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Australian Journal of International Affairs

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/caji20

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To cite this article: Adarsh Badri (13 Oct 2024): The United States is a messianic state: rhetorical roots in US foreign policy since 1991, Australian Journal of International Affairs, DOI: 10.1080/10357718.2024.2415113

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2024.2415113

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Published online: 13 Oct 2024.

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AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2024.2415113

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The United States is a messianic state: rhetorical roots in US foreign policy since 1991

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ABSTRACT

How do we explain the United States' interventionist mindset in the international system since 1991? Since the end of the Cold War and the subsequent unipolar moment, America has actively promoted democracy and human rights globally. However, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and the Taliban's subsequent takeover prompts us to re-think the ideological roots of interventionism between 1991 and 2021. Scholars have taken two broad positions on how they view America: an empire or a hegemon. In this article, I suggest that two conceptions help explain the US actions and behaviour in the international system but do not explicitly outline the rhetorical roots of the US intentions. Drawing on historical instances of messianic tendencies in the global political structure, this paper argues that a messianic state is a nation-state that assumes the global responsibility of saving societies from an impending threat. As a messianic state, the US has used the discursive logic of saving others by drawing on American exceptionalism and the global vision of democratic peace. The messianic content in American foreign policy matured between 1991 and 2010, but it has been in steep decline since 2015 with the rise of China and American inwardness.

KEYWORDS

US foreign policy; messianic state; rhetoric and intentions; international interventions; democracy promotion

Introduction

The end of the Cold War and the subsequent 'unipolar moment' in 1991 allowed the United States to take up the mantle of global leadership. The United States, as a superpower, sought to advance 'liberal international order' and 'freedom, democracy, and human rights' worldwide (O'Rourke and Moodie 2020). Three years before the end of the Cold War, in 1989, Historian Paul M. Kennedy (1989) had prematurely declared the end of an American era as the 'global superpower'. Kennedy used the term 'imperial overstretch'—a phenomenon arising from the growing imbalance between global military commitments and domestic economic resources—to explain the demise of the US hegemony. However, the unipolar moment marked a new beginning of an American era. As Charles Krauthammer (1990, 23) would put it, the 'most striking feature of the post-Cold War world [was] its unipolarity,'—the 'American preeminence' that enabled it to intervene in any conflict in the world it deemed fit.

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Writing in the decade after 1991, Kennedy (2002) reversed his initial judgement. He wrote: ‘Nothing has ever existed like this disparity of power; nothing.’ He added: ‘Being number one at great cost is one thing; being the world’s single superpower on the cheap is astonishing’. By the dawn of the new century, America has already established itself as an indomitable superpower, with some even calling it the ‘American Century’ (Owen 2003).

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent end of bipolarity in the international order enabled the United States to re-envision its grand strategy in light of the changing global geopolitical landscape (Zarifian 2015). The grand strategic thinking in America represented itself as more than just another great power, so much so that whatever happened in America was deemed a significant strategic value compared to what happens in smaller (less powerful) states. Loaded with the intellectual arsenal of ‘democratic peace’ and ‘American exceptionalism’, the US grand strategy sought to promote democracy globally and advance a liberal international order (Restad 2017; Russett *et al*. 1995). As G. John Ikenberry (2020, xi) has argued, American foreign policy since 1991 has been centred around the Wilsonian vision of creating a world free of ‘tyranny, brutality and intolerance’ and ‘safe for democracy’.

Premised on advancing liberal democratic regimes globally, the American foreign policy rapidly advanced its ‘interventionist’ worldview, enabling the US to intervene in societies engulfed in conflicts. Since the end of the Cold War, the US has attempted 188 military interventions globally, up from about forty-six between 1948 and 1991 (Toft 2017). George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton’s era, which inherited post-Cold War America, viewed ‘democracy promotion’ as an essential element of their foreign policy efforts (Cox, Ikenberry, and Inoguchi 2000, 18–19). The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, during the administration of President George W. Bush, allowed the US to unleash a global war on terror (GWOT), resulting in its involvement in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. However, the two-decade American democratic experiment in Afghanistan came to a shambolic end in August 2021 when the Taliban troops took control of the country (Zucchino 2021).

Moreover, there has been only modest success in these military interventions—and on several occasions, the US has even failed to achieve its ‘intended political objectives’ (Toft 2017; Torreon 2022). If this is so, how do we explain the intent behind the US interventions in other societies? What does it tell us about the United States and its interventionist mindset between 1991 and 2021? How do we understand and explain the ideological and rhetorical valence in democracy promotion during this period?

Historians and political scientists have used two interconnected conceptions to explain the US behaviour, i.e. that of an empire and of a global hegemon (Gilpin 1981; Ikenberry 2020; Kindleberger 1973; Nye 2002). Scholars dealing with America as an empire discuss how it has tried to mould the world in its image (Cox 2005; Cox, Ikenberry, and Inoguchi 2000; Hardt and Negri 2000; Ignatieff 2003a). Michael Cox (2005, 25–27), for example, observes that American foreign policy elites consider themselves the ‘masters of a universe’ where the US has a unique role to play: that of an empire. Scholars dealing with America as a global hegemon have drawn on—and advanced—the Waltzian (1979; 1964) structural realism and the Balance of Power theory to explain the American hegemony as a feature of international politics (Ikenberry and Nexon 2019; Webb and Krasner 1989). Even though both these conceptions provide analytical explanations of US behaviour in terms of its outcomes, they are insufficient

to understand the ideological and rhetorical content of American intentions. What motives and intentions drive the US foreign policy to intervene in other societies?

In this paper, I conceptualise the 'messianic state' as a form of the nation-state that takes up the global role of saving other societies from an impending threat.[1] I highlight three interrelated features that make for a messianic state, i.e. assumptions of superiority/exceptionalism, altruistic vision for the world, and the discursive practice of benevolence. I argue that the ideological and rhetorical valence of the US foreign policy enabled it to become a messianic state between 1991 and 2021. To conduct this research, I examine the National Security Strategy (NSS) documents since the 1990s to demonstrate America as a messianic state.

The article is structured as follows: First, I examine how the existing scholars discuss the United States' global role as that of an empire and a global hegemon. Here, I suggest the need to examine the rhetoric and intentions in the US foreign policy behaviour. Next, I conceptualise the 'messianic state'—as those states seeking to save other societies—and situate the messiah tendencies in the historical context. After that, this article explores America's messianic behaviour between 1991 and 2021, premised on 'democratic peace' and 'American exceptionalism'. Finally, I conclude by highlighting some of the key arguments in this article.

The United States as an empire and a global hegemon

America as an empire

The end of the Cold War prompted a renewed interest among academics and analysts in portraying the United States as an empire. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the United States and the subsequent 'Global War on Terror' further propelled the American empire discourse. Some months before the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Joseph Nye (2002, 60) writes: 'Respected analysts on both the left and the right as beginning to refer to "American empire" as a dominant narrative of the twenty-first century'.

Prominently, there are three schools of thought in the American Empire Debate.[2] The first school argues that America is an empire sustained on neo-imperialist tendencies. The second school deems American empire as benevolent. The third school thinks of America as not an empire.

The first school of thought argues that empires take varied forms to establish dominance and 'pursue their ambitions' (Renfro and Alessio 2020). Some scholars look at empire as a logic of organisation, reflecting on how America has established military outposts and operational bases worldwide (MacDonald 2009; Mcconaughey, Musgrave, and Nexon 2018; Motyl 1999; Spruyt 2008). They suggest that America has pursued cultural domination through globalisation, McDonaldization, and Artificial Intelligence. Some, like Niall Ferguson (2005), argue that Americans should embrace the term 'empire' rather than be averse. And others, like Michael Cox (2005), treat America as an 'empire by denial'.

The second school of thought argues that the American empire is one of necessity, benevolence, and hegemony. When Rome and Britain conquered the world, these scholars argue that America has only emancipated the world (Maier 2002). Geir Lundestad (1986), in his essay 'Empire by Invitation(?)', notes that the US is an empire that has

been called to serve the world. Robert Kagan (1998) writes: 'The benevolent hegemony exercised by the United States is good for the vast portion of the world's population'. Similarly, Michael Ignatieff (2003b) describes the 'awesome thing that America is becoming'—the only nation to police the world, maintain military forces across different continents, guarantee the survival of other nation-states, drive globalisation, and fill the 'hearts and minds of an entire planet with its dreams and desires'.

The third school of thought argues that America is not an empire. These scholars point to the definitional ambiguities and intentions. For instance, the word 'empire' derives from *imperium*, a Roman term denoting superior executive power in charge of soldiers (or legions) and judicial matters (Maier 2006). Loosely, the term empire refers to the rule over others. All empires in history have comprised geographical expansion, wealth accumulation and redistribution, and cultural appropriation (Doyle 1986; Howe 2002). Although there is some agreement over what constitutes an empire, April Biccum (2018) has observed that the 'lack of consensus' over the definition of the term has led to a 'dearth of systematic theorisation'. In that vein, Charles Maier (2006, 24–25) argues: 'If having an empire is defined as possessing formal sovereignty over overseas or contiguous territories, such that all political decision-making must originate in, or be ratified by Washington, then no, the United States is not usefully construed as an empire … So, too, if having an empire means that [they] control territory abroad by virtue of [their] continuing military presence, then the United States does not have an empire.' The US foreign policy since the 1990s has advanced liberal democracy and advocated for human rights and freedom,[3] and some scholars think this is un-empire-like. Desmond King (2006), for instance, notes: 'Certainly, the USA manifest some aspects of imperialism and empire-building, but this is not the same as being an empire. If it is an empire, it is an empire by accident, not by design.' For King, empire-like characteristics do not make a nation-state an empire.

America as a global hegemon

Political scientists and IR scholars have increasingly adopted the term 'hegemony' in their discussions about great-power relations, conflict and cooperation, identity, and national interest. Some scholars have even used the terms 'empire' and 'hegemony' interchangeably (Ikenberry 2002; 2004). However, before I discuss further, I acknowledge the complex nature of 'hegemony studies' and their methodological and theoretical diversity (Goh 2013; Ikenberry and Nexon 2019; Nexon and Neumann 2018).

The term 'hegemony' originates from the Greek language, where 'hegemonia' first appeared to represent the dominance of Sparta as the leader of an alliance of city-states (Anderson 2017). Similar conceptions around hegemony have also appeared in ancient China and elsewhere (Ikenberry and Nexon 2019). Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (2012) define hegemony as a structure where 'one state is powerful enough to maintain the essential rules governing interstate relations and willing to do so'. Robert Gilpin (1981) states that hegemons use 'preponderant economic and military power' to perform functions in the international system. Although a comprehensive review of hegemony literature in IR is beyond the scope of this article, I have divided the literature into three broad strands in the context of the United States.

The first strand deals with America as a realist hegemon—a power-seeking, profit-maximising global power. The Hegemonic Stability Theory posits that states cooperate

economically when a hegemonic power holds them together (Kindleberger 1973; Webb and Krasner 1989). Charles Kindleberger (1973) has highlighted that 'for the world economy to be stabilised, there has to be a stabiliser, one stabiliser'—and this is the function of the hegemon. John Mearsheimer (2001) outlines how the anarchic international system paves the way for power-hungry states to install themselves as regional or global hegemons. As a realist hegemon, the United States acted as a 'global policeman' and imposed its will on other states. Drawing on this logic, the absence of a bipolar world order enabled the US to conduct military interventions abroad—from the Gulf War (1990/91) to Somalia (1992/93) to Afghanistan and Iraq (2002/03), and elsewhere.

The second strand argues that America is a liberal hegemon—a democracy promoting, rules-based order maintaining, global power. While the liberals have traditionally found it difficult to reconcile the 'existence of public goods putatively supplied by hegemons', the recent scholarly efforts have sought to develop arguments around American leadership and liberal order (Deudney and Ikenberry 1999). John Ikenberry (2011, 2–3) explains liberal hegemony as 'a distinctive type of liberal international order—a liberal hegemonic order. The United States did not encourage open and rules-based order. It became the hegemonic organiser and manager of that order'. According to Ikenberry (2002), the US foreign policy is one of 'liberal hegemony'. This argument suggests that the United States 'uses its position of global power to exert influence over others while promoting Western liberal values, including constitutional democracy, the rule of law, economic freedom, individual rights and freedoms, and an appreciation of the forces of spontaneous orders' (Coyne and Blanco 2016).

The third strand of the hegemony debate seeks to integrate the often-neglected ideational aspects into the foundation of the American hegemonic order. Inderjeet Parmar (2018), for instance, argued that underneath all the material capabilities of the United States lies the 'ideational-infrastructural' power. Adopting a neo-Gramscian logic, Paramar explores how hegemony is manifested in transnational elite knowledge networks that seek to legitimize American hegemonic leadership.

Despite their theoretical divergences, the conceptions about America as an empire and a global hegemon have sought to explain the behaviour of the American state—by logically making sense of the conditions in which the US has become an empire or a hegemon.[4] While the 'empire' literature has treated the US empire as a historical configuration of world politics, the 'hegemonic' scholarship has alluded to US hegemony as an observable feature of the global order. In essence, both conceptions have provided a lens through which one could objectively make sense of how the world is structured and what role America plays in it. Departing from these two objective categories around American behaviour, I understand America as a 'messianic state' to understand the intentions and ideologies driving US interventions worldwide. In this sense, I seek to understand what rhetorical content allows the US interventionist behaviour despite its limited successes.

In *The Hell of Good Intentions*, Walt (2018) dissects the follies in the American foreign policy premised on liberal internationalism and the commitment to democracy promotion. Although the term 'intention' has been treated rather dismissively as an opposition to 'interest' in foreign policy discourses, it is critical to examine what rhetoric and intention a foreign policy decision carries with it (Goddard and Krebs 2015; Salazar 2005). Moreover, rhetoric like 'Defending the Free World', 'protecting our National

Security', and 'countering the Communist Menace' have all pervaded the history of US foreign policy (Wander 1984). The rhetoric and intentions provide a clearer logic to ideological imperatives driving an action (Winkler and Jerdén 2023). I argue that 'messianism' captures what the US intends and expressly claims. I will show further that the messianic mindset is a feature of political intention that helps set aspirations and preferences through rhetorical claims. Unlike the 'empire' and 'hegemony' scholarships, messianism does not claim to explain the structure of world politics objectively. In this sense, a state could have a messianic mindset and wind up in a hegemonic or imperial structure. A state could be an empire or a hegemon but use messianic logic to justify its behaviour. Therefore, in the following sections, I conceptualise the messianic state as an analytical category for understanding the rhetorical elements in world politics. Drawing on this conceptual category, I discuss how the US is a messianic state by outlining the rhetorical valence around democracy promotion abroad in its National Security Strategy documents.

Conceptualising the messianic state

The term 'messiah' originates in Abrahamic religions, referring to 'the anointed one', a 'saviour', and a 'liberator'. In the Jewish faith, the Messiah is a descendant of the paternal Davidic line, who believe that his arrival in future will lead to the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Christians refer to Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, believing that the messianic prophecies were fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus. Similar religious beliefs are also prominent in Islam. While it is beyond the scope of this article to outline the religious reading of messianism, I suggest that the term 'messiah' has a significant political valence.

In doing so, I situate my work in the scholarship on political theology in international studies. Broad scholarly investigations into theology have suggested that IR terms, such as anarchy, order, interest, and foreign policy, have theological origins (Bain 2020; 2023b; 2017; Paipais 2020). For instance, in examining Hedley Bull's classical text *The Anarchic Society,* William Bain (2017, 59) argues that Bull's understanding of order heavily borrows from the Christian theological debate about 'the nature of God and the extent of his power'. Elsewhere, Bain (2023a, 1) has argued that 'political theology offers not only a better understanding of the vocabulary we use to make sense of international relations, but also a discourse that subverts an ideational matrix that disciplines difference through the binary logic of West and non-West, rational and irrational, secular and religious, and so forth.' In recent years, some scholars have also pointed to how God has centred in the US foreign policy-making since George Washington to the present (Magee 2017; Preston 2010; Taydas and Olson 2022).

Drawing on these scholarly interventions, I suggest that messianism has permeated Western political thought extensively. Michael Walzer (1985: 135; 2012) notes: 'Messianism is the greatest temptation of Western politics'. The core of messianic logic sustains seeking to save something/someone and creating a better future. In the context of a nation-state, a messiah is a state that acts as 'the anointed one' to save the world.

A messianic state is a form of a nation-state that strives to save other societies from an impending threat. There are three interrelated features of a messianic state. *First,* these states operate on an implicit assumption of their relative superiority—often premised

on the logic of 'exceptionalism'. *Second,* a messianic state always has an altruistic vision for the world. These visions often emanate from their beliefs and (mis)understandings about the *supposed* threats grappled by other societies. *Third,* messianic states tend to use discursive practices of benevolence to justify their actions and behaviour. Much like what Edward Said (2003) thought about empires, the messianic states tell themselves and the world that their 'mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate'. In essence, all messianic states operate under the premise that they are ordained by God or nature to save societies—and the world—from their perpetual decadence.

Historically, messianic tendencies have existed within the religious Crusades as well as the master-slave structures of Greeko-Roman societies. The military and religious expeditions between Christians and Muslims to secure holy sites, known as Crusades, were some early manifestations of the messiah mentality in the eleventh century. These Crusades justified violence as sanctioned by faith against unbelievers and those perceived enemies of the faith. In some sense, as Francis Bacon puts it, the Crusades were '[a] rendezvous of cracked brains that wore their feather in their head instead of their hat' (Tyerman 2007). For analytical simplicity, however, I will reference messiah mentalities since the institution of the Westphalian system of modern states.

The conquest of the Americas in the sixteenth century and the subsequent European colonialism of Asia and Africa was the first instance of messianic mentalities within the modern state structure. Three simultaneous yet distinct events occurred in seventeenth-century Europe: the advent of modernity, a renewed sense of identity and nationalism, and widespread colonialism. European colonialism had harsh mercantilist economic policies that benefited the home country's economy at the expense of the colony. At the same time, colonialism was also a conquest of the mind (Cohn 1996; Dirks 2001). Colonialism imposed and maintained European racial supremacy while simultaneously sustaining the narrative of backwardness, barbarism, and savagery of the colonised. As the pro-imperialist poet Rudyard Kipling put it, civilising the barbarians was 'the white man's burden' (Kipling 1899; Said 1979).

Postcolonial scholarship, which emerged in the early 1970s, has demonstrated various aspects of colonial powers and how they operated in colonised societies (Bhabha 1994; Fanon 1961; Mbembe 2001; Said 1979; Spivak 1999). Edward Said has significantly contributed to studying the cultural project of colonialism. He defines Orientalism as 'a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and the Occident' (Said 1979, 1–2). Orient was an object of knowing in their classes, courtrooms, and prisons. Orientalism always sustained 'us' Europeans against 'those' non-Europeans, with a presumed 'flexible positional superiority' over the Orient.

European colonial nation-states adopted a discursive practice of benevolence to justify their rule over the colonised natives. These discourses reinforced that the natives were savage and uncivilised barbarians—and that they worshipped no true God but sticks and stones. European rulers believed they were on a benevolent 'civilizing mission' who claimed to be readying 'natives' for self-rule. In its most violent manifestations, between 1885 and 1908, the Belgian King Leopold II committed large-scale atrocities in the Congo Free State. Under the pretext of establishing an international benevolent committee to propagate civilisation in Africa, Leopold II exterminated over ten million people in Congo (Hochschild 1999). Similar colonial excesses in slavery, mass killings, and ethnic cleansing have been documented throughout colonial history.

After the Second World War, the Soviet Union, as the leader of the communist bloc, took up the mantle of propagating the Marxist-Leninist doctrine of worldwide proletarian revolution and world domination. The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917 was seen as the vanguard of the worldwide socialist revolution. The slogan 'Workers of the world, unite!' was effectively used across societies to establish a Communist International. The Soviet Union began to propagate its own 'distorted Marxism' across other societies, with 'an apocalyptic drive to universal revolution' (Crankshaw 1957). In the 1957 essay, Edward Crankshaw (1957) writes: 'Stalin was adept at using, or abusing, a doctrinaire theory of history as a smoke screen to cover his imperial designs. By this means, he gained control of Poland, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, half of Austria, Albania, and, for a short time, Yugoslavia. He was able to stir up trouble in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.' This behaviour of the Soviet Union was what Winston Churchill remarked as 'a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma' (quoted in Schmeltzer 1992).

The Soviet Union pushed forth the Marxist logic of a stateless society. Rhetorically, the Soviet Union presented the capitalist state system as exploitative and sought to replace it with the system of communes. The construction of socialism in the Soviet Union was seen as an important exemplar to the rest of the world. As the world leader of the socialist society, the Soviet Union further propelled revolutionary zeal among other societies—to take up the mantle of world communism and save the world from capitalism. During the Cold War years, the Soviet Union, as a messiah, used discursive propaganda tools in public meetings, art forms, newspapers, books, and theatre to propagate communist ideals. For instance, the Soviet intelligence agencies are estimated to have spent over $1 billion on propaganda during the Vietnam War (Lunev and Winkler 1998). Kremlin media networks—*Pravda, TASS* and *Novosti*—were instrumental in pushing propaganda about the socialist revolution in the Soviet Union and elsewhere.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 allowed the United States, as the sole superpower, to lead the world. The unipolar moment marked the emergence of the US as a messianic state. To examine the messianic nature of US foreign policy, I examine the National Security Strategy (NSS) documents published by different administrations between 1991 and 2021. These strategy documents will help us understand the rhetoric around the global order as well as better examine the intentions of various American administrations about the United States' role in shaping and sustaining it. These documents will further point us to the continuities and changes pursued by different administrations in their foreign policy rhetorics.

The United States as a messianic state

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has taken up the mantle of a messianic state. In order to examine America as a messianic state, I will need to show how three characteristics of a messianic state—an implicit assumption of relative superiority, an altruistic vision for the world, and a discursive practice of benevolence—come together in its rhetorical practices about its intentions. Here, I discuss that American superiority emanates from its exceptionalism; the altruistic vision for the world is situated in its enthusiastic adoption of democracy promotion globally; and the discursive practice of benevolence arises from leaders' speeches about their intentions.

American exceptionalism

The end of the Cold War marked America's self-perception as 'the last hope on the earth', 'leader of the free world', and 'an empire of liberty'. These ideas had their origins in American exceptionalism—a claim of relative superiority in the international system. American exceptionalism is premised on three notions: First, the United States is distinct from the rest of the Old World. Second, the US plays a 'unique role' in the world. Third, the United States will 'resist the laws of history' (challenging the decline of empires) (Restad 2017).

In essence, American exceptionalism suggests that America is an outlier. That is, it is better than other societies—with a superior culture and a unique mission to transform the world for good (Walt 2011). The roots of American exceptionalism go back to the founding of America, with Thomas Jefferson envisaging America as the world's great 'Empire of Liberty'—which would become a beacon of light for other societies. The collapse of the Soviet Union strengthened American exceptionalism in public discourse.

This exceptionalism has been best captured in Dick Cheney's 2016 book, *Exceptional: Why the World Needs a Powerful America.* Cheney writes: 'We are, as Lincoln said, "the last best hope on earth". We are not just one more nation, one more same entity on the world stage. We have been essential to the preservation and progress of freedom, and those who lead us in the years ahead must remind us, as Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Reagan did, of the unique role we play. Neither they nor we should ever forget that we are, in fact, exceptional' (Cheney and Cheney 2016). Similarly, Kagan (2002) writes: 'Americans have never accepted the principles of Europe's old order, never embraced the Machiavellian perspective. The United States is a liberal, progressive society through and through, and to the extent that Americans believe in power, they believe it must be a means of advancing the principles of a liberal civilization and a liberal world order.' This rhetoric of exceptionalism was crucial to situating the US as a global messiah. American exceptionalism enables the Orientalist tendency to place itself on a pedestal and look at the world.

Democracy promotion

Having considered the principle of exceptionalism, I now discuss how exceptionalism enables democracy promotion as an altruistic vision for the world. Taking a cue from President Woodrow Wilson, who once proclaimed that America should make the 'world safe for democracy', the subsequent American leadership has pursued the path of democracy promotion globally (Ikenberry 2020). Since the 1990s, with the socialist world no longer being a threat, the American leadership took a renewed interest in propagating liberal democracy worldwide. Moreover, a renewed academic enthusiasm for the democratic peace theory, which suggests that no two mature democracies go to war with each other, further pushed for democracy promotion globally.

Writing in the summer of 1989, Francis Fukuyama's 'The End of History?' announced the triumph of liberal democracy over all ideological forces. He added: 'What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form

of human Government' (Fukuyama 1989). Fukuyama's thesis—and the subsequent formulations of democratic peace—became a potent weapon for the US foreign policy thinkers to adopt the 'democratic promotion' project worldwide.

Drawing on an impressive corpus of Immanuel Kant, democratic peace theorists argued that democracies do not go to war with other democracies because of shared norms, economic relations, and political checks and balances that sustain them (Russett 1995; Russett *et al.* 1995). The argument goes that even though democracies may sometimes become embroiled in conflicts with non-democracies, they 'almost never fight each other' (Reiter 2017). Moreover, since the birth of modern democracies in the early nineteenth Century, 'two mature democracies have never experienced intense violent conflicts with each other, incurring at least 1,000 battle dead' (Reiter 2017). In their explanations about why democracies do not wage war against each other, scholars have outlined two arguments: One, democratic political institutions nurture peace between democracies. Two, democracies value norms. They emphasise nonviolent means of conflict resolution, allowing diplomacy, mediation, and international law to take precedence over violent means (Reiter 2017). The central claim that 'democracy causes peace', Stephanie Lawson (2006) has noted, was 'virtually all US foreign policy was underpinned by the belief that America has a unique mission, even divine destiny, to propagate the values of freedom throughout the world'.

With the intellectual arsenal of democratic peace in place, the United States, as a sole superpower, sought to free the world of autocratic influences. In the 1990s, President George Bush and Bill Clinton pushed democracy promotion as the centrepiece of their foreign policy (Carothers 1999). Following the 1991 Gulf War, the US leadership openly advocated toppling the Iraqi regime that Saddam Hussain led. President Bush further encouraged 'the Iraqi military and Iraqi people to take matters [into] their own hands and force Saddam Hussain, the dictator, to step aside' (Zenko 2016). By 1993, the democratic-peace thesis had made inroads into the US foreign policy, and America had already embroiled itself in Somalia, Namibia, Benin, Ethiopia, Zambia, Gabon, Congo, and South Africa (The White House 1993, 5–7). The 1993 Strategy document also noted that it was vital for the US to create the twenty-first century as the 'Age of Democratic Peace' (The White House 1993, 21).

In the second State of the Union address, Bill Clinton (1994) said: 'Ultimately, the best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere. Democracies don't attack each other. They make better trading partners and partners in diplomacy'. Elsewhere, Clinton (1997) added, 'The world's greatest democracy will lead a whole world of democracies'. This vision is further clarified in his administration's strategy document. The 1994 Strategy document noted that the United States's 'long-term goal is a world in which each major power is democratic, with many other nations joining the community of market democracies as well' (The White House 1994, 20). Indrajit Parmar (2013) has argued that the intellectual canon of the democratic peace theory was influential in the Clinton administration, especially in its propagation of democracy promotion abroad.

Following the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, President George W. Bush launched the Global War on Terrorism, which would shape Afghanistan for the next two decades. In his Congressional address on October 7, President Bush declared that the war on terror would dismantle al-Qaeda, Islamic State terror networks,

and those governments that support them. In the wake of 9/11, the Bush administration saw the spread of democracy as an essential measure in sustaining global peace. The 2002 Strategy document added: 'In the war against global terrorism, we will never forget that we are ultimately fighting for our democratic values and way of life' (The White House 2002, 7).

The ideas of democracy promotion had now entered the dawn of a new century. However, the interlocutors for these ideas became known as liberal internationalists and neo-conservatives (Boot 2004; Dusanic and Penev 2009; Grondin 2005; Ikenberry 2011; 2004; Walt 2024). Both Liberal Internationalists and Neoconservatives (also Neocons), despite their differences, had some similarities: they both claimed to be Wilsonians (Desch 2008). These policymakers, thinkers, and politicians had been an outspoken 'advocate for aggressive and, if necessary, unilateral action by the United States to promote democracy, human rights, and free markets, and to maintain US primary around the world' (Boot 2004, 20). Neocons championed American interventions in the Balkans and elsewhere. The ambitious Strategy document of 2002, which called for the US primacy in democracy promotion and the fight against terrorism, was a 'quintessentially Neoconservative document' (Boot 2004). In many ways, the neoconservative and the liberal internationalist ideologies tend to act as examples of messianic mentalities that propelled democracy promotion globally.

Discursive practice of benevolence

The United States, as a messianic state, has consistently adopted discursive benevolence in its rhetorical strategies between 1991 and 2021. The discursive content of benevolence allows America to push its democratic promotion abroad as a mechanism through which it creates a better world. This content of benevolence is better captured in an article published in the *Baltimore Sun* titled: 'The World's Protector'. Its author, George Geyer (1992), noted that 'it is in the American experience—in our entire moral makeup—to believe not only that we can save the world, but also that world is saveable'.

By 1993, the discursive elements of benevolence began to appear in the NSS documents. The document read: 'Only a few years ago, Central America, Southeast Asia, Southern Africa and the Middle East were trapped in the cycle of intractable violence and human misery. Today, with the help of America, all are on the road to peace' (The White House 1993). It further added: 'The impoverished, the oppressed, and the weak have always looked to the United States to be strong, to be capable, and to care. Perhaps more than anything else, they have depended on us to lead. And lead we have' (The White House 1993). In these quotes, the phrases 'help of America' and 'looked to the United States to be strong' suggest both the *supposed* hierarchical dependence and the *altruistic* benevolence of the American state towards others. Rhetoric such as this is replete in policy documents and speeches of leaders, intended to convey the messianic mentality of the United States.

Similar rhetoric about benevolence resurfaced again during the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the Iraq War in 2003. For instance, Bush (2001) stated: 'The oppressed people of Afghanistan will know the generosity of America and our allies. As we strike military targets, we'll drop food, medicine and supplies to the starving and suffering men and women and children of Afghanistan.' Later, a year into the war on terror, the

Bush administration's NSS document added that the US would use 'unprecedented—and unequalled—strength and influence in the world' to defeat the terror networks (The White House 2002).

Under the pretext of the global war on terror, the United States began its war on Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 2003. Even when the UN inspection team led by Hans Blix had declared that there was no conclusive evidence for the existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), the American leadership invaded Iraq (United Nations 2003). However, the rhetoric of benevolence followed the invasion of Iraq. In his radio address on March 22, 2003, President Bush said: 'Our mission is clear, to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, to end Saddam Hussein's support for terrorism, and to free the Iraqi people' (Bush 2003). Despite the resounding criticism against its invasion of Iraq (Walt and Mearsheimer 2009), the 2006 NSS document declared that Afghans and Iraqis have 'replaced tyrannies with democracies' (The White House 2006, 2). In essence, the Global War on Terrorism strengthened the American messianic mindset about *supposedly* lifting 'the hopes of the Iraqi people'—in their fight against Saddam's regime. As a messianic state with a discursive benevolence of freeing the people from other societies, it exported democracy abroad—to societies ravaged by terrorism, conflict, poverty, and authoritarian despotism.

Decline of the US as a messianic state

It is unclear when the messianic mindset slowly began to recede in the US context. However, some broad trends and contexts can give us a better sense of the phenomenon. The year was 2009, when Americans had, for the first time in their history, elected a Black President, Barack Obama. He assumed office determined to end the 'seemingly endless war on terrorism' and had even promised to stop using the phrase 'war on terrorism' (Davis 2011; Stern 2015). Despite these promises, the first NSS document of the Obama administration retained the messianic logic of promoting 'democracy and human rights abroad' (The White House 2010, 37). Moreover, the strategy of 'countering violent extremism' was marred by excessive surveillance and an unprecedented rise of civilian causalities due to armed drone attacks (Stern 2015). By 2010, Obama had withdrawn from Iraq, declaring that 'ending this war is not only in Iraq's interest—it's in our own' (Stern 2015). A year later, in May 2011, the US Navy SEALs killed Osama bin Laden, who was in hiding in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

After the death of bin Laden, the US began its efforts to transfer power to a democratic government in Afghanistan. With the Afghanistan transition still underway, the US-led NATO forces intervened in Libya in 2011, culminating in the killing of Muammar Gaddafi, its supreme leader. By 2014, post-Saddam Iraq, Assad's Syria, and post-Gaddafi Libya were under the control of the Islamic State. In response to the rise of militant Islamic fundamentalism, the US was entangled in a new war with ISIS in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and others. The war in Afghanistan had gained the currency of a 'forever war', even as President Obama vowed to end it.

The decline of the US as a messianic state gained intensity with the election of President Donald Trump, who had vowed to 'quickly and decisively bomb the hell out of ISIS' and make sure no one will 'mess with' the US (Brechenmacher and Feldstein 2017). By now, the focus of the US foreign policy had turned inwards—and the Strategy document

reflected it: 'protect American people, the homeland, and the American way of life', 'promote American prosperity', 'preserve peace through strength', and 'advance American influence' (The White House 2017, 3–4). With America's global role taking a hit, the messianic mindset had receded significantly in policy circles and political rhetoric. By 2020, with no end in sight for the war in Afghanistan, US officials decided to seal the deal with the Taliban (Borger 2022). Subsequently, after two decades of tumultuous occupation, the US withdrew the last of its troops from Afghanistan in 2021.

For over three decades, between 1991 and 2021, the US has spent billions of dollars yearly to advance democracy and human rights globally. The US annual spending on democracy promotion had exceeded $700 million by the mid-1990s (Carothers 1999). Some researchers at the Watson Institute (2021) have even estimated that the US has spent nearly $2.3 trillion in Afghanistan since 2001.

With the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the messianic mindset in the US foreign policy has been drawn to a close. However, notably after 2015, the Strategy documents had already stopped discussing democracy promotion with the same enthusiasm as earlier. Two reasons could be pointed out at the outset. First, China has emerged as a serious challenger to the US hegemony in recent years. As a result, sufficient energy, focus, and resources have been shifted towards tackling the China challenge. Second, the American national character has dramatically changed to look inward—as well as enabled the thinking of 'lead with caution' to take precedence. Both the China challenge and the American inwardness may have caused a steady decline in the messianic content of American foreign policy.

In essence, characterising the US as a messianic state helps us understand the rhetorical content around the intentions of American interventions globally. Between 1991 and 2021, the United States integrated the narrations of American exceptionalism and democracy promotion with discursive benevolence practices to sustain its messianic project. By 2015, the messianic mindset of America's foreign policy has steadily declined with Trump's 'America First' inwardness and the rise of China in the international order.

Concluding summary

In this article, I discussed that since the end of the Cold War, the United States has assumed the global mantle of a messianic state, which enabled America to propagate democracy and liberal international order across societies. I argue that the messianic tendencies in the US behaviour capture the rhetorical content of its intentions—that is, of saving other societies from their immanent decadence. Even though messianism was significant between 1991 and 2010 in the US context, there has been a steady decline since 2015. To make these arguments, I first outlined two conceptions—empire and hegemon —that present an objective overview of the US role in the world since 1991. Even though the two concepts have significant overlaps and divergences, scholars on empire and hegemony tend to explain the US behaviour in the existing international system. However, to complement these conceptions, I understand messianism as a rhetorical and ideological logic in American interventions globally.

This article has highlighted that a messianic state is a form of a nation-state that seeks to save other societies from an impending threat. I have highlighted three interrelated features about how the messianic state functions—mainly by sustaining a logic of

exceptionalism, presenting an alternative global vision, and practising the discursive logic of benevolence. I have highlighted historical examples in the form of European colonial rule, the Soviet Union during the Cold War era, and the United States since the end of the Cold War. Further, I have discussed that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States emerged as a global messiah. Its messianic behaviour was supplemented by the 'democratic-peace' thesis and the 'American exceptionalism', which enabled the US to think of itself as having a higher purpose—of creating a peaceful international system, establishing democracies globally, and saving the world. Drawing on insights from the National Security Strategy documents between 1991 and 2021, I have demonstrated the discursive practices of benevolence in America's messianic project.

Notes

1. I first attempted to understand the United States as a 'Messiah State' in an opinion article (written with Anurag Tripathi) published in the *Economic & Political Weekly* (Tripathi and Badri 2022).
2. The classification here is merely representational and non-exhaustive.
3. This is not to say that America has not been hypocritical and non-self-interested. My discussion of America's messianic tendencies will cover a more extensive assessment of these aspects.
4. I owe this argumentation to reviewer 1, who pointed me to see the categories as complementary rather than as contrasts.

Acknowledgement

I thank the editors of the *Australian Journal of International Affairs* for all their comments and support. I also thank the anonymous referees for their generous reading of the article and for providing extensive feedback on improving the argument. I began thinking and writing about this article when I started my PhD studies in International Politics at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. I have benefitted extensively from conversations with teachers and friends there, and I owe a huge debt to them. I also thank all the reviewers from other journals who have read this article and commented on improving it.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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