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## Sequestering American Exceptionalism

By Roger Peace

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The Obama administration and Republican leaders appear to have reached agreement on at least one issue: preventing sequestration cuts to military spending. "If sequester happens," said then-defense secretary Leon Panetta on February 3, "it's going to badly damage the readiness of the United States of America".

Readiness, in this case, means continuing the self-appointed US role of world policeman. "We have the most powerful military force on the face of the earth right now," continued Panetta. "It is important in terms of providing stability and peace in the world."

Republican leaders are adamant that fiscal austerity be reserved for domestic programs and not apply to the Pentagon. Their budget strategy since the Reagan era has been to slash taxes and keep military spending high to force deep cuts in social welfare spending and preserve market dominance.

Most Republican backbenchers are also believers in the US global policeman role. Any further cuts in military spending, according to Representative Ander Crenshaw of Florida, will undermine America's ability to "respond to crises around the world", "contain persistent threats from Iran, Syria, the Horn of Africa, and Pakistan" and to "defend liberty".

The political debate has thus far focused on tradeoffs between domestic and military spending, tax cuts and deficits. Left out are questions about whether the United States should be

responsible for policing the world or whether international agencies might address terrorism, aggression, and political instability in a more consistent, comprehensive, and internationally acceptable manner.

The United States adopted its world policeman role at the outset of the Cold War. Its mission to "contain communism" was a slippery one, valid in the case of protecting West Berlin but stretched to the breaking point in supporting repressive regimes and overthrowing democratically elected governments.

Still, by the time the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, many Americans had come to accept this expansive global role, believing that the more military power the United States exerted, the better for the world.

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the George W Bush administration pursued a military strategy that had only a tangential relationship to protecting Americans from further terrorist attacks. The United States invaded Iraq despite the fact that the United Nations weapons inspection team had successfully squelched Iraq's ability to produce weapons of mass destruction. The Iraq invasion was preceded by a 2002 National Security Strategy Report that asserted the right of the US to "act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed".

The Obama administration has extended the Bush doctrine of preemption by authorizing assassinations of suspected "militants" in countries with which the United States is not at war. Such rank unilateralism has no basis in international law, and indeed the UN has opened a major new investigation into the United States' use of drones and targeted assassinations.

If it feels an irrepressible urge to deploy its resources abroad, the United States would do well to curb its global pretensions and become more of a team player, putting its military muscle and money behind international agencies. The UN helps protect civilians in war zones, provides humanitarian aid to refugees, promotes the alleviation of poverty and sustainable development, and is a central player in the cause of human rights.

A separate International Criminal Court investigates and prosecutes individuals accused of genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes. The United States has thus far refused to participate in this court.

By the most conservative estimates, the United States spends over US\$700 billion on its military, accounting for 41% of the world's total military expenditures. Transferring some of these funds to UN agencies, even with expected cuts in the US military budget, would enhance global security without weakening US national security.

The United States is moving against the tide of history in attempting to maintain its self-appointed world policeman role. The development of international institutions and law are more than a century in the making and will no doubt require another century to secure. But the "American Century" is most certainly coming to an end. The goal should be a smooth transition to a more cooperative world order.