

American 'Exceptionalism' an Outdated Concept

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The longstanding notion of US exceptionalism has deep roots in the American psyche, but as the world experiences a "tectonic shift in global geopolitics" the very idea of Washington's superiority is being challenged, analyst Eric Draitser told RT.

Earlier this week, President Barack Obama reaffirmed Washington's desire to engage in the affairs of other states, particularly in the Middle East.

"I believe America must remain engaged for our own security. But I also believe the world is better for it. Some may disagree, but I believe that America is exceptional – in part because we have shown a willingness, through the sacrifice of blood and treasure, to stand up not only for our own narrow self-interest, but for the interests of all," Obama said in his address to the UN General Assembly in New York.

Analyst Eric Draitser believes Obama's statement has nothing to do with the situation in Syria, but rather is about US-Russia political rivalry and a direct response to Russian President Vladimir Putin, who recently addressed the American nation through one of the most respected US media outlets, The New York Times.

RT: Obama says the US "has a responsibility to act," but does that guarantee it will act responsibly?

Eric Draitser: No, of course it doesn't. I think we should be very cautious about this so-called "American exceptionalism." I think that what Obama was really pointing to, this was clearly a rhetorical response to Russian President [Vladimir] Putin's [OpEd](#) in The New York Times, in which he questioned the very notion of American exceptionalism.

You see, here in the US, within our collective consciousness and within our sort of national mythology, this notion that the US stands somehow above and beyond all other countries of the world; that we represent not only certain abstract ideals, but certain political principals that somehow are not reflected by other states.

So what Obama is in fact saying with regard to American exceptionalism is nothing to do with the moral character or ethical makeup of the country. It has everything to do with the United States asserting its right to dominate politically, economically, militarily and otherwise anywhere that it sees fit.

And Syria really has become a sort of battleground between the US and Russia – not over chemical weapons, but over influence and over how geopolitics will look like in the US in the 21st century.

RT: *So, bluntly as you say, this is not about the situation in Syria?*

ED: Syria is sort of the pretext for this. What Obama is asserting a longstanding principle not only within the political establishment of the US, but within the very psyche of the American people: that somehow we're better, that somehow we're exceptional. And Obama is attempting to use that rhetoric as a way of putting himself on a moral high ground above Putin, above the Chinese, above any of the so-called "troublemakers" in the UN Security Council.

So, while it looks to the rest of the world that the US is a belligerent actor when it comes to Syria, Obama is essentially asserting, "No, no, we're moral, we're just and we're righteous."

RT: *Eric, there is nothing wrong with national pride, no one is going to argue against that, but this is where it is crossing the danger line, right?*

ED: Exactly right. Essentially, what we should understand is that the language that Obama is using is not only just to make the case that somehow the US is above other countries – it's that the US is above international law, that the US is above the very institutions that the United Nations represents, and that it is above everything that has happened since WWII.

In other words, it's the principle "might is right." You don't want to reduce it down to such a simplistic concept, but unfortunately that is the reality of international relations when it comes to the United States.

 (AFP Photo/ Pool / Mario Tama)

Of course the anger with the Russians, the anger with Putin is his and Russia's inability to accept this principle and what we see is a tectonic shift in global geopolitics, as countries who even 10 years ago would not even dare to question the notion of American exceptionalism and America's ability and... right to assert its military authority around the world. Now this is being questioned.

This is, of course, due to a combination of many different factors, not the least of which is America's global prestige in decline.

RT: *And how this has been accepted internally? You've highlighted there what America is thought of externally. After all, Russia has been saying for a while that there should be a collective global leadership. How is that going down with the average American?*

ED: It's a bit complex, because on the one hand Americans tend to have this sort of patriotic fever that you've been referring to earlier, believing in some of the issues of national pride, believing in the country. This is all well and good, but this has sort of blended with the growing discontent among regular ordinary Americans with US foreign policy: tired of the Afghan war, disgusted by the experience in Iraq and America's adventurism all over the world. So, while that is not necessarily the vast majority of [American] people, a solid percentage of this country is so tired of war that they are not really willing to listen to whatever justifications are going to be made by the political leaders.

 (Reuters / Michael Nagle)

On the other hand, there are so many people burdened by debt, so burdened by the other economic problems that exist in this country, that they are sort of allowing the international

angle to sort of go by the wayside. Unfortunately, when you allow things like this to happen regional conflicts and world conflicts develop very quickly.

RT: *So collective global leadership is a nice idea, but is it realistic?*

ED: It is realistic only insofar as all actors are willing to accept the basic principle of equal responsibility and equal authority. And of course the United States is unwilling to do that, as we've seen with the example of the UN Security Council. Notice the language of the policymakers in the US when it comes to the Security Council. It is not working exactly as was intended to, that the veto is working precisely as it was intended to. No, to describe the institution itself as dysfunctional, they describe the institution as – quote “lacking leadership” – something that [Russia's] Foreign Minister [Sergey] Lavrov highlighted in his speech.

And I think that is couched as rhetoric, as a way for the US to say “we will talk the talk [about] shared responsibility and shared global leadership, but when it comes down to it – we're the US and everyone either falls in behind us, or stands against us.”

RT: *I guess you've got to look at the track record of what America has been involved in. Is this really bad for the experience, generally speaking?*

ED: Sure, what we've also seen in recent years that the US for its war-making ability, for all of its vast military-industrial complex, it is unable to win wars. Because what we've learnt that wars are no longer simply won on the battlefield, they are won in a diplomatic sphere, they are won with counter-insurgency tactics, they are won over decades, they are not simply won in conventional wars.

The US would do well to rethink its global posture and to look to leaders such as Putin, the Chinese and to other actors around the world who have preached caution and preached international law and respect for the international law, because only through those positions we are going to actually move forward and create some kind of a lasting peace in Syria and beyond.

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