

U.S. militant exceptionalism and the erosion of international law through support of the Israeli regime against the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Original Article</p> <p>Main Object: Interdisciplinary Scope: Iran, US & Israeli Regime</p> <p>Received: 11 August 2025 Revised: 06 September 2025 Accepted: 13 September 2025 Published online: 16 September 2025</p> <p>Keywords: American exceptionalism, erosion of international law, hegemonic stability, militarism, offensive realism.</p>	<p>This article examines the interplay between structural power imperatives, contested global order, and ideational self-conceptions in shaping United States foreign policy, with particular attention to the nexus of militarism, American exceptionalism, and recurrent violations of international legal norms. Integrating three complementary theoretical perspectives including American exceptionalism, offensive realism, and the critical variant of hegemonic stability theory, the study offers a multidimensional analytical framework that captures normative, structural, and systemic dimensions of U.S. conduct. The article applies this tripartite framework to empirical cases involving U.S. military interventions, nuclear modernisation, and its selective adherence to, and reinterpretation of, binding legal obligations. It argues that these behaviours reflect a durable fusion of systemic compulsion, hegemonic maintenance, and identity-based legitimization. In so doing, the study contributes to debates in international relations and international law by demonstrating that the United States' exceptionalist posture is both a cause and a consequence of its hegemonic role. The analysis offers insights into the persistence of militarised exceptionalism and the structural and normative constraints or lack thereof that shape the prospects for a more equitable and law-bound global order.</p>

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1. Introduction

Much like all other occupied and colonised territories, the United States has, since its inception, been founded upon a paradox. The country attempts to project an image of itself as a champion of international law and democracy, yet is simultaneously the most systematic violator of the very norms it purports to uphold. The root of this paradox lies in the ideology of American exceptionalism, a deeply-held belief in its unique historical destiny that it uses to justify unilateral actions and claim an exemption from the constraints of international legal frameworks (Ameli, 2017; Pease, 2009; Lipset, 1996). This issue is most apparent in the United States' aggressive military interventions and its nuclear weapons policy, which violate established international treaties such as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the Geneva Conventions (United Nations, 1968; 1949).

The present article seeks to delineate the interplay between three theories— American exceptionalism, hegemonic stability, and offensive realism— to explain the fundamentalism inherent in American policy, from the initial genocide of Native American peoples to contemporary military aggressions, as well as its persistent disregard for international law, particularly its endorsement of the Israeli regime's military actions against Iran and its own nuclear posture. The concept of American exceptionalism provides a foundational approach to the analysis of United States foreign policy behaviour (Ameli, 2017). This ideology, which originates in Puritan narratives concerning the “City upon a Hill” (Squiers, 2018: 62-63), frames the United States as a unique force for global good, one that is entitled to operate beyond the customary confines of legal and moral boundaries (Edvardsson, 2021). This self-perception of superiority has historically served to justify actions ranging from the extermination of indigenous populations to contemporary drone strikes and preemptive wars (Sachs, 2018; O'Connor et al., 2024).

From a critical perspective, the theory of hegemonic stability (Gilpin, cited in Ercan, 2024) also illustrates how the United States undermines the international order. Complementing this ideological framework is offensive realism (Mearsheimer, 2001), which explains the structural imperatives driving United States behaviour. In the context of an anarchical international system, hegemonic powers equate survival with military dominance (Monteiro, 2014). The United States' trillion-dollar nuclear modernisation programme is a prime example of this logic (Schweller, 1996), undertaken in clear violation of its commitments under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

The objective of the article is to analyze the United States' historical and contemporary violations of international law, drawing upon foundational legal documents, policy statements, and critical research, and employing a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2018). By integrating the frameworks of American exceptionalism, offensive

realism, and hegemonic stability theory, it is argued that the actions of the United States should not be regarded as anomalies or deviations, but rather as deliberate strategies aimed at maintaining global dominance.

The article is organised to first establish a tripartite theoretical framework that integrates American exceptionalism, offensive realism, and hegemonic stability theory. The following section sets out the qualitative case study methodology and the analytical approach employed. The analysis then proceeds in two stages. First, a historical examination of the continuity of United States violations of international law, and second, a focused investigation of the contemporary misuse of nuclear power and related doctrine. The penultimate section synthesises these empirical findings within the theoretical framework in order to explain the underlying drivers of U.S. conduct. The conclusion summarises the core argument, reflects on its implications for the international legal order, and identifies avenues for further research.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this research is designed to link the subject matter to established scholarly traditions within International Relations and international law. A theoretical framework must not be merely an abstract structure; rather, it should serve as a “system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that support and inform the research” (George & Bennett, 2005: 75). This article has chosen the three distinct theories of American exceptionalism, offensive realism, and hegemonic stability as a combined approach to the topic, as these perspectives collectively illuminate the strategic, structural, and ideological dimensions of United States foreign policy.

American exceptionalism depicts the ideological and identity-based justifications that underpin and perpetuate the hegemonic ambitions of the United States. The critical iteration of hegemonic stability theory interrogates the complex and often-contested nature of the US-dominated hegemonic order. Offensive realism, in turn, provides a structural explanation for the maximalist power behaviour of the United States within the anarchic international system.

American exceptionalism is a deeply-rooted ideological construct which posits that the United States possesses a unique historical destiny, a moral mission, and a distinct political character that distinguishes it from other states (Ameli, 2017). This set of beliefs imbues the United States with a sense of entitlement and a moral justification to act beyond conventional limitations (Pease, 2009). The roots of exceptionalism lie in biblical narratives such as the “City upon a Hill”. This metaphor, originating from a 1630 sermon by John Winthrop and evolving into a powerful symbol in American political discourse, embodies the idea of the United States as a nation serving as a model for the world. It is derived from a verse in the *Gospel of Matthew* (5:14), wherein Jesus

Christ states: “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden” (Squiers, 2018). This concept is also a product of the United States’ self-perception as a global promoter of democracy, liberty, and order (Edvardsson, 2016).

The ideology helps to legitimise policies that contravene international norms or laws, framing them as necessary interventions for the preservation of a higher global good. Scholars such as Sachs (2018) and O’Connor et al. (2024) demonstrate how exceptionalist discourse enables a selective engagement with international law, often serving to justify United States unilateralism or military interventions. This ideological framework functions in tandem with structural imperatives and hegemonic strategy; its primary purpose is to provide a moral veneer to realist calculations. It forms a crucial part of the mechanism used to justify the United States’ persistent extralegal role in the international system and its pursuit of corresponding military programmes.

On the other hand, the theory of hegemonic stability, first formulated by Kindleberger (Mehrling, 2025) and later expanded upon by Gilpin (Ercan, 2024), argues that a dominant hegemon is essential for the creation and maintenance of international order through the provision of public goods such as security, open markets, and stable institutions. In contrast, the critical variant of hegemonic stability theory refines this view by highlighting the inherent fragilities, contradictions, and conflicts within hegemonic rule.

Gavris (2021) emphasises that hegemonic leadership is not merely about material capabilities but also about ideology, legitimacy, and domestic political conditions. His perspective draws attention to how the United States’ hegemonic power is continually negotiated and contested, both internationally and domestically, thus exposing the fault lines in the proclaimed global order. Similarly, Acharya (2014) argues that the United States’ hegemonic role is increasingly being challenged by emerging powers and internal contradictions, a situation that complicates the notion of a stable unipolar world. The critical variant of hegemonic stability theory demonstrates how American exceptionalism and militarism reflect the country’s attempts to reinforce its hegemonic authority in the face of systemic and normative pressures. It also notes that hegemonic stability has been neither guaranteed nor universally accepted.

As the third approach, offensive realism (Mearsheimer, 2001) provides a structural explanation for power-maximising behaviour. This theory posits that the anarchical nature of the international system—the absence of a supreme authority—compels great powers to relentlessly pursue relative power gains to ensure their survival. This behaviour is driven by five core assumptions: the anarchic international order, the inherent offensive military capability of states, the uncertainty regarding other states’ intentions, the primacy of survival as

a goal, and state rationality (ibid). Consequently, great powers are incentivised to seek regional hegemony and to prevent the rise of peer competitors, viewing military dominance as the ultimate currency of security.

Offensive realism explains United States militarism and interventionism as system-based, realist strategies for maintaining unipolar dominance and preempting potential threats. Schweller (1996) had previously established a similar viewpoint by classifying the United States as a revisionist power that actively seeks to reshape the global balance of power in its favour. Similarly, Monteiro (2014) demonstrates that even in a unipolar world, competition persists, compelling the hegemon to preserve its global strategic superiority. Thus, offensive realism places American exceptionalism within an objective security competition and as a response to systemic imperatives alongside ideological self-aggrandisement.

These three theoretical perspectives provide a layered analysis of the United States' interaction with international legal norms. American exceptionalism explains the ideological and identity-based logic that justifies the country's exceptional behaviour concerning international law. The critical variant of hegemonic stability theory questions the global order maintained by the hegemon, exposing the disputed nature of legitimacy and the role of coercion. Offensive realism, in turn, clarifies the reason for the United States' prioritisation of strategic interests over legal constraints.

This integrated framework explains the coexistence of militarised power politics, contested global governance, and normative justification in American foreign policy. It demonstrates how structural and ideological factors jointly shape the United States' violative and extralegal approach to international law and order. As Heath (2022) points out, international law is an "arena of struggle" where meanings are contested and redefined. Therefore, the United States' engagement with international legal norms can be viewed as both a contentious arena and a hegemonic relationship.

3. Method and analytical framework

Methodologically, this research employs a qualitative case study design, which is commensurate with the detailed and contextual analysis required to examine the complex legal and political dimensions of United States foreign policy. The qualitative approach allows for an interpretive engagement with diverse sources, thereby capturing the complexities and nuances that are often obscured in quantitative analyses (Yin, 2018). The case study method, as delineated by George and Bennett (2005), facilitates the exploration of causal mechanisms and the testing of theoretical propositions through empirical evidence, which aligns with the objectives of this study.

The dataset utilised in this study primarily comprises primary

legal documents, including international treaties such as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the protocols of the Geneva Conventions, and advisory opinions from the International Court of Justice (ICJ). These documents provide the normative and legal benchmarks against which the United States' actions are evaluated. These are complemented by official US government documents, including Department of War policy papers, policy statements, and congressional reports, which reveal the strategic and doctrinal rationale underpinning US behaviour.

Data collection was conducted through a systematic documentary analysis, with cases and materials selected based on their exemplification of a pattern of US treaty violations, aggressive posturing, and legal justifications, particularly concerning its recent attack on Iran. The selection criteria were based on relevance to the research topic and representativeness of key US interventions. Specific attention was paid to United States military operations, such as targeted killings, drone strikes, and nuclear policy developments, which demonstrate the operationalisation of exceptionalism and legal disregard.

The analytical methods employed included content analysis and discourse analysis. Content analysis facilitated the systematic coding of legal texts and policy documents to identify instances and patterns of norm violation, while discourse analysis allowed for the examination of the rhetoric and framing strategies used by the United States to construct legal narratives that justify exceptional actions. This dual approach enabled the study to capture both explicit legal breaches and the ideological mechanisms influencing them.

To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, this study utilised triangulation of sources, cross-referencing legal documents with international responses, such as UN resolutions, IAEA statements, and critiques from human rights organisations. This multi-source validation reduced bias and strengthened the robustness of the conclusions (Denzin, 2017). Furthermore, the inclusion of scholarly literature ensured that interpretations were informed by established research and critical perspectives, lending credibility to the analytical claims.

Clarifying the core concepts of this study is also essential for analytical precision. American exceptionalism, as the first concept, is defined as a "set of ideas that deems the United States to be unique among nations due to its historical evolution, political and religious institutions, and moral mission" (Pease, 2009: 6). This belief, while distinguishing the United States from others, also gives it a sense of entitlement to act beyond legal constraints. As the second one, the concept of "preemptive warfare", as articulated in the 2002 United States National Security Strategy, involves striking an adversary before they can launch an attack, with the justification hinging upon the

imminence of the threat. However, as Gray (2007) argues, the legal threshold for imminence is often contested and a concept that is fundamentally open to broad interpretation. The “international legal norms” are also principles and rules derived from treaties, customary law, and general principles that purport to bind states to certain behaviours. In the humanitarian sphere, these norms include the principles of distinction, proportionality, and necessity, which are codified in the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions (ICRC, 2016). And finally, “nuclear deterrence” is defined as “the attempt to prevent an enemy's aggression through the threat of retaliation with nuclear weapons” (Payne, 2001: 15), while the “first-use doctrine” refers to a policy that does not preclude the initial use of nuclear weapons in a conflict.

4. Findings

This section provides a detailed examination of the empirical evidence concerning the United States' persistent violation of international legal norms and its strategic use of exceptionalism to maintain global hegemony. Drawing upon both historical and contemporary case studies, this analysis explains how these practices are manifested through a systematic disregard for treaty obligations, targeted military interventions, and the instrumentalisation of nuclear capabilities. The section will also reveal the structural and ideological underpinnings of the United States' approach to international law and order, highlighting the continuity and evolution of its hegemonic strategies.

4.1. Historical continuity of US violations

From its inception—marked by the genocide of indigenous peoples across the continent—to its present era of global hegemony, the United States has pursued its legacy not through law or justice, but through an unbroken chain of violence, conquest, and systematic violations of humanitarian and international law. Far from the fable of a virtuous republic, America is a serial violator of international norms, its empire clothed in hypocrisy, with genocide sanitised and sanctified by political and media propaganda. Whether in the extermination of indigenous populations, the devastation of cities and nations, or the overthrow of foreign governments, America has transformed criminality into its institutionalised strategy, leaving few places in the world untouched by its destructive footprint.

This historical trajectory is best understood not as a series of discrete aberrations but as the evolution of a hegemonic strategy, adapted to the structural constraints of successive international orders. From continental expansion in a multipolar 19th century to global interventionism during the bipolar Cold War and the unilateralism of the post-Cold War unipolar moment, the manifestation of this strategy shifts. However, its core logic—the utilisation of exceptionalist

ideology to justify the pursuit of dominance through extralegal means— exhibits a remarkable continuity. The following analysis examines this continuity through the lens of hegemonic consolidation and power maximisation.

From its earliest days, America enacted a doctrine of expansionism, fuelled by the concept of “Manifest Destiny” (Pratt, 1927), establishing a pattern of force that consistently operated beyond the conventional legitimacy and ethics of its time. The systematic and widespread dispossession of indigenous lands and the subsequent campaigns, known as the “Indian Wars”, were marked by indiscriminate violence, “scorched-earth” tactics, forced removals, and massacres (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2023). In California, between 1846 and 1873, colonial militias and federal forces perpetrated a genocide of between 9,500 and 16,000 Native Americans, an act that has always stood in contradiction to the principles of population protection (Madley, 2016). These actions, far from mere incidental events, were codified in state policies and supported by federal force, setting a brutal precedent for the exercise of US military domination.

During the 19th century, following the genocide of its indigenous peoples, the United States turned its gaze beyond its own borders, establishing a pattern of transnational aggression that would pave the way for an empire built on terror (Immerwahr, 2019). During the Mexican-American War (1846–1848), US forces invaded sovereign Mexican territory on fabricated pretexts (Greenberg, 2013). In Monterrey, US troops and Texas Rangers executed civilians, raped women, and devastated local communities (Foos, 2002). The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo subsequently compelled Mexico to cede over 1.3 million square kilometres, forcing it to disregard the principle of its own sovereign integrity (Del Castillo, 1992).

This period also witnessed the forcible overthrow and annexation of the Hawaiian Kingdom (1893). American business interests, “supported by US Marines under the command of John Stevens, deposed Queen Lili‘uokalani in an illegal coup” (Silva, 2004: 123). The subsequent “Bayonet Constitution” (Osorio, 2002: 267) disenfranchised native Hawaiians, which led to land dispossession, cultural erasure, including a ban on the Hawaiian language in schools, and famine. This era was a pivotal chapter in the United States’ emergence as a hegemonic power, forever linking its persistence and endurance to systematic criminality.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the United States cast off any remaining vestiges of earlier restraint, as the Spanish-American War awakened its expansionist spirit and colonial ambitions. The subsequent US war against the Philippines initiated a brutal campaign of suppression, which, in clear violation of newly established norms of civilian immunity, claimed the lives of approximately 200,000 civilians through direct combat and punitive occupation (Linn, 2000). Naval

annexations, interventions in Latin America, and the imposition of puppet regimes demonstrate how the United States used its military might without limitation, violating the sovereignty of burgeoning nations and the human rights of their people.

Continuing its doctrine of war and domination, the Second World War witnessed the United States' entrenchment of a total war doctrine, accompanied by a catastrophic disregard for civilian lives. The bombings of Dresden and Tokyo unequivocally erased the line between military and civilian targets, while the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki precipitated a new legal and moral crisis. With the instantaneous deaths of some 200,000 Japanese civilians, the United States crossed a new threshold (Malloy, 2008). Nascent International Humanitarian Law failed in the face of a brutal utilitarianism, with the principles of distinction, proportionality, and necessity discarded in favour of a savage expediency.

Throughout the Cold War, United States interventionism became a global mechanism of coercive violence. In Vietnam, the 1968 My Lai massacre, in which "between 347 and 504 unarmed civilians, including women, children, and the elderly, were slaughtered" (Sim & Bilton, 1992: 321), was not merely a military atrocity but a judicial scandal. In return for a widespread massacre of a nation, Lieutenant William Calley was the only soldier convicted, yet he faced a mitigated sentence and was effectively shielded by a presidential pardon (Belknap, 2002).

Furthermore, the extensive US-authorized bombing of Cambodia from 1965 to 1973 saw the delivery of over 500,000 tonnes of ordnance, which is estimated to have killed up to 150,000 civilians (Kiernan, 2002). This horrifying intervention ultimately contributed to the rise of the genocidal Khmer Rouge (Owen & Kiernan, 2006).

United States involvement in Central America similarly demonstrates its iniquitous record. The 1954 CIA-backed coup in Guatemala instigated decades of genocidal repression. From 1981 to 1983, under the Reagan administration's indifference, Guatemalan military forces trained and armed by the United States conducted scorched-earth operations, during which an estimated 162,000 to 200,000 indigenous Maya civilians were massacred, with entire villages destroyed and their populations forcibly displaced (Grandin, 2011). A United Nations Historical Clarification Commission investigation concluded that the United States provided direct logistical, financial, and training support to the perpetrators of the genocide, rendering the US complicit in crimes against humanity (CEH, 1999). These brutalities were concealed for years under a veil of secrecy, demonstrating a deliberate and systematic subversion of international law.

In the post-Cold War era, US militarism not only failed to abate but pivoted to a new phase, cloaked in humanitarian rhetoric which, of course, was unable to conceal its strategic aggressions. The 1990–1991

Gulf War witnessed estimated civilian casualties of between 100,000 and 200,000, as coalition bombing operations devastated cities and critical civilian infrastructure (Hiro, 1992). The 2003 invasion of Iraq, under the specious pretext of imminent threats from weapons of mass destruction, instigated further carnage (Woodward, 2004). A 2006 *Lancet* study estimated that over 150,000 excess civilian deaths had occurred, a toll exacerbated by abuses at Abu Ghraib prison and the 'extraordinary rendition' doctrine, which disregarded both its own constitutional limitations and international norms (Burnham et al., 2006).

In Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, civilian casualties are estimated to be between 47,000 and 200,000, while drone aggressions outside of declared war zones have killed almost 14,000 people, with a very high proportion of civilian fatalities (Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, 2025). Extrajudicial assassinations, such as the killing of General Qassem Soleimani in 2020 (Soleimani, 2021), exemplify the United States' brazen disregard for territorial sovereignty and legal procedure, as it bypasses legal mechanisms and subverts international order under the guise of unilateral executive authority.

Throughout all the aforementioned phases, the United States' strategy has demonstrated a stability of aggression, lawlessness, and bullying. By invoking fabricated notions of existential threats and national security, it violates international legal frameworks, especially those designed to protect civilians. International Humanitarian Law (IHL) stipulates that the use of force must be 'necessary', 'proportional', and 'distinguished', yet the United States has repeatedly violated these principles in all its historical interventions, weaponising not only bombs and missiles but also its legal imaginations and state power. These actions do not stem from a misstep or a bureaucratic error but from a conscious doctrine of militarism sanctioned at the highest levels of government yet concealed behind diplomatic rhetoric. By shaping a narrative of itself as a self-proclaimed global guarantor, the United States has consistently undermined the very norms it claims to defend, carving its strategic position into the fabric of the modern world with the blood of nations.

4.2. The abuse of nuclear power

With the aim of preserving its dominance, the United States leverages its nuclear weapons as a tool of coercion and a bludgeon against any international limitation. This empire is founded on legal hypocrisy, subjecting the world to carnage by manipulating international treaties to justify its crimes, all while developing an arsenal that undermines the very global order it claims to champion.

Under international law, nuclear facilities under the purview of the IAEA are afforded almost impenetrable protection. Article 56 of

Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions explicitly states (United Nations, 1977a):

“Works or installations containing dangerous forces, namely dams, dykes and nuclear electrical generating stations, shall not be made the object of attack, even where these objects are military objectives, if such attack may cause the release of dangerous forces and consequent severe losses among the civilian population.”

It is further posited with heightened emphasis that:

“Other military objectives located at or in the vicinity of these works or installations shall not be made the object of attack if such attack may cause the release of dangerous forces from the works or installations and consequent severe losses among the civilian population.”

A similar prohibition is found in Article 15 of Protocol II, which eliminates all loopholes even in non-international conflicts, underscoring that such protection constitutes customary international law and is binding upon all states, regardless of their ratification of the Protocols (United Nations, 1977b):

“Works or installations containing dangerous forces, namely dams, dykes and nuclear electrical generating stations, shall not be made the object of attack, even where these objects are military objectives, if such attack may cause the release of dangerous forces and consequent severe losses among the civilian population.”

The General Conference of the IAEA has also repeatedly adopted resolutions— such as GC(XXVII)/RES/407 (1983) and GC(68)/8 (2024)— that condemn any military action against nuclear facilities under safeguards. Furthermore, in international practice, no country has ever embarked on direct armed attacks against IAEA-safeguarded facilities, the most notable example being the 1998 India-Pakistan “Non-Attack Agreement”, which specifically prohibits targeting each other’s nuclear facilities. This demonstrates a widespread belief in the binding nature of these prohibitions. This global restraint is a clear testimony to *opinio juris*, the psychological belief in a legal obligation.

Despite this robust legal deterrence, the United States has violated all these laws, protocols, and practices through covert aggressions and baseless claims of military necessity for attacking Iran’s nuclear facilities. The United States justifies such attacks with fabricated pretexts of preemption or defence, but the reality is that it has effectively breached its commitment to respect the normative compliance enshrined in International Humanitarian Law, the UN Charter, and the statutes of the IAEA.

On the other hand, at the heart of the United States' strategic ambition is an arsenal of apocalyptic capacity, a symbol of a country untethered from conscience and indifferent to legal and moral constraints. While it advocates for non-proliferation, it has produced and maintains approximately 5,177 nuclear warheads (Korda & Kristensen, 2025). Of these, roughly 1,770 are currently deployed, 1,930 are in reserve, and 1,477 are so-called "awaiting dismantlement" (U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration, 2024). Even the supposed end of nuclear testing in 1992 has not paved a new path for the United States; rather, the nuclear warhead stockpile is continually maintained, a testament to the country's enduring obsession with aggression (ibid).

This is despite the fact that the (ICJ), in its 1996 Advisory Opinion on the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons, affirmed that the general principles of humanitarian law must be applied in their entirety to nuclear weapons, meaning that any attack likely to cause indiscriminate or unacceptable collateral damage is unlawful (ICJ, 1996b). The Court emphasised that nuclear weapons are inherently catastrophic in nature, in that they cannot be limited solely to military targets, and that their unique characteristics render them "scarcely reconcilable with the principles of humanitarianism" (ibid).

The country's delivery systems also attest to a doctrine of targeted destruction. The Triad, which includes some 400 Minuteman III ICBMs, approximately 1,920 SLBM warheads on Ohio-class submarines, and around 788 air-launched weapons, including B61 and B83 bombs, is designed with the capacity to deliver nuclear bombs (U.S. Department of War, 2022). None of these systems are relics of the Cold War era; rather, they have been modernised. The Sentinel ICBM programme, set to replace the Minuteman III, is reportedly 81% over budget, while the first Columbia-class submarines are scheduled for delivery in 2030, with their development costs having already exceeded \$132 billion (U.S. Congressional Budget Office, 2023). Meanwhile, the B61-12 and B61-13 bombs, along with proposed replacement warhead variants, represent an active effort to enhance the lethality of these armaments and the longevity of the warheads (U.S. Department of War, 2023).

The financial structure behind this nuclear machine exceeds the entire budget of many governments worldwide. The US Congressional Budget Office estimates that from 2025 to 2034, the United States will spend an additional \$946 billion, approximately \$95 billion annually, to maintain and upgrade its nuclear weapons. This figure includes \$309 billion allocated for the modernisation of delivery systems, \$357 billion for the maintenance of current armaments, and nearly \$150 billion to strengthen command-and-control groups and infrastructure. These figures do not include additional costs such as the 81% overrun for the Sentinel ICBM or the Columbia-class submarines, which symbolise

staggering expenditures and mismanagement (U.S. Congressional Budget Office, 2023). Such exorbitant spending, pursued even in an era of pressing global challenges, is indicative of a morbid US militarism.

The United States also adheres steadfastly to a first-use doctrine, intentionally embracing strategic ambiguity in this area to keep global security in a state of flux. High-alert warheads are ready for immediate launch. Critical voices that advocate for transparency and restraint are dismissed amidst the United States' justification for readiness in preemptive counter-force scenarios. Although the New START treaty between Washington and Moscow limits deployed strategic warheads to 1,550 (U.S. Congressional Research Service, 2023), both sides maintain dangerously high levels of readiness that disregard disarmament transparency (Arms Control Association, 2024).

From an international law perspective, this vast arsenal clearly subverts the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the ICJ's advisory guidance on nuclear weapons. The United States' maintenance and modernisation of nuclear armaments on this massive scale is in explicit violation of its obligations under several international legal regimes. First, Article VI of the NPT obliges nuclear-weapon states to (United Nations, 1968):

“Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.”

While the text of Article VI is replete with rhetorical signifiers that lack any enforcement mechanism, nevertheless, even in appearance, the countries with the largest nuclear stockpiles, including the United States, absolutely pay it no heed. The United States' trillion-dollar modernisation programme over the next decade, the proliferation of lower-yield and tactical warheads, and the retention of a first-use doctrine are in clear contradiction with any serious pursuit of disarmament and undermine both the letter and the spirit of the treaty.

Secondly, the International Court of Justice, in paragraph 105(2)(f) of its 1996 Advisory Opinion, emphasised that, according to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, states (ICJ, 1996a):

“Unanimously, there exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control.”

The ICJ further stipulates that any use or threat of use of nuclear weapons must comply with the fundamental principles of 'distinction' and 'proportionality' under International Humanitarian Law.

Consequently, the first-use position, which is reinforced by the United States' modernised launch systems, falls outside the legal realm.

Finally, International Humanitarian Law (IHL) (International Committee of the Red Cross, n.d.), stipulates in Article 35(3) of Additional Protocol I:

“It is prohibited to employ methods or means of warfare which are intended, or may be expected, to cause widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment.”

And article 55 in section 1:

“Care shall be taken in warfare to protect the natural environment against widespread, long-term and severe damage. This protection includes a prohibition of the use of methods or means of warfare which are intended or may be expected to cause such damage to the natural environment and thereby to prejudice the health or survival of the population.”

And section 2:

“Attacks against the natural environment by way of reprisals are prohibited.”

The United States' sustained investment in nuclear capabilities and its first-use doctrine with submarine-launched cruise missiles, air-launched bomber bombs, and intercontinental ballistic missiles is in contradiction with this area of restraint and disregards this legal prohibition, in spite of the ICJ's acknowledgement that nuclear weapons inflict radiological damage that is “unlimited in space and time.”

The sum of these violations characterises the United States as a country that deems itself exceptional and deliberately subverts legal obligations to perpetuate global insecurity. These repeated and widespread violations also imply the ineffectiveness of the legitimacy of the structure of international treaties.

5. Explanations

The empirical findings presented elucidate a consistent and systematic pattern of United States disregard for international legal norms, which is rooted in an interplay between ideological exceptionalism and the structural imperatives of power. These findings, framed within the theoretical prism of American exceptionalism, offensive realism, and hegemonic stability theory, demonstrate that the United States' approach to international law and order should not be viewed as an aberration; rather, this continuous historical reality is a coherent manifestation of its hegemonic strategy.

5.1. American exceptionalism as a legitimising narrative

The empirical findings demonstrate that American exceptionalism functions as the primary ideological mechanism for legitimising the United States' extralegal actions. This deeply entrenched self-conception provides a narrative framework through which violations of international legal norms are reframed as necessary endeavours for a higher global good. The historical record, from the doctrine of 'Manifest Destiny' to the contemporary rhetoric of pre-emption, shows how this ideology facilitates a selective engagement with international law, justifying unilateralism and military intervention when multilateralism proves inconvenient (Sachs, 2018; O'Connor et al., 2024).

The ideology of American exceptionalism is deeply entrenched in the political culture and identity of the United States, providing the infrastructure for a narrative in which it views itself as a unique actor entitled to disregard international norms when they conflict with its interests or values. The findings reveal that this ideology is manifested through a consistent pattern of violating or selectively interpreting international legal obligations, particularly with respect to its nuclear weapons policy and military interventions.

The historical record of the United States' violations, from the genocidal violence against indigenous peoples to current extraterritorial drone strikes and threats against Iran's nuclear infrastructure, demonstrates how exceptionalism justifies a state of legal impunity and supremacy. This ideological dimension aligns with prior research (Lipset, 1996; Domhoff, 2006) which emphasises the role of identity and normative self-perception in shaping state behaviour, showing that lawlessness by hegemonic powers is often justified through narratives of rectitude and mission.

5.2. Offensive realism and the logic of power maximisation

Parallel to the ideological foundation of exceptionalism, the structural logic of offensive realism elucidates the material compulsions behind US conduct. The anarchical international system generates a relentless security competition, driving the hegemon to prioritise strategic superiority over legal constraints. The empirical evidence—the massive nuclear modernisation programme, the adherence to a first-use doctrine, and the readiness for pre-emptive force—is indicative of a realist calculus where legal obligations are subordinate to the imperatives of survival and dominance. These are strategic investments in maintaining unchallengeable military primacy, a core tenet of offensive realist behaviour in a unipolar system (Monteiro, 2014).

The United States, as a global hegemon, operates on a calculated imperative to maintain unchallenged supremacy through military might and coercive diplomacy. The empirical evidence concerning the United States' massive nuclear arsenal, its readiness to employ a first-use doctrine, and its disregard for treaty obligations, is reflective of a realist

calculus in which legal obligations are subordinate to the imperatives of national security. This structural analysis highlights the instrumental logic of power politics, which drives hegemonic actors to view international law not as a binding constraint, but as a flexible instrument to be invoked when it is commensurate with their strategic objectives and ignored whenever it conflicts with their intentions.

5.3. Hegemonic stability and the management of global order

Hegemonic stability theory illuminates the paradoxical outcome of this synthesis: a superpower that champions international institutions whilst simultaneously undermining them through selective enforcement and self-exemption. The US-led order is characterised by this tension; it provides public goods to maintain systemic stability for its allies whilst employing coercive violence against those who challenge its primacy. The nuclear arsenal and interventionist doctrine are instruments of hegemonic maintenance, designed to perpetuate a global order tailored to US interests. This selective legality erodes the legitimacy of international law itself, as the hegemon's violations create a permissive environment for norm-breaking by others, ultimately leading to the institutional debility observed in organisations like the UN and IAEA (Acharya, 2014; Gavris, 2021). The empirical records concerning the United States' nuclear modernisation programmes, combined with the strategic use of preemptive force and a disregard for protective treaties, exemplify this tension between order and disorder within hegemonic governance.

The synthesis of these perspectives with the findings reveals new insights into the evolutionary trajectory of the United States' hegemonic strategies. The normative rupture and legal violations by the United States indicate a historical and continuous approach, shaped by enduring ideological self-perceptions and the structural realities of power politics. The transition from territorial expansionism to contemporary strategies of nuclear intimidation and covert and overt military interventions illustrates the adaptable logic of hegemony. These violations are not aberrations but a deliberate and institutionalised doctrine for maintaining global supremacy, which is concealed behind legal and diplomatic appearances.

In comparison to previous scholarship, this integrated analysis, by explicitly linking ideological narratives to structural imperatives and institutional performance, offers a more comprehensive perspective. While existing studies have examined the role of American exceptionalism in foreign policy rhetoric or the explanatory power of realism for power politics, they have often failed to connect these dimensions to the practical function of hegemonic stability and the legal order. This study demonstrates that the enduring pattern of the United States' norm violations can only be fully comprehended by understanding these elements as interdependent. Furthermore, this

study extends the critique of hegemonic behaviour by highlighting the strategic instrumentalisation of international law itself as an arena for power competition, rather than a neutral framework.

The implications of this hegemonic strategy for international law and global security are profound and multifaceted. The United States' persistent violations contribute to the delegitimisation of international legal regimes, undermining their authority and effectiveness. By selectively applying norms and prioritising military power over legal obligations, the hegemon creates a permissive environment for other states to renege on their international commitments, thereby eroding the normative fabric that underpins the global order. These actions, compounded by the failure of weakened legal constraints to contain conflicts and the heightened risks of proliferation, exacerbate insecurity and instability. The United States' approach to nuclear armaments is particularly concerning; the expansion and modernisation of its arsenals, combined with doctrines that endorse first-use, challenge the core principles of non-proliferation and disarmament and increase the risk of an escalatory proliferation.

Furthermore, this hegemonic behaviour places international institutions under immense strain. Organisations such as the United Nations, the IAEA, and the ICJ have become arenas for hegemonic power competition, often subject to the overbearing influence of the United States. The resulting institutional debility diminishes the prospects for effective multilateral cooperation, rendering global governance fragmented and vulnerable to unilateralism. This institutional erosion calls into question the capacity of current international frameworks to manage contemporary security challenges.

6. Conclusion

The United States has shrouded its international conduct in a rhetoric of legality and pacifism while simultaneously acting as a principal violator of the legal norms governing warfare, the sanctity of civilian infrastructure, and the integrity of disarmament commitments. International law delineates clear boundaries, whereby an attack on nuclear facilities protected by the IAEA is not merely a war crime but a direct assault on the institutional backbone of global security. Yet, the United States systematically subverts these legal structures through doctrines designed to justify so-called preemptive aggressions under the mantle of national security.

The United States' historical record, which includes the genocidal violence of indigenous eradication, civilian massacres, clandestine torture sites, and drone assassinations in sovereign nations, serves as a grim reminder that these acts are not aberrations but constitute the country's core doctrine. This same ideological history fuels its contemporary nuclear posture, the orientation of which is built on a logic of domination and global intimidation. The United States'

monstrously expanded and obsessively modernised nuclear arsenal is not merely a deterrent capability or a military necessity but a geopolitical bludgeon held over the international order.

These actions and their accompanying doctrinal positions are by no means defensive schemes; rather, they function as offensive blueprints for the preservation of an extralegal US global hegemony. The enormous scale of resources dedicated to this apparatus, amounting to nearly a trillion dollars over the next decade, and the country's readiness for first use and the production of new warheads, underscores its legal recklessness and moral bankruptcy.

In such a situation, civilian, scientific, and peaceful nuclear facilities are vulnerable. The continuous escalation of US militarism, pursued with ambiguous doctrine and unrestrained armaments, strips legal protections from IAEA-safeguarded infrastructure and establishes a dangerous precedent for its future targeting. International law is now devoid of any authority, and global actors are unable to counter this boundless lawlessness.

With such a backdrop, the world can no longer tolerate impotent institutions that acquiesce to United States exceptionalism. The United Nations, the IAEA, the ICJ, and the frameworks designed by the Non-Proliferation Treaty have all been rendered fragile institutions, incapable of containing the United States' hegemonic lawlessness.

The time has come to declare the formal failure of international institutions. The time has expired for any form of international order rooted in a nefarious US hegemony. This kind of order is in contradiction with true collective security based on the equality and dignity of nations. The world requires a new international order in which genuine guarantees of nations' rights and the real deterrence of aggression, plunder, and crime are possible. Only then can humanity transcend this inhumane and bloody historical chapter and begin anew.

This analysis opens several pathways for further scholarly inquiry. Future research might empirically examine the material and diplomatic consequences of U.S. exceptionalism, particularly its influence on patterns of treaty adherence by other states and the erosion of specific multilateral regimes. A comparative study of other self-proclaimed "exceptional" or rising powers could clarify whether similar patterns of legal exemption emerge, or whether this phenomenon is distinctive to U.S. hegemony. In addition, research could investigate the potential role of emerging counter-hegemonic blocs and legal institutions in generating a more constrained environment for great power conduct, thereby testing the limits of the prevailing hegemonic stability model. Finally, dedicated legal scholarship could develop more effective mechanisms for enforcing state accountability, moving beyond the identification of breaches towards the formulation of tangible solutions aimed at establishing a more equitable and binding international legal order.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to the original idea, study design.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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