A Non-Mainstream Perspective on the United States Foreign Policy

An Essay

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Abstract

The intent of this paper is to induce the readers to think for themselves about the United States Foreign Policy (USFP) and not let the “experts” do it for them and, in the process, help get our country out of the foreign policy morass it has been in for the last at least seventy years. It may be generally agreed that the ideological roots of USFP and the drivers of this nation’s actions in the global arena have been the constructs of Manifest Destiny and American Exceptionalism. These ideas have led the US over the course of its history to pursue expansionist policies and engage in many military interventions in other countries. American foreign policy has indeed been expansive, gaining for the United States vast territories (for instance, half of Mexico) during the 19th century. In the 20th century and during the last 15 years of the 21st century, the US has not been motivated by a desire for new territory but inspired by an ambition for political, economic and cultural hegemony, particularly after the fall of the Soviet empire. Limaye, the author of this piece, finds very little evidence to substantiate the often-made claims that the US always fights for democracy and freedom. The author would like the US to see itself as others see it – particularly, as many people from the developing countries see it. Limaye maintains that, during the last six decades or so, the US has mainly relied on its “hard” (military) power but, in most cases, has gained little return on its investment. A major reason why the US has recently failed to achieve its goals is that, like other empires before it, it lacks empathy for the nationhood of other peoples. The US as a nation does not comprehend that people elsewhere also love their own countries. The imperial path the US has followed has engendered of late a good deal of animosity toward it in several parts of the world. If the US were to abandon its imperial dream and employ carefully more of its “soft” power, the dangerous situation the world and the US itself are now in might get at least somewhat ameliorated.
Introduction

I’m going to propose and elucidate a critique of the United States foreign policy (USFP) from a non-establishment, non-insider, third-world perspective. Seeing America through the eyes of a person born and brought up in a developing country (In India) will, most likely, be a beneficial experience for most of this country because it will force many Americans to reorient their thinking about themselves and, especially, their perception of the other. What does USFP look like through one non-Western lens? Not very pretty! In this case, the lens and the worldview are of a US citizen of East Indian descent who has lived for five decades in the United States. Though I’ll be critical of USFP in this essay, I need to emphasize that I’m proud to be an American citizen and thoroughly admire many aspects of this country, just not its foreign policy.

A Caveat, a Reservation

Let me start with a caveat: Whenever I refer to the United States in this essay, I mean exclusively the government of the United States, not the American people. I’m only talking about the official policy and actions of this nation, not about the opinions and protests of its citizens. It’s well known that, from the beginning of this Republic, American citizens (admittedly a small number) have expressed their disapproval of the US government’s foreign policy – from the time of the Monroe Doctrine (1820s) to the Iraq War starting from 2003. Let me cite three famous examples: The first dissenter is Henry David Thoreau (the author of Civil Disobedience and Walden) who courted jail in protest of the Mexican War. The second is Mark Twain who (during the Spanish-American War, involving the Philippines, in 1900) sarcastically said, “I thought it would be a great thing to give a whole lot of freedom to the Filipinos, but I guess now it’s better to let them give it to themselves” (quoted in Brewer, p. 14). The third is Senator LaFollette who asked (during WWI), “If the United States really was going to fight for democracy, why not fight for the dissolution of the British Empire and home rule for Ireland, Egypt, and India, as well as for the end of German autocracy?” (Brewer, p.55).

I thus recognize the necessity and value of being aware of the dissenting voices in any democracy. But, having said that, one must recognize that generally speaking the media, Congress, and a large majority of American people have historically
gone along with the initiatives in foreign policy of US presidents, big corporations, and American elites. If I may speculate, no more than 100,000 Americans are actively engaged today in shaping, influencing and initiating US international relations. And a large number of these work in the Departments of State and Defense, in the armament industries, in spy agencies, as faculty in various Ivy League Political Science departments, in numerous think tanks, and as lobbyists engaged in “educating” Congressional members in international relations and global affairs. I’m convinced that the principal reason why we have been in such a foreign policy mess is that we average US citizens have left the determination or shaping of our country’s international relations into the hands of these “experts” who have huge stakes in an aggressive and meddlesome foreign policy.

**Ideological Sources of USFP**

It is generally agreed that the roots of USFP lie in this nation’s ideologies of Manifest Destiny and American Exceptionalism, in the conviction of many leaders and opinion shapers of the colonists that they were building a shining city on the hill and in their abiding sense of moral superiority over the other nations of the world. Excess of hubris has been haunting America for a long time: Reinhold Niebuhr is cited as remarking, “We (The United States) must resist our dreams of managing history” (Ellis). “Many Americans imagined a new and better world emerging, a world, they said, of ‘greater perfection and happiness than mankind has yet seen’” (Wood, p. 106). An expansionist impulse went hand in hand with a strong belief among early Americans that they were establishing a new kind of republic not seen before on this planet. The Declaration of Independence is permeated with this consciousness of most Founding Fathers and a sense of superiority of their race over the Native American race. The Declaration chastises King George for “raising the Conditions of new Appropriations of Lands” and for endeavoring “to bring on the Inhabitants of our Frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known Rule of Warfare, is an undistinguished Destruction, of all Ages, Sexes and Conditions.” Ivan Eland notes (p. 28), “The urge to be civilizing missionaries was transplanted to the United States in the breasts of the first English colonists in the new world.” Incidentally, that conviction in a modified version and that perception (We are here to spread freedom and democracy in the world) persist in the U.S. even today.
USFP Mirrors American Democracy

In my judgment, some aspects of USFP reflect three of the structural and conceptual flaws in American democracy: (1) Presidential veto power finds its mirror image in the demand of the United States that the world community of nations grant it immunity from war-crimes prosecution, while reserving for itself the right to prosecute other countries for their war crimes. (2) The Electoral College, a relic from its past, serves as a model for America’s unaccountability in its international relations. (3) And the Constitution-enshrined practice of small states sending two persons in the US Senate, the same number as the bigger-population states, is reflected in the US refusal to support a permanent-member status in the United Nations Security Council for countries such as India and Brazil or Indonesia – nations with large populations.

Goals of USFP

American belief in the ideologies of Manifest Destiny and American Exceptionalism easily led to four American goals: 1. to maintain America’s exceptional status in the world; 2. to acquire military strength superior to any other country’s power; 3. to speak softly and carry a stick; 4. to hold on to a high level of prosperity. These goals themselves are the corollaries or derivatives of the above two ideologies that most US citizens cherish. These goals have remained constant throughout recent US history – particularly after WWII. As Joseph Stiglitz says (P. 40), “Americans want very much to be No. 1 – we enjoy having that status.” These ideologies historically evolved into different forms and assumed different names, such as the Monroe Doctrine (1823) and “White Man’s Burden.” The chief impulses behind the US foreign policy have demonstrably been territorial expansionism – “Sea to shining Sea” -- (until the end of the nineteenth century) and a sense of entitlement to natural and human resources worldwide, in the name of free trade.

Economic and Psychological Motives behind USFP

In my analysis of the United States foreign policy, I’ve tended to assign the psychological and the political motives of America the prime role in accounting for its expansionism right from its birth (in fact, right from the first permanent Anglo
settlement at Jamestown in 1607). However, I’m conscious of the existence of other motives behind this imperial enterprise. For instance, several other analysts, among them William Appleman Williams, attribute that role to the economic interest of America (After all, “the business of America is business”).

Speaking of the economic aspect of USFP, big business interests quite often drive our foreign policy decisions. President Eisenhower had warned the nation about the Military Industrial Complex. An example of the big stake American weapons manufacturers have in the conduct of USFP is provided by William Hartung, Director of the Arms & Security Project at the Center for International Policy. He reports, “From October 2010 through 2015, the U.S. has approved sales of $111.3 billion of arms to Saudi Arabia” (*Bloomberg Business News*, P. 201). Keeping the world conflict-ridden seems to be in the interest of some sections of American business—for instance, the armament industry.

It seems, therefore, reasonable to state that all these motives – political, psychological and economic -- together explain more satisfactorily and more thoroughly why America expands and intervenes so frequently in other countries. Analyzing motives is a nuanced affair, a balancing act, because average Americans and quite a few elites get upset whenever they perceive even a hint of the ethics of US motives (and behavior) in the international arena questioned in USFP critiques. But even assuming the purity of US motives in its international relations, as Andrew Bacevich says, “--- yet in the end it is not motive that matters but outcome” (P. 207).

On the positive side of US economic hegemony, one should give credit to American policy of the last several decades (in the trade and monetary spheres) for preventing a major war on the scale of WWI and WWII by linking its economy to those of China and several emerging nations in recent years. Many Western Europeans mention another earlier successful effort: The US poured huge sums of money in Europe in the form of Marshall Aid in the aftermath of WWII and, arguably, stopped a potential Soviet expansion in that part of the world.

However, when it came to the liberation of the Western powers’ colonies in the Third World, the US was quite indifferent to the issue. In fact, because of its fear of Communism and its craving for the stability and peace that empires promise, the US turned quite hostile to the cause of freedom for these Europe-controlled
colonies. In this context, Thomas Meaney observes, “Fear of revolution was the most primal instinct of American foreign policy in the decades” of the early and mid-twentieth century (p. 47).

**US Rhetoric versus Us Actions**

Though the US is the first modern democracy born out of a revolution and even though many contemporary Americans believe that the US fights abroad for democracy and freedom, the truth is it does not spread either of the two elsewhere. On the whole, historically, we Americans have been cool toward the independence struggles of the former colonies of the imperial West. At best, we have exhibited a policy of benign neglect. In this context, a reporter for ABC News, John K. Cooley, wrote in *The Christian Science Monitor* (P. 13), “In 9 cases out of 10, the US either sided with the colonial powers or sat on a neutral fence. Politics in the mother country (General de Gaulle’s accession to power in France, for example, or the collapse of General Franco’s dictatorship in Spain), third-world or Communist-world help – not American rhetoric – brought liberation.” India, for instance, gained its freedom from the British and became a democracy without assistance from any country. I’m told that FDR put pressure on Churchill to liquidate the British Empire. My reaction to this “folktale” is the same as that of Jean Paul Sartre -- “Commitment is an act, not a word.” The U.S. supported the French in Indochina (today’s Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam), the Dutch in Indonesia, and the British in East Africa -- today’s Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania -- when the people in those countries were fighting to gain their independence. Lest I be misunderstood, let me emphasize that I’m not suggesting we Americans should have stepped in or intervened in any of these cases to win independence for others. On the contrary, I firmly believe that every country has to achieve its freedom for itself.

When it comes down to the nitty-gritty of things (besides the dubious record of the United States in liberating erstwhile colonies and establishing democracies there), here is an undeniable fact that democracy cannot be bestowed as a gift. Good intentions aren’t enough. Nations themselves have to want democracy fervently and must work hard to establish and maintain it in their lands. Of all the countries that became independent recently, India and Israel are two of the very few shining examples where democracy has taken a firm root. (In fact, I may venture to say that the US democracy can learn a thing or two from India’s democracy; but that’s not the subject here).
There is a belief among some academic circles that ignoring the counsel of our Founding Fathers (to stay out of the conflicts and affairs of other countries) has created the mess we have been in for many decades. I, however, do not agree with the premise underlying this observation. For one thing, not all early leaders of the newly founded republic were anti-interventionist. Though the first president George Washington advised against foreign entanglements, Thomas Jefferson had his covetous eye on the Caribbean islands. Secondly, within forty years of American independence, President Monroe was already declaring the new nation’s right to interfere in the Americas and warning the old world from further colonization in the new continents. That means, the generation in power in the early 1820s, when some Founding Fathers like Adams and Jefferson were still alive, was already thinking in an “expansive” mode. Their national interest and their sense of national security spanned and encompassed the whole hemisphere. That the early counsel in this country was of constraint and non-intervention does not, therefore, hold water. In fact, in my judgement, the seeds of imperialism and expansionism were sown in the United States from even before its inception (Witness the incursions of white settlers in Native American territories from long before the War of Independence). However, even though some scholars, like Prof. Williams (*The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*), believe that the US was always an expansionist country, they begin their analysis and critique of American foreign policy only from the time of the Spanish-American War, that is, roughly from the end of the 19th century.

I’d like to venture one probable reason for the exclusion of America’s 19th century expansion of the original thirteen colonies into the present-day coast-to-coast United States of America: Such exclusion allows Americans to remain silent about that period. Then they don’t have to face up to the moral issues raised by US activities in the 19th century – particularly the US-Mexican War. However, there are some welcome exceptions: Historian Foner mentions that some Americans with a conscience like Ulysses S. Grant, U.S. President after the Civil War, called the Mexican-American war one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger nation {the U.S.} against a weaker nation {Mexico}. However, by and large, ignoring the 19th century is the standard ploy used by many Americans writing on USFP. To me, American exploits of the 19th century *are* a legitimate USFP issue. This is about the foreign policy of the United States, not about its domestic or internal affairs. The often unspoken premise of these scholars is: it was the birth
right of the United States to expand from sea to shining sea. The Native Americans already living in this continent didn’t matter. Jefferson had already labeled them as “savages” in the Declaration of Independence. The grab of Mexican territory doesn’t count. European leaders (such as Napoleon, Hitler, or Stalin) wanting to expand from coast to coast, say, in Europe have been demonized and denounced as wicked dictators. American expansion is the will of God. When “democracies” build empires, it is “manifest destiny” or “white man’s burden.”

**Most Americans’ Hyper-Patriotism**

For me, American hyper-patriotism explains a good deal of USFP. I have a hard time believing some Americans’ claims that the United States does no wrong, it is always there to defend liberty and democracy, and “We don’t conquer; we liberate.” (Rush Limbaugh, a Conservative radio commentator). Tom DeLay, a former Congressman from Texas, recently made similar comments, “We are the leader that defends freedom and democracy around the world” (Brewer, P. 241). However, there is just no evidence to sustain such noble claims. The facts of US history simply do not support such grandiose notions. I’m aware that the critics of USFP, particularly those who are foreign-born Americans like me, hailing from the Third World, are entering dangerous territory: They will be immediately branded as insolent and ungrateful leftists, and their patriotism will be questioned.

Talking about American rhetoric, even as far back as during WWI, US President Woodrow Wilson had held out a promise of self-determination for the subjects of these empires. But this promise “was not applied to Egyptians demanding the end of British rule” (The Economist, P. 86). In fact, a third-world perspective can interpret both the world wars as a struggle between the well-established empires of the time, on the one hand, and the aspiring or would-be empires, on the other. From that perspective, there was not much to choose between the two parties. Through my lens, neither of the two wars had anything to do with democracy. For Britain, sitting on a vast empire, to make such claims is at once tragic and comic, and highly absurd and hypocritical. Most Americans strongly believe that getting rid of Hitler, the menace, was so urgent a priority during WWII that it was not prudent or real-politick for the US to insist that European powers give up their empires. The US could not risk the support of its allies by pushing them too hard.
or by alienating them. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) could not afford to provoke Winston Churchill, though he put some pressure on him. I presume that the communist Soviet Union (the lesser of the two evils – Nazism and Communism) was also needed as an ally to combat Hitler’s Germany. Hitler’s win would have been a disaster. This is how expediency trumps principles, ethics and values.

Except for a couple of decades, during the last one hundred years or so, the US has been engaged in constant warfare – directly or by proxy. American empire, though informal, is ubiquitous and unlike most other earlier empires is burdened by its own rhetoric. The earlier empires were unashamedly self-aggrandizing, openly expansionist. They did not even look for justifications or any fig leaves for the wars they engaged in. On the other hand, the claims of a moral high ground and noble purposes always made the United States scramble for an inspiring veneer and stirring propaganda for the consumption of the domestic as well as foreign audiences. The declared purposes for engaging in these wars have varied from fighting communists to bestowing democracy and fighting terrorists. But all these wars are fought, we have been told, to establish peace. However, in this context, it would be good for us to remember what Mahatma Gandhi once said: “There is no 'way to peace,' there is only peace”.

### Supporting Unsavory Third-World Dictators

During the Cold War, the U.S. became addicted to propping up third world dictators as long as they were perceived to be anti-communist. Even some democratically elected leaders who were perceived by the U.S. as left-leaning and too independent to toe the US line were overthrown (Examples: A CIA-backed coup dissolved the last fairly elected parliament of Syria in 1949. There is also considerable evidence to suggest that Iran’s Mossadegh in 1953 and Chile’s Allende in 1973 – both democratically elected -- were disposed of with covert help from the CIA. More recently, when the Arab Spring resulted in the election of Morsi in Egypt, we were not happy and closed our eyes as the military took over the reins there and killed Egyptian democracy). The successors in all these cases were dictators who suppressed democracy. The United States supported all these right-wing autocrats even when they were hated by the populace: the Shah of Iran, Pinochet of Chile, Marcos of the Philippines, Thieu of South Vietnam, and Suharto of Indonesia are some more examples.
The United States often uses self-determination as an excuse to intervene in other countries on the side of one faction or another. If the nations so embroiled get split in the process, so be it. For instance, the present day Iraq is virtually (de facto) split into three autonomous, almost sovereign, nations – Southern Iraq as a Shia country, middle Iraq as a Sunni country, and Kurdistan in the North – apparently with the blessings of the US. Dexter Filkins (in the same article) also refers to the role of the longtime American diplomat Peter Galbraith when East Timor and Croatia became separate states. However, I cannot forget that a brutal civil war was fought in the U.S. in the 1860s which kept it as “one Nation under God, indivisible.” So, it is all right to fracture third world nations but not powerful nations! The hypocrisy, the double standard, here will not be lost on anyone except on American hyper patriots. Critics could be forgiven if they maintained that splitting helpless nations is America’s pastime.

Not long ago, some U.S. leaders supported Iraq’s Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war. Later, in the 1980s, they “created” the Taliban with the active support of Pakistan under the excuse of forming a force to fight against the Soviet Union (“Your enemy’s enemy is your friend” seems to have been their mantra). Apparently, these American leaders did not foresee that they were creating a “fundamentalist” monster that would turn against this country. Today, we are cooperating with Iran in our fight against ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham/Syria) while, at the same time, we are at odds with that country in our support of the rebels fighting Assad, the dictator of Syria. Such contradictions occur when foreign policy is pursued in an ad hoc and unprincipled manner rather than being based on justice, fairness and equity. There may not be permanent friends or permanent enemies, but there ought to be permanent values that should be guiding a nation.

Current US Policy toward Iran and Syria

Speaking of Iran, some Republicans are harshly criticizing President Obama’s “nuclear deal” with that country because they are convinced Iran cannot be trusted. One could argue that, back when our War of Independence was winding down and talks were going on in early 1780s for a peace treaty, “the new nation double-crossed its ally” (Kingsbury, p. 48). France, whose friendship was assiduously cultivated by Benjamin Franklin, had helped the Colonists financially and militarily during the Revolutionary War. Our country, however, concluded a
separate treaty with Britain without consulting the French, thus breaking our pledge to them (Wood, p. 87) and resumed trade with Britain soon after the war ended. Joyce Appleby, professor emerita of history at UCLA, remarked in this context that the family (the English and the American colonists) made up and left the French out (Kingsbury, p. 48). So our own (diplomatic) record from the birth of our nation isn’t spotless. With the history of some of our Founding Fathers behaving in a rather questionable, duplicitous manner still accessible, we’d better curb our audacity in accusing other countries of (potential) untrustworthiness.

In the context of the United States taking on misadventures in lands and among people it hardly knows and understands, Graeme Wood, a contributing editor for The Atlantic, observes that “we (the United States) have misunderstood the nature of the Islamic State” – a new threat -- on several dimensions (p. 80). And we seem to be rushing headlong into battles there in Mesopotamia.

After Russian bombing in Syria began, relentless pressure was building up on Obama to develop a swift and adequate response to this serious situation. The Cold War mentality raised its ugly head again. It is not just small countries (like Sweden, Zimbabwe or Chile) who are not planning a response; even big countries like China are, presumably, not planning to respond to the civil war in Syria. We, American citizens, need to ask questions like “Why do we have to react? Is it really our concern?” In light of the recent news item (The Idaho Statesman, October 9-10, 2015), “US ends effort to train rebels in Syria”, which reported that close to half a billion dollars from our taxes resulted in fewer than ten rebel soldiers ready to fight the Assad regime, one wonders: Are we ever going to learn? Will we ever stop intervening in affairs far away from our shores?

The lessons to be drawn from these events and from our international activities are that far-sighted statesmanship rather than expediency or contingency actions, and the purity of ideals as well as the purity of means, employed to achieve them, are paramount and cannot be sacrificed. The contradictions in USFP are too numerous and too unwise to be good for our future. We treat, for instance, Saudi Arabia, an authoritarian regime that has been a breeding ground for fundamentalism and terrorism, as our friend and client. By supporting such regimes, the U.S. makes enemies of those around the globe who are repressed, seemingly with its blessings. The world is thus dismayed when it sees the U.S.
supporting various despotic regimes while preaching democracy in the same breath.

**America’s Lack of Empathy**

As a young man growing up in India and as a student of international relations, I remember that, during Kennedy’s presidency, the United States was willing to risk a third world war to get some Soviet missiles off Cuban soil. Today, however, I witness American eagerness to co-opt the former Soviet satellites into NATO to encircle Russia. It appears that the U.S. cannot put itself in the shoes of the other. If we Americans didn’t like enemy missiles in our backyard, how do we expect Russia not to react negatively at the prospect of being surrounded by NATO countries? In this connection, one can argue that NATO should have been disbanded right after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since, in fact, it was an alliance formed mainly to defend against aggressive Soviet intentions – regardless of whatever other claims are made as the reasons for its founding -- it has no raison d’etre (no reason for existence) any more, unless we continue to equate Russia with the Soviet Union and desire to carry on with the Cold War mentality. In fact, NATO militates against that other international body, the United Nations, by intervening in conflicts everywhere, even outside its geographic sphere. Thus it undercuts the authority of the UN.

I can understand the temptation for the United States to capitalize on the love some of these newly independent nations have found for it. After the rather cool but proper relations India has had with the US for several decades during the era of third-world neutrality, it too has recently fallen in love with America-the-Charmer. The Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, has called India and the US as “natural allies.” In light of this new development, many Indians might find my strictures against the US foreign policy unpalatable. Of course, many Indians do not read US history, and those Indians who are born and educated here (like other Americans) are only exposed to air-brushed, white-washed US history.

A lack of empathy and an inability to see the world as someone else sees it (unawareness or cluelessness about other countries’ sensibilities) have been the hallmarks of US international relations. It is perhaps how one can define all empires. It seems that the United States as a nation cannot understand that other people also love their countries and resent superpowers meddling in their
affairs. The US has treated Latin America as its legitimate sphere of influence and put in dictators or removed dictators there, at will. A friend of mine cites a Mexican saying, “Alas, so far from God, so near the United States!” However, I admit that the interventions undertaken on humanitarian grounds and to prevent human rights abuses raise complex moral and realpolitik issues that have no simple answers.

Empires and their “National” Interests

In my view, another defining characteristic of an empire is its wide range of “national” interest, which tempts it to intervene everywhere. Several scholars, like Bacevich (P. 176), make similar observations: US administrations define national interest too broadly. That explains American interventions in the Middle East of the last several decades. Eland categorically claims, “The September 11 attacks resulted because the United States has become involved in a civil war within Islam” (P. 90). In this context, it is noteworthy that Sherle R. Schwenninger ventures to guess (The Nation, P. 33) “It is likely that there would have been no Benghazi, no civil war among competing Islamic militias, no spread of weapons or chaos in Libya, if Washington had refrained from militarily intervening against Qaddafi.”

Some defenders of empires maintain, with some truth, that imperial powers develop their colonies bringing in new capital, new technologies, and more modern administrative systems into unsophisticated regions of the world. However, these innovations were rarely brought in on the terms of the colonized. Williams emphasizes the same point throughout his book. Often, the costs for the ruled have outweighed the benefits to them. And, even more important, there is a deeply fulfilling psychological or emotional component to freedom, to self-rule. Nothing else can take its place: “Give me liberty or give me death.” An Indian political leader said around 1900 regarding the British Empire in India that, even assuming the British regime to be a good administration, no rule can match self-rule.

Many British scholars and diplomats claim that the British rule civilized the colonies by bestowing on them “a common rule of law and governance” during the heyday of the British Empire. Niall Ferguson, for instance, makes such a claim in his Empire (Reprint, 2004). The reason to allude to British claims in this essay
on USFP is that, similarly, some Americans claim how wonderful it is that the US also confers such benefits on the countries it invades. Incidentally, all empires in human history imposed their universal law and order on the people they conquered. In addition, I may however point out that such a claim absolutely makes no sense. Every society, civilization, or nation has law and order. No society, worth the name, can last or persist even for a few decades without law and order, let alone for centuries. The Philippines and Cuba had law and order (Currently, Somalia may be lawless, Nigeria or Sudan may be lawless; but they have been in the midst of civil wars). The world has had Mosaic Law, Manu’s (Hindu) Law, Hammurabi’s Law, Sharia Law, etc. Some of us may not like those legal systems, and some of those systems may be unjust and oppressive; but they are “law and order”, nonetheless. Reform must come from within, not imposed from outside by aliens. In this context, however, we have to admit that the almost-universally accepted doctrine of the sacrosanct nature of the nation-state does pose ethical and diplomatic dilemmas.

Most Americans of all political persuasions, from Tea Party conservatives to left-leaning liberals, agree on the principal contours and aims of USFP, leading to its continuity. Consequently, notwithstanding the party affiliation of the President and regardless of which party holds a majority in Congress, the neo-imperial character of USFP does not change, with a few exceptions – like the opening to China under President Nixon and, maybe, the very recent overtures toward Cuba during President Obama’s administration. However, I’d like to raise a legitimate question: Isn’t it time to revise these goals, given the considerably changed world of today?

**Too Slow American Awareness of a Changing World**

The awareness that the world is in the 21st century is dawning upon the United States rather too slowly. This is not the 18th or the 19th century when Native Americans were pushed out of their lands rather easily by white American settlers through their superior arms and superior numbers (not to mention, the aid of small pox). This is also not the century when territorial gains occurred through negotiated buying (like the Louisiana Purchase) and through conquest and annexation (like a half of the then Mexico). This is not even the first half of the
20th century (when the sun did not set on the British Empire). The lessons of nationalism and patriotism taught by the West have now been thoroughly learned and absorbed by the Third World. Another factor which has resulted in this American intellectual inertia is that paying attention to the historical and cultural influences or legacies in foreign countries is hard work and requires long, nuanced studies of those regions. Instead, promoting simplistic, easily understood and rhyming slogans like “Better dead than red” is easy. For several decades, US administrations refused to grasp and acknowledge the distinctions between civil wars and nationalist struggles (for unification, for instance) on the one hand and communist aggressions on the other. Mechanistic lumping together of all conflicts as communist-inspired had been the norm. Now similar perceptions, for instance, like labeling all conflict and unrest in the Moslem world as Islamic terrorism, continue to land the United States into unnecessary and doleful wars.

In fact, even before the buzz words of the West -- nationalism and patriotism – were known in Asia, ethnic groups with strong self-identity were not easily controlled by their imperial masters; their rebellions often resulted in their freedom. Most Americans, who may not know Indian history, will find the following example quite interesting and instructive in the context of US interventions: A mighty Mughal/Moslem emperor named Aurangzeb, whose empire then stretched from today’s Afghanistan to South-Central India, descended from Northern India into Western India around the last decades of the 17th century to crush a newly founded Maratha kingdom (a rebellious act in the eyes of the emperor). He had huge resources at his command – soldiers, weapons and other materials -- many times more than what the Marathas could muster. Aurangzeb stayed and fought in the Deccan/South-West India for over 25 years. Finally, he died there; his son -- exhausted and discouraged – gave up the campaign and left for the North.

Some of our leaders seem to be reluctant to accept that the world today is neither bi-polar nor uni-polar, that the rise of regional powers has rendered it multi-polar. One would expect the US to have learned from its Vietnam experience and, particularly, Senator John McCain, who was in Vietnamese prison for a number of years, to have learned a lesson too. Instead, he has turned into a hawk, eager to jump into wars. People like him and Senator Lindsay Graham of South Carolina now want the US to fight ISIS in the Middle-East and to tighten the
sanctions against Iran. The pressure on President Obama is steadily increasing. However, fighting stateless agents (on their turf), who are stirred by rigid fundamentalist doctrines of monotheistic religions and obsessed by apocalyptic visions, is most likely to be painfully unsuccessful and, indeed, quite disastrous for the United States. It seems to me that the hawks in this country are inspired by the likes of President Teddy Roosevelt who thought that a nation needed wars periodically; otherwise, it would lose its sap, its manliness. That is why I’d like to repeat: This is not the world of President Teddy Roosevelt anymore.

Again, I cannot overemphasize that I’m fully aware of the fact that quite a few Americans are conscious of the flaws in the USFP and are striving to bring about a healthy change in it. Many American scholars at various universities and area-study institutes have been active in educating their students and the public at large. But, at the same time, it’s also true that many entrenched interests with a good deal of clout and wealth are hard at work to influence those in power and to maintain the status quo.

**Urgent Need for Introspection**

I’m also fully aware that a perfect nation does not exist because we humans are not perfect. Hence, the concepts of Manifest Destiny and American Exceptionalism need to be taken with a grain of salt. Good is mixed with evil, everywhere. There are skeletons in every closet. Therefore, continuous and deliberate striving toward improvement should be everybody’s mission. One step toward an honest self-analysis would be for us Americans to stop pretending that we intervene in the civil strife of other nations to spread democracy and freedom. Other more powerful motives (like fighting a proxy war with Russia in Syria) sometimes take precedence. Besides, we need to be at least somewhat skeptical about holding American democracy as a model for all to follow because of the plutocratic undertones behind our mask of democracy. Democracy everywhere in the world is a work in progress. Moreover, as I have mentioned elsewhere in this essay, democracy and freedom cannot be gifted; people have to earn and constantly maintain these blessings themselves. We can locate one example supporting my assertion in US history itself: The Civil War only nominally, *de jure*, granted freedom to African Americans. They had to win it *in spirit* for themselves, 100 years later, with blood, sweat and tears – through the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.
Some Remedies

One thing that has struck me all along is how apt, fitting and still timely the recommendations (I made for the U.S. to follow, in an article written in 2001-02 and published in 2004, Limaye, p.438) are even today, after a lapse of almost fourteen years. Let the readers of this essay/Op Ed decide for themselves. Here are the recommendations I made then:

1. Pursue genuine attempts to promote democracy in those areas of the world where presently authoritarian or dictatorial regimes rule.
2. Be a good, well-behaved citizen of the world community of nations.
3. Call its troops home from abroad. In other words, close down its military bases on foreign soil.
4. Serve as a model of human rights protector for other nations by protecting human rights here at home.
5. Share its wealth with the poorest nations of the world, just because it has more.

The crux of the matter for me is that we as a nation must forsake the imperial ambitions that many of our political leaders and foreign policy experts entertain. Though power will be exercised and will justify itself, there are choices between military/hard power and persuasive/soft power. Many in the US call themselves Christian; the choice for such a nation should be soft power, the path followed by Jesus Christ two millennia ago and by Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Walesa in our time.

Concluding on an Optimistic Note

As I come to close this analytical narrative, I’d like to mention two positive chapters in this otherwise dismal tale: As many scholars have noted, American soft power has been doing remarkably well all over the world. American “can do” creative spirit is admired everywhere. Though America’s hard power, the use of its military muscle, of late, has led to disasters for the US itself and the world, America’s cultural influence (from movies to fast food, from literature to education) is spreading around speedily and effectively. The Economist of February 21, 2015, for instance, refers to a fast growing “yearning for American higher education.”
As the other positive aspect of American soft power (several students of American history and culture have emphasized this point too), let me mention the assimilative knack of the United States. This goes beyond the often-referred-to “melting pot”: That phase mainly covered the assimilation of white European elements into the demographics of this country. What I have in mind is a relatively recent phenomenon – the assimilation of non-white immigrants into American life. When one hears about the turmoil and the simmering discontent among the immigrant populations of Europe, one comes to deeply appreciate this strong and positive aspect of American soft power. I only hope we, as a nation, realize that soft power is more enduring and appealing for the very reason that it is non-coercive.

In conclusion, let me humbly suggest that the U.S. explore whether, for all its investment of money and people over the last 60 years from the Korean War to the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, it has had appreciable returns. America should ask itself whether it has created a positive image for itself around the world and whether its policies and actions have been serving its long-term interests and well-being. While the US is quick to insert itself into conflicts everywhere, outsiders notice the growing feelings of unease in some quarters of the United States regarding the still unaddressed problems here like police racial bias or profiling and the increasing inequality of incomes. As they say, charity begins at home. Some humility, introspection, and insight are in order for our nation -- the United States of America.

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**Acknowledgements**
Michael Allen, Mark Buchanan, Isaac Castellano, Robert Cornwell, Hema Haller, Erin Hern, Vishwas Kolhatkar, Diane Limaye, Nisha Limaye, Bob Mobley, Jim Stephens, Chaitram Talele, Shelton Woods, Chanda Yadavalli, Michael Zirinsky, ,