

What Claim Does America Have to Global Dominance?

Panel Debate

By [Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya](#), [Jonathan Steele](#), [James Thackara](#), and [Prof. Anatol Lieven](#)

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#), [UKRAINE REPORT](#)

In his address to the United Nations president Obama said of the United States of America: "We are heirs to a proud legacy of freedom, and we are prepared to do what is necessary to secure that legacy for generations to come. Join us in this common mission, for today's children and tomorrow's..." So, what sort of claim does America have to global domination? VoR's Dmitry Linnik hosts a discussion.

Barack Obama used the word America 27 times in a fairly short speech. That includes only two mentions of the United States of America.

Why does president Obama think the US has a claim to leadership of the world?

"Because we hold our leaders accountable, and insist on a free press and independent judiciary."

In other words, is there a division of powers, a system of checks and balances that makes US government a model? It seems that the US is unprepared or unwilling to apply the same principles on a global scale - it doesn't want to see any checks or balances to its global domination...

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To discuss this VoR's [Dmitry Linnik](#) is joined by:

Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya, Research Associate at the [Centre for Research on Globalisation](#), a contributor at the [Strategic Culture Foundation](#) in Moscow and an [author](#) and sociologist

[Jonathan Steele](#), Guardian columnist and author of *Ghosts of Afghanistan: The Haunted Battleground*.

[James Thackara](#), novelist, human rights activist and author of *The Book of Kings*.

[Anatol Lieven](#), visiting professor at the Department of War Studies, King's College London and author of *In America Right and Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism*.

Soundbites

Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya: “I think the United States has no claim to global domination. Of course, that’s not the same in practice. It’s done everything it can, everything in its power, to impose itself globally. But if we’re talking about a claim to global domination it has no legal claim, it has no moral claim, it has no claim whatsoever.

“What he [Obama] was saying is basically poetry...

“The United States does many times lose sight of the fact that when it talks, it can only talk for itself. It is not supposed to be talking for the rest of the world. And in fact, it appropriates terms like ‘international community’ and it increasingly mingles the two. It loses sight of where the international community is and where the United States is.”

James Thackara: “I don’t feel any apology for Obama. I think everybody should be worrying about what would’ve happened if he hadn’t been in office. It was a great speech in the UN. Unfortunately, America doesn’t follow its own precepts, and part of the speech – the whole world to adopt this speech as its credo, it wouldn’t necessarily mean that they belong to an American empire, they might just do things in the American way which is something Americans hugely believe in...

“He talked about ‘might not right’ and ‘right not might’ and I thought that was gross hypocrisy. We have just been through a very ugly period in which America exerted ‘might not right’ and a lot of people died, and that’s been true of Vietnam and Korea before that. So we have a really big foreign policy problem. When one says ‘American dominance’ and ‘the American way of life’ you’re actually talking about a country that’s withdrawn from the world. The American Revolution was about withdrawing from the world. It wasn’t about dominating the world. It’s done a hell of a bad job of influencing anybody in the world...

“Putin has been able to concentrate in his hands, and create, probably as he would have liked, a personality cult and when you have that amount of power – he’s moved very deftly in Ukraine, it’s been a spectacular performance...

“America doesn’t have anybody like Putin. We have an elected official that’s got very little power. He [Obama] came in on dreams and I’m glad you say ‘poetry’ because he certainly has a lot of poetry. I thought it was a great speech! Interestingly, I thought he agreed with Lavrov – I think if you examine the foreign policy aspect of what they are saying they were both talking as responsible people. Obama avoided foreign policy and in fact, that was a stump speech for the midterm elections...

“From the War Powers Act in 1941 the American security establishment has been building up its presence in the world. We now have 1000 bases in 120 countries. If he [Obama] had 36 years in office he could not dismember this monster. Obama is certainly not unaware that the monster is there and we should all be collaborating to get rid of it.”

Jonathan Steele: “It’s not domination. It’s an attempt to domination, maybe. I think in that speech made to the UN General Assembly, he [Obama] was speaking to the world as it were. But I think he was speaking down to the world. It was a very patronising speech to talk constantly about American leadership, and the ‘beacon on the hill’ and all that, and the hope of freedom, etc. This is the strand that has long been there in American history – this exceptionalism, that somehow, unlike any other country it [America] is not motivated by self-interest or cynicism and it’s bringing freedom and democracy and the rule of law to the rest of the world. It’s interesting that Putin picked that up in his famous op-ed piece in

the New York Times some months ago criticising this 'American exceptionalism', saying we've had enough of it...



Photo: Barack Obama, Flickr

"I think Obama has unfortunately been very hypocritical because when he came in, we thought that he would respect the UN much more than Bush had done - with all of Bush's pre-emptive wars and unilateralism. But actually, Obama's hardly brought the UN into the mix at all. Look at this latest thing against ISIS! This is a classic case where you would want a UN Security Council Resolution and it wouldn't have been too difficult! But instead he just announces that we're having a 'coalition of the willing' and we're going to be the leaders of it. So unfortunately he has been very much in the same mould of previous American presidents in spite of the election rhetoric when he came in, in 2008."

Anatol Lieven: "It's important to note though that both sides of it [America] are nationalist. The belief in America's right and duty to lead the world towards democracy is just as nationalist in its way as that of the hard-line chauvinists who basically hate the rest of the world. It's two faces of the same nationalism. What one certainly sees in America today compared to under George Bush is much less desire to become involved in overseas adventures on the ground. While Obama has shown that he is completely part of the US establishment and the whole of the establishment, Democrat and Republican, believe in American global leadership as they would call it, there are tactical differences. Obama, of course, came in with a much more cautious agenda than George Bush, much more realist in a way... Some people have called him an Eisenhower-Republican.

"What we are seeing is a much more cautious US president who is determined to maintain US dominance in various parts of the world and almost cannot phrase that to the American people - possibly can't even imagine it, except in these tremendously magniloquent and ideological terms of leading democracy and leading freedom, which frankly, on the ground in the Middle East nobody believes in. It's a separate issue whether it is or is not a good thing to fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria but this is most certainly not America leading democracy..."

Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya: "From my experience in Eastern Europe it is not that Eastern Europeans want to have American leadership at all. You're talking about something that Eastern European political and financial elites are interested in, not something that the regular people in Eastern Europe are interested in. In places like Bulgaria and Romania, where they're more concerned about bread on the table, an end to corruption; their states have been criminalised and the mafia is basically involved in government there. Those are their concerns, not being part of some 'American Empire'.

"Being there and speaking to people in Eastern Europe, seeing things as they are, a lot of them [Eastern Europeans] are actually having second questions about what entry into the European Union, into being part of the Euro-Atlantic orbit, as some people in Brussels and in Washington like to call it, means..."

"This talk about America being a beacon of freedom, helping spread democracy - this is just an ideological framework to justify American foreign policy abroad. During colonial periods, in Western Europe there was the white man's burden, there was the mission of civilising the

world and today the United States has the mission of spreading democracy, but in practice, the proof is in the pudding. You can see that the United States has been one of the biggest obstructions to democracy in the Middle East – supporting the House of Saud in Saudi Arabia, the Al Khalifa family in Bahrain which uses tanks against peaceful protesters...”



Photo: South Vietnam. Residents leaving western quarters of Saigon bombed by US warplanes, 1968 (RIA Novosti)

James Thackara: “I think you’re talking about the institution of the security apparatus we’ve got in America. I don’t think that Obama created it and I’m not saying that to defend Obama. Obama’s election mandate, I would go a little further than Anatol and say that he [Obama] was given a rather large, not so moderate one, which was basically to contain America. The people of America wanted to withdraw from the world and that is what he came in on.

“I’ve watched many-many phases of America abroad and I’ve never heard anybody talk about American dominance, forgive me for saying that... I think American influence is the word that might be needed and that was probably what he [Obama] was trying to emphasise in that speech about ‘might for right’ and ‘right for might’...

“I don’t think America wishes to dominate the world. Since it’s never developed a foreign policy, its idea of its utopian prescription, which I agree with Mahdi has not worked very well, I mean we’ve got the largest prison population in the world [...], and particularly with the Kennedy doctrine in Vietnam – these were really abhorrent, malfunctioning forms of governance and they were forms of governance! And in that sense, yes, America probably does exert a dominating influence but I don’t think its dominance is the idea of building an ‘American Empire’ because that would never work. We haven’t even been able to run our own country correctly!”



Photo: Donald Rumsfeld (L) and Dick Cheney (R)

Anatol Lieven: “There’s obviously a very strong current in the American establishment which certainly does desire dominance and sometimes is willing to talk explicitly of ‘empire’... If you look at some of the neoconservatives and the programme of Rumsfeld [Donald Rumsfeld] and Cheney [Dick Cheney] during the last administration, I mean, this is very powerful in the US establishment. Of course America didn’t develop all these bases and all these client regimes all over the world by accident...

“This is by no means necessarily the will of the American people as a whole. It’s often necessary to whip up a completely exaggerated hysteria over international threats in order to get Americans really to want to do anything much at all – that has been the history of several episodes in US foreign policy.

“It’s true no doubt that in most parts of the world ordinary people are really just concerned with jobs and income and security and so forth, but foreign policy is shaped by foreign policy elites, or if you like, simply those parts of the population that are interested in foreign policy. And if you look at Eastern Europe – and I have to say, I have been a strong critic of US policy in Ukraine, but clearly there are a great many Ukrainians who do look to the US for help and

leadership. As for partly similar reasons there are of course so many people in the Far East who look to the US for help against China because their fear of China is greater and that includes of course, the Vietnamese who suffered so terribly at America's hands.

"And in the Middle East there a great many people who look to the US for help, also against neighbours whom they are extremely frightened of. They may not like asking or needing US help in this way but they do ask for it. That isn't however, by any manner of means necessarily in the name of democracy – as one can see in the Far East in the Vietnamese case and as one can see in the Middle East with the Saudi case... US dominance would be going too far but certainly should we say 'predominant influence' in certain parts of the world is not simply imposed by imperial force, it is also desired by a good many people in these areas."



Photo: Anti-attack on Syria demonstration, Rafah, Gaza Strip, Palestinian Territories, 2013 (Rex Features)

Jonathan Steele: "I would very much actually disagree on this occasion with Anatol. I don't think that the Middle East is the area where many people would want US protection or friendship or help. It's the region of the world where there is most strong anti-Americanism, except obviously in the case with Israel..."

Anatol Lieven: "...The thing is that many of them [in the Middle East] are more afraid of Iran and ISIS than they are of the US presence..."

Jonathan Steele: "No, I think that's completely exaggerated. I think the elites of the Gulf certainly want to be America's ally and friend and that is why some of them have joined this 'coalition of the willing' but one of the things in the Arab Spring was precisely to get away from dictatorships which were clients of the United States. That element of the Arab Spring which was about foreign policy is often underplayed but it was clear in Tunisia where France was the colonial power more than the US, but in Egypt it was certainly the colonial power seen as a neo-colonial power and people wanted to get away from that..."

"Most countries are very suspicious. After all, the US has been intervening in the Middle East for more than fifty years after it took over from the British. And it's been a disaster for most people..."

James Thackara: "The Arab world has been trying to unify itself – the caliphate speech has been going on for quite some time, it started with Bin Laden... And there are movements like that – the pan-Arab revolution in Algeria was going on in the early 19th century; the British imposed their structures there which couldn't be maintained by anybody really; and these experiments of trying to restore the caliphate have been hugely enhanced by America's interference in the region – getting involved with elites, rather like the ones in Latin America... We seem to do this over and over, even in Ukraine we've somehow gotten into this role. What it's actually doing is it is perfecting a laboratory in which this experiment of unifying militant Islam from Indonesia to Morocco is prospering."



Photo: Fight for Kobane between Islamic State militants and kurdish troops, Suruc (Rex Features)

“ISIS has really got the formula quite right. They’re getting much-much closer to being able to find an ideology within Islam, as brutal and ghastly as it is, which will more or less erase all our – or what I would call – American allies in that region, or what’s left of them, and I don’t think that any of the Arab governments down there want us there except to maybe get something out of us and if they do, maintain their position in power.”

Jonathan Steele: “[In Afghanistan] there was an element of provocation [by the West] but I think it was this idea that the US was going to encroach on the Soviet Union from the south – don’t forget that in 1979 the Shah, the great bastion of American power in the Middle East, collapsed and was thrown out and in came Khomeini [Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini]. There was this funny feeling in Moscow that somehow Khomeini would move Iran back to the Americans and that in Afghanistan, Hafizullah Amin who was the current leader, would also move back to the Americans and they moved pre-emptively and stupidly into Kabul to try to overthrow that regime and put in a client-puppet regime [in Kabul]. But it wasn’t expansionist. Some people in the West, including Zbigniew Brzezinski said they were trying to move to the warm water ports for Pakistan and so on and to go through Afghanistan to get that, which I thought was nonsense. I think it was a kind of defensive move, if you can call an aggression defensive, to pre-empt something worse happening in Afghanistan which was falling out totally from the non-allied camp into an American camp...”



Photo: Participants of an anti-American rally outside the former U.S. Embassy building in Tehran, 2013 (RIA Novosti)

Anatol Lieven: “As Brzezinski himself has admitted there was an element of deliberate provocation on the US side even before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan...”

“It was a classic attempt to prop up a client regime fearing that its fall would lead to wider and very dangerous consequences. In that of course, it’s very close to what America and previous imperial powers did in South Vietnam... That, however, doesn’t make it any less of a mistake on the Soviet part.”

Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya: “When we talk about American influence, we can argue about the terms, but we have to look at what someone means when they say ‘American influence’... So for example, when we hear Hillary Clinton speaking on the media front saying that the United States need to expand more on things like Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty so that American influence can increase in other places – what does that mean? That’s a question that we should keep in mind.

“In regards to this entire question of dominance, we have to remember that perception management is something that the United States is very good at. People might perceive that their lives have become better or they might perceive that China is a threat now or might perceive that Russia is a threat, but that doesn’t mean it is reality. We need to ask where the constructs for these perceptions are coming from. This goes full circle to statements like Hillary Clinton saying we should prop up our media because our enemies are winning the war... And what is this war? It’s on this perception management...”

“Yes, foreign policy elites – this goes to your question about how Ukraine is like Afghanistan; I’m in Canada and in Halifax there’s something called the International Halifax Security Forum... This security forum was started by the German Marshall Fund which is based in

Washington DC. It was funded by them and the Canadian government, Stephen Harper and the Conservatives. This security forum started in 2009 and one of the first guests was the foreign policy advisor of Mr Yatsenyuk [Arseniy Yatsenyuk]; and this forum was about expanding NATO, one of the speakers was talking about war with Iran...

"There's something the United States is working on - creating consensus amongst elites all around the world and in fact, they made similar security forums in Ukraine. For years they spent money in Ukraine to basically groom an elite to think that 'your interests' lie with the United States, not with the Russian Federation or with the Commonwealth of Independent States which is where the majority of your trade is..."

"This entire situation in Kiev, it's been manufactured by the United States."



Photo: US Senator John McCain, center, at the Dignity Day rally held by supporters of eurointegration on Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Kiev (RIA Novosti)

James Thackara: "The fact is, and Xi [Xi Jinping], the head of the Chinese government has said it, Russian officials have said it - American exceptionalism is this idea that America is somehow the only superpower. I'm afraid that China and Russia, Russia being the largest country in the world and China, since before the first Opium War having the largest economy in the world and certainly will have it now again - these three countries are going to have to get along together."

"I think that the problem we've got is not with Obama and it's not with his speech at the United Nations... It's with this huge security operation. The Republicans are doing their very best to keep that there - they probably thought Romney would take over again and run that whole thing continuing their imperial ambitions. That has to stop, and I don't think the American people want it, I don't think the Chinese want it and I don't think the Russians want it..."

Anatol Lieven: "I think America will bankrupt itself in the process and stir up so many enemies against itself that it will at best, eventually, be forced to withdraw as previous empires did and at worst, will actually stumble into a very serious conflict, possibly a catastrophic conflict in the Far East."

"Putin, the Chinese leadership and others too, including the democratic governments, have been saying that America simply has to get on with other major powers even if they do not share America's ideology. This is something which the American establishment at heart finds very difficult to do."

"The striking thing is, and with a bipartisan consensus behind it, that to a great extent this has become the modus operandi of US policy - under the Clinton administration, the Bush administration and admittedly once again in a softer and more cautious way under the Obama administration, hence the move into Ukraine, hence the move to contain China."

"I've argued for many-many years about America's need to recognise the legitimacy of other people's interests; the need for cooperation across ideological lines against the range of threats facing humanity. I must say that over the years I have also become less optimistic. I would however like to come back once again, and if you look at India for example, they would certainly never accept American dominance but as we see from Modi's

visit to Washington – India, after all is the second largest country in the world in terms of population, and certainly the Indian policy elites while they will never accept American dominance, are very strongly supportive of an American presence in Asia against what they see as their major rival – China and major threat – Pakistan. Once again, this is not about democracy, whatever the American and Indian governments may say. It’s about national interests.”

Jonathan Steele: “There’s a big question mark in my mind, and I still haven’t found a good answer – why have the Americans revived this Cold War against Russia?”

“The earlier part of Obama’s second term was the pivot to Asia and this attempt to contain China, which I think they are exaggerating anyway – this alleged threat, but nevertheless, there is this great push in East Asia. Then you’ve got the whole Islamic thing and complete turbulence in the Middle East now because of ISIS... Why do they suddenly need a third front, as it were, which they’ve developed in the last six months as a result of Ukraine, to revive the Cold War? It doesn’t seem to make any sense! Russia is not the equal of the United States in the world, it’s no longer a global power – it’s a regional power and not a challenge to them! It’s had no attempts to recreate the Soviet empire, let alone a global empire!



Photo: Rex Features

“Sometimes you feel that Obama is like a prisoner in the White House. That there’s a combination of the neocons from the Bush administration who are still there, plus these humanitarian interventionists like Samantha Powers and Susan Rice, who are there in other capacities, and that Obama is the only one who is trying to keep an even keel but is always outsmarted by his advisers.”

Anatol Lieven: “It is precisely the way in which the Wolfowitz Doctrine [unofficial name given to the initial version of the Defence Planning Guide for 1994-99, by Paul Wolfowitz], if you can call it that, has become – an American Doctrine: nobody else is to exert influence beyond their borders essentially, in any part of the world except when America sees it as completely in tune with its interests.

“This [reviving the Cold War with Russia] is in no way in the interests of the United States, let alone humanity – and the answer is that the Washington policy elites are not wholly rational; they are also influenced by very strong prejudices, emotions, affections and also, I’m sorry to say, hatred in many cases! Precisely the mixture that George Washington, the first president, warned against...”

James Thackara: “The ruling elite which is an amateur elite – these people in Washington who I’ve often seen, these are people who don’t know very much and this is what I find scary. Let’s not accuse Obama, let’s be terrified of this extraordinary ignorant and ill-tutored bunch of special interests people who will bow to all sorts of pressures...”



Photo: Zbigniew Brzezinski, Center for Strategic & International Studies, Flickr

Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya: “Where are these ideas coming from? Mr Brzezinski himself

said that it is better if Russia was divided into several countries. It would be more democratic for the Russians if their country was split up. And who supports the separatists in Chechnya?

“I don’t think the Cold War ever ended because when the foreign elites like the ones in Washington or the ‘Washington beltway’, want to control everything in the world or ‘have influence’ if some people want to use the term ‘influence’ instead of ‘control’... Well, of course you would want everyone else weaker. Why do we consistently see countries in other parts of the world that are always opposed to the United States breaking up? Like Yugoslavia, it was neutral actually, it wasn’t even in the Soviet camp and it wasn’t in the western bloc... You see the Soviet Union breaking up and you see Arab countries, instead of becoming more unified, they become more fragmented whenever the United States intervenes.”

Anatol Lieven: “The world is ‘balkanised’ already and it didn’t take the United States to ‘balkanise’ it – if you look at the situation in East Asia and in the Middle East – yes, it was originally ‘balkanised’, if you like, by Britain and France after the First World War and the US have done nothing to ‘de-balkanise’ it. I would caution against thinking that there is some wicked detailed master plan in Washington...”

Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya: “Hold on, Joe Biden agreed with dividing Iraq – it’s called the Biden Plan...”

Anatol Lieven: “No, I’m sorry, the plan for the division of Iraq – yes, it was the US invasion that brought about the civil war that divided Iraq and the Biden Plan was an attempt to get out while leaving some sort of minimal order behind. The United States did not invade Iraq with the intention of dividing the place – you mustn’t work backwards from events to invent detailed plans for them. A lot of the time the United States elites, just as is the case with ISIS, are scrambling to respond to events that they were not prepared for and do not understand – as we’ve heard many of them, even the so-called foreign policy elites, are actually profoundly ignorant of the rest of the world and certainly of the details of situations. The problem is that they are programmed ideologically to respond in certain ways and the key factor in this point of view is that yes, America has the right and duty to lead and when necessary, to force other people to follow it and nobody has the right to object to that. This is very often an essentially confused response rather than a cold-blooded highly intelligent master plan...”

“If you look at so many of the people in Washington, they are not super-intelligent nor actually are they cold-blooded – they are responding very emotionally...”



Photo: A rally in Kiev against Ukraine joining NATO. The Russian-language poster reads: “No to NATO!” (RIA Novosti)

Jonathan Steele: “I think there’s a been a plan to try and get Ukraine into NATO for the last 10 years and they’ve been working very hard – grooming the elites, particularly the Ukrainian elites... The National Democratic Institute or whatever it’s called – the Democratic party’s foreign policy arm and the same one for the Republicans who had offices in Kiev, constantly pushing this idea, inviting people to Washington, inviting them to Brussels, to the NATO headquarters, wining and dining them, offering them all kinds of blandishments even

though every single opinion poll in Ukraine showed that the majority of Ukrainians did not want to enter NATO. But they would not give up and they're slowly moving towards achieving their aim because now Yatsenyuk and Poroshenko are saying that they will get parliament to throw out the vote that ratified non-alignment as a strategy, and then they are going to start proceedings to join NATO..."

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An award-winning author and geopolitical analyst, Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya is the author of *The Globalization of NATO* (Clarity Press) and a forthcoming book *The War on Libya and the Re-Colonization of Africa*. He has also contributed to several other books ranging from cultural critique to international relations. He is a Sociologist and Research Associate at the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG), a contributor at the Strategic Culture Foundation (SCF), Moscow, and a member of the Scientific Committee of Geopolitica, Italy.

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