

IDEOLOGICAL NARRATIVES OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THEIR IMPACT ON INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

ULUGBEK ISHANKHODJAEV 

Associate Professor (Dr.), Head of the Center for American Studies, UWED

Abstract. *The article explores the formation of ideological narratives as instruments of national identity and foreign policy strategy. It examines the evolution of political ideas, with particular emphasis on the United States, and draws parallels with alternative identity narratives in the twenty-first century. The first part of this publication demonstrates how the American messianic image of the "City upon a Hill," rooted in religious tradition and reinforced by Enlightenment ideals, shaped the liberal world order of the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, this liberal concept has entered a crisis. To the contrary, similar concepts of Chinese, Russian, and European identities are gaining strength and exacerbating geopolitical competition. The chaotic nature of contemporary international politics is, to a large extent, the result of the struggle between national narratives of exceptionalism.*

Keywords: *national identity; messianism; liberal world order; ideological narratives; religion and politics; United States; China; Russia; Iran; Turkey; Uzbekistan.*

Introduction.

In the twenty-first century, international relations are increasingly defined not only by competition for resources and power but also by the rivalry of ideological narratives of national identity that largely determine the foreign policy strategies of major actors. Such narratives—be it the American image of the "City upon a Hill," Russia's concept of the "Third Rome," China's vision of the "Middle Kingdom," Iran's idea of the Islamic Revolution, or Turkey's Neo-Ottomanism—extend beyond mere historical or cultural myths and have become instruments of geopolitical competition.

The rivalry of messianic and nationalist projects has emerged as one of the key factors in the fragmentation of the global order. However, this dimension remains relatively understudied in academic discourse. Historically, politics has often been explained through the lenses of military power, economics, and technology. However, underlying these material factors are ideas that form the "matrix" of state action.



This is open-access article
distributed under the terms of
the **Creative Commons**
Attribution 4.0 International License

As Plato observed, “ideas rule the world.” John Maynard Keynes wrote that ideas, not vested interests, are the driving forces behind societies. The development of Western political thought and practice confirms this insight. The United States, as a young nation of the eighteenth century, became a kind of “laboratory” of Enlightenment ideals—freedom, equality, popular sovereignty, and the rule of law. Thomas Jefferson, when drafting the Declaration of Independence, drew heavily on the works of John Locke. At the same time, the U.S. Constitution embodied the separation of powers articulated by Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu. These philosophical concepts were transformed into tangible political institutions, laying the foundation of the American state and its ideological narrative.

By the nineteenth century, the American narrative had evolved into the concept of national exceptionalism. The Monroe Doctrine (1823) proclaimed the United States' special role in the Western Hemisphere, effectively shaping the country's self-perception as the region's guardian. Simultaneously, the idea of Manifest Destiny emerged—the belief that the United States was destined to spread freedom and democracy, which initially justified territorial expansion westward and later intervention in the affairs of neighboring nations. In the twentieth century, the American narrative of chosenness assumed the form of liberal internationalism—from Woodrow Wilson's “Fourteen Points” to the Cold War rhetoric of leading the “free world.” After 1945, the United States constructed an unprecedentedly ambitious liberal world order based on institutions, alliances, and rules. This “liberal hegemony” became one of the most successful international systems in history (Ikenberry, 2011).

In recent decades, however, the American-led liberal order has faced a serious legitimacy and authority crisis. A growing sense of the “end of the American era” has coincided with the emergence of a multipolar world, in which alternative, non-liberal projects of world order are on the rise. Political resistance to the old system and the emergence of new centers of power and ideas have challenged Western liberal universalism. Consequently, the unipolar moment of the late twentieth century has given way to an era of competing narratives, where the United States no longer enjoys a monopoly on ideological leadership (Ikenberry, 2011).

Research objectives and methodology. The central premise of this research is that narratives of national exceptionalism and political messianism can serve not only as instruments of internal national cohesion but also as sources of international conflict and crises of global

architecture. The article reviews and compares the key national narratives of the leading powers—the United States, China, Russia, Iran, Israel, Turkey, and the Gulf monarchies (Saudi Arabia and Qatar)—analyzing their global and regional ambitions, sources of legitimacy, cultural and religious roots, and mechanisms of influence. The final section focuses on Uzbekistan's position as a "middle power" amid global instability and its search for an optimal strategy of self-identification and balance among competing ideological projects. Methodologically, the study relies on the constructivist approach within international relations theory, which emphasizes the role of ideas and identities in shaping political behavior. In addition, the research employs a civilizational approach to compare narratives across different cultural and historical worlds.

Literature Review.

Scholars have long explored the power of ideological narratives to shape international politics, specifically American exceptionalism's early portrayals as a moral beacon (Winthrop 1996/1630 and Huntington 1996) that scholars contend shaped not only domestic identity but also U.S. views of liberal world order that later were dissected both as stabilizing and crisis-prone (Ikenberry, 2011; Nye, 2017).

Comparative studies have shed light on how other powers developed competing narratives of legitimacy and authority, such as China's Tianxia ideology (now revised into Sinocentrism visions), which has been described as a post-hegemonic alternative to liberalism (Callahan, 2008). Russia's "Russkiy Mir" project is examined as an instrument of soft power with deep connections to historical and religious identity (Laruelle, 2015). India's Hindutva ideology has been examined as an amalgamation of cultural nationalism and a civilizational mission (Jaffrelot, 2007), while Turkey's "Strategic Depth" can be linked to foreign policy activism aimed at preserving neo-Ottoman identity (Davutoglu, 2010). Additionally, the literature documents the ideological projects of Middle Eastern actors, such as Iran's Islamic Revolution (Tony Blair Institute 2022) and Israel's internal nationalist discourse (Peleg & Waxman, 2011).

As analysis of narratives tends to take place in isolation, recent critics have noted the absence of comparative frameworks illustrating how competing ideological visions interact within today's multipolar environment. To fill that void, this article juxtaposes American exceptionalism with Chinese, Russian, Indian, Turkish, and Middle Eastern projects that challenge domestic legitimacy while asserting rival claims to the international order.

National Narratives of Major Powers

The United States: “city upon a hill” and the Liberal Mission. Since its foundation, the United States has constructed a messianic narrative of national identity rooted in the conviction that America is destined to serve as a moral and political example to the world—a “city upon a hill.” This phrase, originating from the Puritan leader John Winthrop’s 1630 sermon, reflects the idea of America’s divine chosenness. Over time, the metaphor became firmly embedded in the country’s political vocabulary, with numerous presidents invoking it to justify both domestic and foreign policies. The narrative rests on a synthesis of religious motifs (Puritan tradition and Protestant messianism) and Enlightenment ideals of democracy and freedom.

American exceptionalism manifested itself both domestically and internationally. Its foreign policy dimension crystallized in the nineteenth century through the Monroe Doctrine and the concept of Manifest Destiny, which justified westward expansion and foreign interventions. In the twentieth century, this foundation gave rise to the doctrine of leadership of the “free world”. Following World War II, the United States spearheaded the creation of a liberal-democratic world order built on alliances (NATO), institutions (the United Nations and the Bretton Woods organizations), and norms reflecting democratic and market values (Ikenberry 2011). Within this system, America positioned itself as a guarantor of global security and prosperity, guided by the belief in the universality of its values. U.S. leadership relied not only on military and economic power but also on “soft power”—the appeal of liberty, human rights, and the American way of life, which became a model for others (Nye, 2017).

However, in recent years, this narrative has encountered serious internal and external challenges. The crisis of liberal internationalism is visible in the rise of isolationist and populist tendencies within the United States, embodied by Donald Trump’s “America First” policy, which questioned the traditional American mission as a global archetype (Frum, 2021). Simultaneously, U.S. dominance abroad has been increasingly contested by other powers advancing alternative models of governance and values. As a result, America’s role as the “shining city upon a hill” is being challenged both externally and from within. A striking example of this evolution is the emergence of a new, quasi-religious technological elite in Silicon Valley. Figures such as Peter Thiel openly describe an impending apocalyptic struggle between “creators” and those seeking to constrain technological progress and artificial intelligence. This techno-messianic ideology, invoking a militant faith in innovation, portrays salvation through technological supremacy and sanctifies digital power as a new global creed (McCants, 2025).

Nevertheless, the U.S. narrative continues to rest upon powerful institutional foundations—its global alliance network, international organizations, cultural hegemony, and the economic dominance of the dollar. These mechanisms sustain American leadership, albeit in a transformed and increasingly competitive international environment (Ikenberry, 2011).

Sources of Legitimacy and Ambitions. The American narrative draws legitimacy from liberalism, democracy, and a belief in divine providence. Its cultural and religious foundations lie in the Protestant ethic and the worldview of early settlers who perceived the New World as a “promised land”. Initially, the United States’ ambitions were regional—the Monroe Doctrine confined them to the Western Hemisphere—but over time they evolved into global aspirations: the construction of a “right” international order grounded in liberal democracy. Institutionally, the U.S. promotes its narrative through international organizations, economic agreements, and value-based diplomacy—from the Marshall Plan to contemporary democracy-promotion programs. Yet this universalist and missionary project has entered a phase of erosion, challenged by competing civilizational and ideological worldviews (Ikenberry 2011).

China: “Civilizational Revival”

Historical Dimension. For modern China, the central ideological narrative is the concept of the “great reinstatement of the Chinese nation”, signifying a return to its rightful place in the world after a century of decline. Official Chinese rhetoric links this “century of humiliation”—from the Opium Wars (1839–1842) to the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949—with foreign aggression and colonialism. Upon proclaiming the PRC, Mao Zedong declared that “the Chinese people have stood up—the nation will never again be humiliated” (Metcalf 2020). According to the Communist Party’s historiography, only the Party ended this period and launched the path of national revival. The idea has since been institutionalized in the “Chinese Dream” and reflected in President Xi Jinping’s strategic initiatives (Callahan 2012).

Civilizational Foundations. China presents itself as the world’s oldest continuous civilization—the “Middle Kingdom”—reclaiming its centrality after a temporary decline. The ideological core of its narrative lies in a synthesis of Confucian values, nationalism, and socialist doctrine. The Communist Party legitimizes its rule by claiming it liberated China from colonial subjugation and restored national dignity. Confucian principles—emphasizing harmony, hierarchy, and the paternal role of the state—are

employed to justify China's distinct developmental model, contrasting with Western liberalism (Callahan 2012).

Regional and Global Ambitions. China's narrative seeks to restore its historical status as Asia's leading power and a potential global center of influence. The "Chinese Dream" encapsulates economic modernization, national strength, and technological leadership by mid-century. Its global manifestation is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), through which China seeks to project economic and political influence across Eurasia, Africa, and beyond. Framed as mutually beneficial cooperation, BRI also serves as a vehicle for promoting China's image as a benevolent yet powerful center of global growth. Complementing this is the concept of a "community of shared future for mankind," which offers an alternative vision of world order grounded in sovereignty, non-interference, and development, rather than liberal-democratic norms (Callahan 2012).

Legitimacy and Instruments of Influence. China's narrative derives legitimacy from the pursuit of historical justice—correcting the misdeeds of colonialism—and from the Communist Party's record of delivering rapid modernization and poverty reduction for hundreds of millions. It also rests on deep civilizational pride and nationalist sentiment. While officially secular, the CCP cultivates a quasi-religious reverence for its leadership and ideology— "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Beijing wields influence through multiple instruments: economic leverage (investment, loans under BRI), creation of alternative international institutions (the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization), and soft power via Confucius Institutes, media diplomacy, and cultural outreach. In essence, the Chinese model offers a non-liberal but increasingly attractive vision of governance—emphasizing sovereignty, development, and respect for tradition as an alternative to Western universalism.

Russia: "A Civilization-State"

Historical Dimension. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia formulated a national narrative centered on the idea of restoring its historical greatness, often encapsulated in the metaphor "Russia is rising from its knees." This image evokes memories of national humiliation and chaos in the 1990s, followed by a period of regained strength and international influence. The core notion is that Russia constitutes a unique civilization—neither Western nor Eastern—with a special mission in global affairs. In the official discourse, the country's resurgence is portrayed as a rectification of a historical catastrophe (the collapse of the USSR) and the restoration of Russia's rightful place among the great powers (Laruelle 2015).

Civilizational Foundations. The historical and cultural roots of the Russian narrative trace back to the concept of Moscow as the “Third Rome” — the successor to the Byzantine Orthodox Empire (the Second Rome). This idea, first articulated in the sixteenth century by the monk Philotheus, held that after the fall of Rome and Constantinople, Moscow had become the last bastion of true faith and legitimate authority: “Two Romes have fallen, the third stands, and there will be no fourth.” In modern political thought, this idea has been revived as part of a nationalist and conservative worldview that defines Russia as the guardian of traditional—particularly Orthodox—values in opposition to the secular and morally “decadent” West.

In the 2000s, this evolved into the concept of the “Russian World” (Russkiy Mir)—a transnational community encompassing all those who share Russian culture and Orthodox civilization. The notion of the Russian World functions as both a soft-power instrument and a geopolitical claim over the post-Soviet space, portraying Russia as the cultural and spiritual protector of its former compatriots (Laruelle 2015).

Sources of Legitimacy. The Russian narrative draws legitimacy from a triad of nationalism, Orthodoxy, and Soviet nostalgia. Orthodoxy provides the notion of a spiritual mission—Russia as Katechon, the restraining force holding back evil in the world. Soviet heritage, meanwhile, contributes to the imagery of victory in the Great Patriotic War and the pride of superpower status. Official discourse frequently emphasizes the continuity of Russian statehood—from Kyiv Rus to the Russian Empire, the USSR, and the present-day Russian Federation—depicting these epochs as successive embodiments of a single great civilization. Thus, whether tsar, general secretary, or modern president, all are portrayed as serving the same overarching mission: the preservation and expansion of Russian greatness.

Regional and Global Ambitions. A foreign policy shaped by this narrative aims to restore Russia’s influence in the post-Soviet region and assert its position as one of the poles of a multipolar world. Moscow seeks to lead Eurasian integration projects such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), while presenting itself as the global defender of sovereignty and traditional values. The motif of “rising from the knees” is framed domestically as the restoration of historical justice and the protection of the Russian World, legitimizing an assertive foreign policy—including the use of military force. Globally, Russia positions itself as a counterweight to U.S. hegemony and an advocate of multipolarity. The rhetoric often takes an explicitly anti-Western tone, drawing on a civilizational dichotomy between a “spiritual” Russia and a “decadent” West (Ikenberry 2011; Laruelle, 2015).

Instruments of Influence. In addition to military strength, Russia employs a wide range of institutional and ideological tools. Among them are regional integration frameworks (EAEU, Union State with Belarus), energy diplomacy (using oil and gas exports as levers of influence), and media outreach. Russian state media—most notably RT and Sputnik—serve as global platforms for disseminating pro-Russian narratives and critiques of Western liberalism, thereby shaping international perceptions of Russia as an alternative civilizational center.

The Russian Orthodox Church also plays a significant role, operating through its global dioceses and affiliated organizations to promote the concept of the Russian World and to foster cultural solidarity among Slavic and Orthodox populations. In this way, Russia's soft power blends with hard power, reinforcing its geopolitical ambitions through a combination of cultural attraction, ideological influence, and coercive capacity (Laruelle 2015).

The European Narrative: "Unity in Diversity"

Historical Dimension. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Europe developed its own ideological narrative aimed at strengthening supranational identity and defining the continent's collective role in world politics. This narrative was built upon shared civilizational and cultural foundations—namely, the philosophical, legal, and artistic legacy of Ancient Greece and Rome; the common Christian tradition; and the humanist ideals of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. These sources provided Europe with a sense of belonging to a single civilization characterized by reason, human dignity, and the rule of law.

In this vision, the European integration project emerged as a "peaceful union," created to prevent future conflicts and ensure prosperity through cooperation and interdependence. Universal principles of humanism and enlightenment became the moral and intellectual pillars of a supranational European identity that complements, rather than erases, the national cultures and traditions of its member states.

Civilizational Foundations. Unlike the United States, which developed as a "melting pot" of nations, Europe has never been a homogeneous entity. Rather, it represents a mosaic of peoples, languages, religions, and cultural traditions that cannot be fused into a single "European nation" modeled after the American example. Consequently, the ideal of a unified Europe can only rest on the recognition and respect of diversity—both individual and collective.

Nevertheless, the formation of a supranational European identity has been a slow and complex process. This identity largely remains an intellectual construct of political elites and is not fully embraced by the

broader public. Even after decades of integration, most citizens of EU countries continue to feel a stronger attachment to their nation-states than to “Europe as a whole.” The limited popular resonance of the European project became evident in the rejection of the proposed European Constitution in the 2005 referenda and later in the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the European Union. These developments revealed a persistent gap between the ideals of integration and the everyday perceptions of European citizens (Kavvadias 2025).

Sources of Legitimacy and Instruments of Influence. Externally, the European narrative manifests itself through the EU’s role as a “normative power” in global affairs—a power that seeks to shape international relations through norms and values rather than coercion. Its influence derives not from military might but from soft power and the diffusion of legal and institutional models. The European Union promotes democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, presenting its integration model as a successful example of overcoming historical divisions and achieving prosperity through cooperation.

This “normative identity” serves as both a moral and strategic instrument: it legitimizes the EU’s external engagement and strengthens its global standing as a promoter of universal principles. By linking its foreign policy to normative ideals rather than mere geopolitical calculation, the EU projects an image of a “civilian power” that contributes to global stability through diplomacy, development assistance, and multilateral governance.

Regional and Global Ambitions. In the twenty-first century, however, the European project has come under strain from both internal and external challenges. Within the EU, the rise of conservative and nationalist movements has exposed tensions between supranational and national loyalties, producing what many scholars call a “crisis of European identity.” The large-scale migration flows of 2015–2023 intensified these divisions, triggering xenophobic sentiments and disputes over burden-sharing among member states. The migration crisis highlighted the limits of solidarity and revealed fault lines between Eastern and Western Europe, North and South. Externally, the erosion of the liberal world order and the rise of alternative centers of power—such as China and Russia—have undermined the EU’s normative dominance. Euroscepticism remains a persistent phenomenon: critics argue that Brussels imposes “top-down” decisions detached from the needs of ordinary citizens, weakening the democratic legitimacy of integration (Kavvadias 2025).

Despite these challenges, the European narrative continues to serve as a significant identity project on the global stage. The COVID-19 pandemic and, more profoundly, the war between Russia and Ukraine

acted as catalysts for European solidarity. The EU demonstrated unexpected unity—imposing severe sanctions on Russia, hosting millions of Ukrainian refugees, and granting Ukraine candidate status for membership. Through these actions, Europe reaffirmed its collective identity and its vision of world order based on law, dialogue, and cooperation. By doing so, the EU positioned itself as a moral actor and defender of multilateralism, competing ideologically with more authoritarian or exclusivist worldviews. Although the European narrative today faces structural and ideological crises, it remains one of the most enduring attempts to translate cultural diversity into a shared civilizational mission.

To be continued in the next issue of the journal by comparing national identity narratives of the countries with regional ambitions, such as Turkey, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, and the opportunities and risks for a middle-power state (using Uzbekistan as a case study) in constructing its own narrative, model of self-identification, and strategy of international positioning.

Bibliography

1. Callahan, William. 2008. "Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-Hegemonic or a New Hegemony?" *International Studies Review* 10 (4): 749–761. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2008.00830.x>.
2. Davutoglu, Ahmet. 2010. *Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position*. Istanbul, Turkey: Küre Yayınları.
3. Frum, David. 2021. "Is America Still the 'Shining City on a Hill'?" *The Atlantic*, January 18. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/01/america-still-shining-city-hill/617707/>.
4. Gorski, Philip, and S. Perry. 2022. *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
5. Huntington, Samuel P. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
6. Ikenberry, G. John. 2011. *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
7. Jaffrelot, Christophe. 2007. *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
8. Kant, Immanuel. 2006. *Perpetual Peace*. Translated by T. Humphrey. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett. (Original work published 1795).
9. Kavvadias, Ioannis. 2023. "European and National Identity." *Shaping Europe*. <https://shapingeurope.eu/european-and-national-identity/>.

10. Laruelle, Marlene. 2015. *Russian World: Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination*. Washington, DC: Center on Global Interests.
11. McCants, William. 2017. "What the 1967 War Meant for Saudi Religious Exports." *Brookings*, May 30. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-the-1967-war-meant-for-saudi-religious-exports/>.
12. McCants, William. 2025. "Inside Billionaire Peter Thiel's Private Lectures: Warnings of 'the Antichrist' and U.S. Destruction." *The Washington Post*, October 10. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2025/10/10/peter-thiel-antichrist-lectures-leaked/>.
13. Nasr, Vali. 2006. *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
14. Nye, Joseph S. 2017. "Will the Liberal Order Survive?" *Foreign Affairs* 96 (1): 10–16.
15. Peleg, Ilan, and D. Waxman. 2011. *Israel's Palestinians: The Conflict Within*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
16. Reagan, Ronald. 1989. *Farewell Address to the Nation*. Washington, DC: The White House. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/farewell-address-nation>.
17. The Tony Blair Institute. 2022. *The Fundamentals of Iran's Islamic Revolution*. London, UK: TBI Reports.
18. U.S. Department of State. 2011. "Monroe Doctrine (1823)." In *Office of the Historian, Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations*. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1801-1829/monroe>.
19. Winthrop, John. 1996. "A Model of Christian Charity (1630)." In *The American Puritans*, edited by P. Miller. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.