Neoclassical realism remains a structural realist theory of international relations. It prioritizes and stresses 'power, interests and coalition making as the central elements in a theory of politics' but seeks to recapture classical realists' appreciation that we need to look within societies as well as between them, to deny that states are simple, 'irreducible atoms whose power and interests are to be assessed.' [39] The school has three main ideas which contribute to this research: First and surprisingly enough for a realist theory, more powerful states tend to base their policy and grand strategy on ideational factors rather than material capabilities. They have this ambitious mission of empire dom to shape the world beyond the initial power once it reaches that level of hegemony and predominance. One of the main reasons for this could be that the international system poses few restrictions on a super-power state, whose material power and ideational dominance largely define the international structure. With their open hand, they have the freedom to choose what they should do in terms of greater ideas. Hegemonic or imperial states therefore have

power that can be used for objectives that are not associated with clearly definable needs. In such situations, a foreign policy based on intentional ideas is the likely course, in which ideological goals end in themselves [40]. In fact, the more predominant a hegemon and the more power it possesses over the world, the likelihood of their grand strategies based on ideational factors and strategic ideas increases.

The second component the theory adds, which is highly relevant in the context of this research, is that these strategic ideas become institutionalized or embedded in the establishment and preservation of institutions. This allows the impact of ideas in institutional policymaking to remain relevant and consistent throughout time to realize and serve the interests of the superpower or hegemon. Ideas that form a strong component of national identity or strategic culture are likely to be almost unconsciously shared among ruling elites and foreign policy institutions. These ideas filter and limit options, ruling out policies that fail to resonate with the national political culture [22]. Third, when power in a particular institution is concentrated in one or among a few powerful states, the rationale of the majority does not have so much of a voice, and so the potential for particular ideas to be central and generally accepted globally in the international system is increased. This indicates the unpredictability of actions by superpowers, particularly hegemonies, in treating world rules and institutions.

In neoclassical realism, the interactions of units (states) are both created and informed by the structure. That is, the structure that informs and constrains states' grand strategic choices is constituted by the grand strategic choices of states. Thus, in this vision of the international system and true to the primacy of neoclassical realism places on the imperatives of power, the most important states remain those that have the greatest resources or that hold the balance of power [38]. It is also important how the superpowers and hegemon reflect their power depending on their political culture and strategic ambitions and usually beyond their immediate national security interests and requirements. Therefore, it is especially important to recognize the impact of ideational variables on grand strategies.

Overall, neoclassical realism perfectly merges and incorporates the importance of hard power—that is, material capabilities such as economic advantage and military might—with the soft power of immaterial ideas derived from the political and strategic culture of the hegemon. In this case, we accept American Exceptionalism as the fundamental American tradition that feeds the very political identity and grand strategic choices of the United States in the international system. This idea has been translated into international institutions since the Second World War.

Nevertheless, as much as the approach and resultingly, the definition of hegemony differs in the two paradigms of Realism and Neo-Marxism, the fundamental conceptual basis of hegemony is much the same. In this research, while agreeing on the conceptual logic of hegemony in different schools of

thought, we consider that the ways to approach and maintain hegemony and global dominance have changed throughout the history of nations and have taken various forms. One viable route to achieving hegemony, especially from what has been witnessed since the end of World War II, has been the establishment of international institutions for the hegemon, the United States per se. As explained, Neoclassical Realism takes into account this vital instrument of preserving, acquiring, and exercising power in the international system by powerful states – here the Hegemon itself—through the establishment and promotion of international institutions.

4.2. Institutional Hegemony in the Liberal World Order

Institutions, defined as “formal or informal procedures, routines, norms, and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the polity or political economy” [41], can play a pivotal role in securing hegemony. Membership in these institutions often determines the application of various (military and economic) rules to different states, as well as the taxes and debts they are obligated to pay. States frequently pursue their political and strategic objectives through the construction, destruction, participation, and leadership of institutions. The cooperation, coalition-building, and collaboration that arise from the core of international institutions can be adjusted to suit the interests of more dominant actors in the international arena. As a result, the hegemon typically holds an advantage in shaping the structure and fundamental rules of an institution.

One of the prominent schools of thought in international relations that addresses the role and function of international institutions is Liberal Institutionalism. Proponents of this approach, including Keohane and Nye, have also discussed the concept of institutional hegemony. They argue that power can be solidified within institutions, defining the hegemonic state as “powerful enough to maintain the essential rules governing interstate relations, and willing to do so” [42]. Liberal institutionalists such as Ikenberry, Qin Yaqing, and Keohane further explain the rules-based international order that emerged after World War II, which was profoundly shaped by international institutions.

Therefore, the weight realists such as Mearsheimer give to the materialistic powers and capabilities, dismisses the importance of ‘soft power’ and undermines the hegemon’s - here, the American ideational hegemony; a concept underlined by Nye himself. Leaning to either side (hard or soft power) inevitably leads to ignorance of the role of international institutions rooted in the institutionalized channel of the hegemon’s power. These institutions have allowed the United States to extend its limits of military and strategic power through certain rules and regulations, with the help and collaboration of its allies after the Second World War. Therefore, it can be presumed that institutionalizing hegemonic power persuades the synergy of power by granting a soft pow-

er-contributing component to the material's strategic hard power. It is the synthesis of these types of intertwined powers that makes it attractive for a hegemon to move from traditional to *institutional hegemony* in the current liberal capitalistic order [1].

In the case of the United States, it appears that its pursuit of dominance has always been a blend of both ideational and material factors, with the decision to establish institutions being a strategic move following the World Wars. The interaction and dynamics among these crucial elements have significantly shaped the framework of the post-war international order. The rules, institutions, pacts, and international and regional treaties have legitimized the overt exercise of dominance by the United States and its allies over time. As a result, this has fostered a misleading image of a rules-based international system, supported by numerous socio-economic, military-strategic, and political institutions that severely penalize outsiders and challengers, portraying them as rogue states and troublemakers.

These dynamics have, in turn, allowed the hegemon to seamlessly transition through critical junctures of time and events, while the institutionalized order remains firmly in place. Even in instances where the hegemon places itself above regulations and treaties due to its "exceptional" position, the institutions persist in pursuing their "legitimate" fixed agendas, which strategically benefit the hegemon. Cox [43], when explaining the Gramscian aspect of hegemony, highlights that one of the most significant sources of ideational domination within the liberal market order—an order that American hegemony helped establish and legitimize—was the separation of economics from politics. This created a rule-governed economic international order that appeared independent and, in doing so, effectively insulated and solidified the hegemon's role as the central figure in the system established in the early stages of American hegemony. The distinction between low politics (economy and trade) and high politics (security) is said to align with the United States' national security interests in the new world order. This framework aids in understanding the dynamics of American unilateral actions post-9/11 and how the institution-based order endures through seemingly turbulent periods.

This means that the ideational and rhetorical elements of American political identity, embedded deeply in the tradition of American exceptionalist elite discourse, have managed to legitimize American dominance and authority and helped materialize the institutionalized hegemonic order through a combination of coercion and consent. According to this study, the ideational factors of American Exceptionalism have been the cultural pillars of institutional hegemonic resilience, which have crystalized in the form of institutions and laid the cornerstone of the current order. The US has managed to keep up to the profound idea of its claimed 'exceptional' position in the world; the outcome being an ongoing consistent creation, maintenance and promotion of institutional hegemony.

5. Conclusion

According to neoclassical realism, and under the assumption that the international system operates in anarchy, the state (or states) possessing the greatest power—both ideational and material—is the one that upholds order through international multilateral agreements and institutions, rather than the institutions themselves. The hegemon, in collaboration with its allies, binds these institutions together, creating a resilient order where, regardless of potential minor or major declines in U.S. leadership, institutionalized hegemony remains secure. This stability is achieved through a combination of hard—material—power and soft—ideational—discourses of power.

Within the framework of neoclassical realism, American political identity, discourse, and strategic culture have shaped the perception of power at the domestic sub-unit level of the U.S. decision-making elite. The ideational foundation of American Exceptionalism—rooted in the perception of the "righteous us" and the "evil others"—has been a core element of American identity since the nation's founding. Over time, this ideological foundation has evolved to influence the hegemonic world order that emerged after World War II, taking the form of institutional hegemony. Neoclassical realism helps to explain the persistence of these perceptions and ideas and their manifestation in the global system—specifically, how American Exceptionalism aligns with the formation of an American-led liberal world order. This order has proven capable of self-preservation and promotion through institutional hegemonic resilience.

In conclusion, the resilience of U.S. institutional hegemony is grounded in the interplay of the hegemon's power, supported by its allies (sometimes manifested through hegemonic unilateralism or pragmatic multilateralism), the international institutions and their procedures and mechanisms (which serve as instrumental arrangements and facilitate the consensual submission of states), and the Gramscian perspective of hegemony, which emphasizes the ideational and cultural values of the hegemon, driven by the concept of American Exceptionalism. Ultimately, it appears that it is the ideological components that have legitimized American dominance and authority, thereby enabling the material aspects of hegemony to be enacted through a combination of coercion and consent.

In other words, the relationship between the legitimacy provided by institutions and regulations and the power of the hegemonic state(s) has contributed to a certain resilience in the establishment of order. Furthermore, this resilience is largely driven by the combination of ideology (drawn from the Gramscian concept of hegemony) and the material elements of hard power. This study argues that the ideational factors of American Exceptionalism have served as the cultural foundation of this resilience, which has been solidified through institutions and formed the cornerstone of the current order. This is where the concept of resilience is closely linked to the idea of institutional hegemony.

Resilience has preserved the hegemony of the United States, despite the emergence of other great powers and various hybrid challenges, and enabled the survival of different U.S. administrations, each with distinct interpretations of American Exceptionalism. In this context, the U.S. has managed to uphold the deeply ingrained notion of its exceptional position in the world and its divine mission to promote peace and goodwill globally. It has succeeded in translating its distinctiveness, uniqueness, and exemplary status, allowing it to exempt itself from undesirable entanglements and regulations, while also establishing a legitimate foundation for the "othering" of states within a global multilateral institutional framework. This exceptionalism has manifested in various forms over time, shaped by changing events and administrations, yet its core components have remained largely unchanged over the decades.

The main argument in this research is that the ideational and rhetorical elements of American political identity, embedded deeply in the tradition of American exceptional elite discourse, have managed to legitimize American dominance and authority and helped materialize the institutionalized hegemonic order through a combination of coercion and consent. The ideational factors of American Exceptionalism as the cultural pillars of *institutional hegemonic resilience* have crystalized in the form of institutions and laid the cornerstone of the current order. The US has managed to keep up to the profound idea of its claimed 'exceptional' position in the world; the outcome being an ongoing consistent creation, maintenance and promotion of institutional hegemony.

Author Contributions

Sotoudeh Zibakalam Mofrad is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

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Biography



Sotoudeh Zibakalam Mofrad is an Iranian academic with expertise in American studies and international relations. Zibakalam earned a PhD in North American Studies from the University of Tehran, focusing on American Exceptionalism and Institutional Hegemony, and an MA in Diplomacy and International Organizations from the School of International Relations of the Foreign Ministry. Zibakalam has teaching experience as lecturer for courses related to International Politics and Political Psychology at the University of Tehran and Shahed University, and is also a research affiliate in American Politics at Imam Sadeq University. Zibakalam has held various positions demonstrating their expertise in international affairs and research, serving as Editor in Chief of the English Bulletin of Public Diplomacy, Human Rights Expert, and researcher at the Institute for Political and International Studies of the Foreign Ministry. Actively participating in international events, including the Munich Young Leaders Program and the Berlin Executive Seminar for Diplomats, further reflects her commitment to international affairs.

Research Field

Sotoudeh Zibakalam Mofrad: International Relations Theories, Global Trends, American Politics, Political Psychology