

## IDEOLOGICAL *REALPOLITIK*, EUROSCEPTICISM AND AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM IN ROBERT KAGAN

GABRIEL C. GHERASIM\*

**Abstract.** *The global political realities in the aftermath of the Cold War era have shifted slowly, but firmly, from a widespread optimism regarding the future of world politics and the role of global political institutions to recent apprehensions concerning the present state of affairs in the field of international politics. On the one hand, most political actors in the western world (including here both the European Union and the United States) are still defending the global geopolitical model they previously endorsed after 1989, while, on the other hand, there is a significant and ever growing number of critics (including, especially, scholars and even citizens) doubting and questioning the geopolitical design and achievements of the recent past. As the present paper focuses mainly on the issue of euroscepticism, one of its most comprehensive, peculiar and expressive forms can be found in the works of the well-known political scientist Robert Kagan. Therefore, I will examine the issue of Kagan's euroscepticism from a threefold perspective: i) the return of the pre-global ideology of realpolitik and the demise of the postmodern concept of international politics; ii) the failure of the EU's project to expand its own geopolitical options and spread its post-ideological values and iii) the reassuring ideology of American exceptionalism and its lucid approach on geopolitical realities. Kagan's views on all of these topics are – as far as the present paper is concerned – conducive to and explanatory of what I would term 'geopolitical euroscepticism'.*

**Keywords:** *Robert Kagan, political realism, exceptionalism, euroscepticism, neoconservatism, power politics.*

### *Opening remarks*

Contrary to Jean-Francois Lyotard,<sup>1</sup> the construction of the “end of grand narratives” thesis is a rather mytho-poetic ‘tale of a tub’ when confronted, for instance, with the most pressing questions of geopolitical realities today. The wide-circulating alternative narratives of American exceptionalism represent a

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\* Lecturer, PhD, Faculty of European Studies, Department of International Relations and German Studies, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania; gabriel.gherasim@ubbcluj.ro; gherasim88@yahoo.com.

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, pp. 37-41.

case in point for this disenchantment with the most basic postmodern theories. Following the post-colonial inception of exceptionalism in late 18<sup>th</sup> century America and its mid-nineteenth century western expansionist versions, the United States has committed itself to the current vocabulary of today's American model of exceptionalism since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which marked the internationalist stance of the United States, in the aftermath of the Spanish-American war of 1898.<sup>2</sup> Since then, the intractable story of American hegemonism, expansionism, militarism and interventionism has become a distinct language in international politics, in the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century American status of global leader. One influential ideologue, historian and geo-strategist who tells such a story is Robert Kagan, a Greek-born foreign policy commentator and advisor (of John McCain and Hillary Clinton, among others), columnist and outstanding member of several think-tanks and NGO's (such as Brookings Institution and Council on Foreign Relations), co-founder (with William Kristol) of the well-known think-tank for public foreign policy *Project for the New American Century* (1997-2006). A member of the so-called "the third generation of American neoconservatives" (Paul Wolfowitz's generation),<sup>3</sup> Kagan's views are strongly associated with the neoconservative war-like, belligerent propaganda, "effective diplomacy"<sup>4</sup>, all understood in terms of the United States unilateral use of force and muscular politics.

Indeed, what Robert Kagan recently assessed as "an intellectual problem, a question of identity and purpose"<sup>5</sup> was also deconstructed as an insidious, aggressive and persuasive propaganda of the neoconservatives for the highly questionable hegemonic conduct of the United States in foreign policy, criticized as "imperialistic, chauvinistic, militaristic, and hypocritical".<sup>6</sup> In the eyes of the critics, the substantial sins of American neoconservatives rest in their "excessive idealism, blinding self-righteousness, utopianism, hubris, militarism and overweening ambition".<sup>7</sup> But: "To examine this premise requires first understanding what people mean by "neoconservative," for the term conjures very different images. For some, it is synonymous with "hawk," to others, it is an ethnic description, and to still others, it is a term to describe anything evil – I once heard a Cornell professor earnestly define neoconservatism as an ideological commitment to torture and political oppression. But when employed fairly neutrally to describe a foreign policy worldview, as Packer does, neoconservatism usually has a recognizable meaning. It connotes a potent moralism and idealism in world affairs, a belief in America's exceptional role as a promoter of the principles of

<sup>2</sup> "The Spanish-American war was probably the most popular war in American history", writes Robert Kagan, "Neocon Nation: Neoconservatism, c. 1776", in *World Affairs*, Spring 2008, available at <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/neocon-nation-neoconservatism-c-1776>. He opposes the thesis of an imperialist conspiracy of outstanding Republican political officials at the turn of the 20th century (Theodore Roosevelt, Cabot Lodge, Hearst or Mahan).

<sup>3</sup> Patrick E. Tyler, "U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring no Rivals Develop", in *The New York Times*, March 8, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> R. Kagan, "US needs a discussion on when, not whether, to use force", in *The Washington Post*, July 15, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> R. Kagan, "Superpowers Don't Get to Retire", in *New Republic*, May 27, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> R. Kagan, "Neocon Nation...", *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem.*

liberty and democracy, a belief in the preservation of American primacy and in the exercise of power, including military power, as a tool for defending and advancing moralistic and idealistic causes, as well as a suspicion of international institutions and a tendency toward unilateralism. In the hands of more hostile critics, the neocons are not merely idealistic but absurdly and dangerously hubristic about the unlimited capacity of American power to effect positive change; not merely expansive but imperialistic, seeking not only American pre-eminence but ruthless global dominance; not merely willing to use force, but preferring it to peaceful methods; and not merely tending toward unilateralism but actively spurning alliances in favor of solitary action. Even these deliberately polemical caricatures point to something recognizable, a foreign policy that combines an idealist's moralism, and even messianism, with a realist's belief in the importance of power."<sup>8</sup>

The critically dismissive labelling of the (neo)conservative thinking in the field of international politics as “the hallowed tradition”,<sup>9</sup> from John Quincy Adams, George Kennan and Reinhold Niebuhr to the present-day neoconservative “hawks”, is not consistent – according to Kagan – with a unilateral, minoritarian and partisan understanding of foreign politics; in fact, both the neoconservatives and liberal internationalists have shared the same basic views in this respect.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the arbitrary association of the “neoconservative conspiracy” with the international political agenda of the Republican Party is counteracted by historical facts (e.g., those who fiercely denounce the Bush Doctrine and the post-Baghdad narrative<sup>11</sup> easily forget that in the 1990s, for instance, the Clinton Democratic administration turned from “containment to regime change”).<sup>12</sup> In realist terms, according to Kagan, a reflective analysis of the last century's trends in international politics will reveal that, following two short periods of inaccurate realism (i.e., the Wilsonian liberal internationalism of the 1920s and the political culture of appeasement and international legalism of the 1930s), the post-war strong realism of the Cold War era divided the world order between the camp of “armed liberalism” and the camp of totalitarianism; with the demise of the Soviet Union and the dismantling of the totalitarian world, a new promise of universal liberalism and global democracy emerged, which proved to be rather an illusionary and fictitious optimism about the world's future.<sup>13</sup>

Oversimplistic or comprehensive, fallacious or explanatory, perspectivistic or objective, Robert Kagan's assertive approaches of “the American hegemon”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew J. Bacevich, “Glory Days: A pundit's rosy view of Pax Americana”, in *Harper's Magazine*, June 2012, p. 70, referring to Robert Kagan's recent work *The World America Made*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> R. Kagan, “Neocon Nation...”, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Robert Kagan, William Kristol, “Remember the Bush Doctrine”, in *The Weekly Standard*, April 5, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> R. Kagan, “Neocon Nation...”, *op. cit.* Some critics have commented upon Robert Kagan's centrism, due to his attempt to move beyond the partisan support for the Republican foreign policy agendas (Jacob Heilbrunn, “Why Trump Is Panicking Robert Kagan”, in *The National Interest*, February 26, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Kagan, “America's Dangerous Aversion to Conflict”, in *The Wall Street Journal*, September 5, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> The expression was used both by Kagan, “The Benevolent Empire”, in *Foreign Policy*, Summer 1998, and Samuel Huntington, “The Lonely Power”, in *Foreign Affairs*, 78/2, March-April, 1999.

are frequently intertwined with large ideological digressions and geopolitical evaluations and prognoses; as far as his purported euroscepticism is concerned, its meanings and occurrences are rarely elicited from a personal understanding of the past, present and future configurations of global politics. As such, the present study examines first, the facets of his ideological commitment to *realpolitik*, second, the overall premises for the relevance of his euroscepticism, and third, the all-encompassing assumptions of his understanding of American exceptionalism.

*The intellectual engine:  
ideological realpolitik in Robert Kagan*

Kagan's diagnosis on the present ideological state of things in international politics is founded on two basic sets of presuppositions: first, that a visionary, finalist and holistic interpretation of world history is the key for understanding the real state of things in international history, and second, that a return to a strong model of historical interpretation, according to the realist doctrine, is the only genuine solution for overcoming present-day dangers and difficulties and the only practical approach to foreign policy, in geopolitical terms. His first assumption (i.e., his intractable historicism) is not explicitly asserted and undertaken by Kagan: on the contrary, according to his detractors, his purpose-oriented verdicts and selective judgments are the very substance of his "oracular" indoctrinations and misconceptions. His obsessive claims for a return to a strong realist understanding of geopolitics, which is equivalent to his commitment to *ideological realpolitik*, is the methodological tool in the service of his endorsement of power politics, militarism and force-centred diplomacy. Let us examine both Kagan's historicism and realism.

Kagan's historicist views on global politics stem from his discontent with "the end of history" thesis which, paradoxically, is also a historicist option. Targeting precisely the optimistic determinism of the 1990s, according to which there was not a viable alternative to liberalism and democracy, Kagan aimed to dismantle Francis Fukuyama's theory of ideological noncombat in a confrontation with the liberal doctrine.<sup>15</sup> Stating that the post-Cold War victory of liberalism and democracy over communism and totalitarianism "were not inevitable, and they need not be lasting",<sup>16</sup> Kagan seems committed to a species of contingent historicism; acknowledging that the illusionary and promising "end of history" thesis was influential for less than a decade in geopolitics, Kagan argues that the avatars of "history's return" can be detected in the forms of resurgent strong nationalisms and the ascent of Russia, China, India, Iran and radical Islam to global power. In other words, the fallacy of "the end of history" thesis rests on the naïve presumption that the world would turn to the globalization of the liberal democracy model. Kagan's carefully constructed historicism expands

<sup>15</sup> Kagan, "The End of the End of History", in *New Republic*, April 23, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008, pp. 104-105.

beyond a more detailed consideration of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in order to include oversimplifications and large generalizations about church-centred orientations in foreign policy during the middle ages and monarchical guidance for the understanding of geopolitical aims in the age of empires. Even the “uncertainty and flux”<sup>17</sup> of the present-day international order is adjusted to fit his overconfident historicist attitude. Various critics harshly attacked Kagan’s historicist passion for lacking a lucid examination of reality and for generating historical counterfactuals; for instance, his simplistic identifications of recent geopolitical orientations in terms of appeasement (i.e., Clinton’s foreign policy in China, Obama’s approaches in Iraq and Afghanistan) are contradicted by historical facts,<sup>18</sup> while his overall obscure language is denounced as “fabulist, shameless quackery, trafficking in knowingness, wishful thinking”.<sup>19</sup> In developing his purpose-oriented historicist narrative, Kagan uses less than compelling logical arguments, by deriving, for instance, the scientific and technological progress, the global economy and the international institutions from the liberal conception of world order, instead of considering these as liberal premises.<sup>20</sup> One of his statements might stand for the demise of historicism altogether, including “the end of history” idea: “The great fallacy of our era has been the belief that a liberal international order rests on the triumph of ideas alone, or on the natural unfolding of human progress.”<sup>21</sup>

Robert Kagan’s commitment to a resurgent ideology of *realpolitik* is consistent with a double consideration of the doctrine: i) his definition of power and ii) his opposition to the highly popular doctrine of “declinism”. In 1996, during the preparations for the inauguration of the *Project for the New American Century*, Robert Kagan and William Kristol unequivocally expressed their views concerning the new concept of power: in their words, a refreshing American foreign policy should stand for a “benign global hegemony”, based on “military supremacy and moral confidence”, to the detriment of “isolationism, neoisolationism, tepid consensus, and Kissinger-type realism”.<sup>22</sup> In his essay *Macht, Power, Puissance: prose democratique ou poesie demoniaque*, the French philosopher Raymond Aron defined the concept of power politics as both a descriptive approach to state relationships and a doctrine of international politics; considering power politics as an attribute of “who holds the upper hand”, one might speak of a *realpolitik* adage to Aron’s classical formulation, or of the “Kagan corollary” to the doctrine of realism in international politics.<sup>23</sup> The “true realists”<sup>24</sup> oppose traditional realists and leftists alike, in order to include moralism, principled

<sup>17</sup> Kagan, “A Changing World Order?”, November 17, 2013, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/a-changing-world-order/>.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Beinart, „2014 Is Not 1931“, in *The Atlantic*, September 8, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Bacevich, “Glory Days...”, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-72.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Leonard, “The world that America built”, in *New Statesman*, May 2, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Kagan, “The End of the End...”, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> William Kristol, Robert Kagan, “Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy”, in *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 1996.

<sup>23</sup> Bacevich, „Glory Days...“, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

<sup>24</sup> Kagan, “Neocon Nation...”, *op. cit.*

idealism and liberal capitalism. Beyond grasping the deep realist meanings of the most recent ideological competition between western democracies and the postmodern autocracies of Russia and China, the “hawkish” realist would also accommodate the unfortunate idealist programmes to pressing challenges<sup>25</sup> and condemn the pseudo-realist flaws of cynical arguments. The very complex nature of power politics at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century imposes a realistic approach, in the sense that the outdated and harmonious construct of global convergence has been already replaced by global competition, in which “competing truths” would finally dissolve American unilateralism into a multi-faceted multilateralism, according to a recent statement of the Russian minister for foreign affairs, Sergei Lavrov.<sup>26</sup> But, as Kagan replies in an essay which was included in his recent book *The World America Made*, these “rising powers” should not necessarily compete with the United States; they should be amassed as “assets” and not fatalistically conceived as American “liabilities”.<sup>27</sup> All depends on the wise and realist understanding of the very concept of power politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Not so long ago, it was believed that the transition from “hard” to “soft power”<sup>28</sup>, which was tantamount to the shift from geopolitics to geo-economics, would bring about the final victory of liberalism and democracy; the same Joseph Nye amended his early views by stating that “the rise of the rest” – and not the ascension of Russia or China or American decline – would shape the world future.<sup>29</sup>

A different version of Kagan’s ideological realism in international politics is consistent with his anti-declinism; even if a large number of critics and ordinary people tend to appraise the American retreat from its self-engaged hegemonism, Kagan’s plea for an assertive presence of the United States in world affairs is explicitly directed against declinists (Fukuyama, Zakaria) and multipolarists;<sup>30</sup> one reputable critic states that his anti-declinst convictions and his overconfidence in predicting the future of world politics are the most important deficiencies of his latest work, *The World America Made*.<sup>31</sup> By and large, Kagan rejects all the three apparent basic forms of American decline, which were operational in the declinist language: i) the declining *power* of the United States, according to his belief that a declining America will lead to world decline altogether; moreover, the costs of losing power are higher than the costs of maintaining the military;

<sup>25</sup> Kagan, “Barack Obama as Woodrow Wilson’s Foreign Policy Heir”, in *The Washington Post*, June 7, 2009. Kagan’s references point here to the readjustment of Barack Obama’s international agenda, following his utopian “new beginning” of 2009 (the Cairo discourse, nuclear disarmament, Guantanamo and his prospects about the possibility of solving the Israeli-Palestinian issue).

<sup>26</sup> Kagan, “The End of the End...”, *op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> Kagan, “Not Fade Away: Against the Myth of American Decline”, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/not-fade-away-against-the-myth-of-american-decline/>

<sup>28</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World’s Only Superpower Can’t Go It Alone*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>29</sup> *Idem*, “American power in the 21st century will be defined by the ‘rise of the rest’”, in *The Washington Post*, June 28, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Kagan, “A Changing...”, *op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> Robert O. Keohane, “Hegemony and After: Knowns and Unknowns in the Debate over Decline”, in *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2012 Issue.

ii) the declining *influence* of the United States, based on the “nostalgic fallacy” that the United States have used propagandistic and persuasive methods for ensuring other states follow its path and iii) the decline of Joseph Nye’s popular concept of *soft power*, based on a delusive understanding of the world’s political culture at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; in the real world, according to Kagan, nobody “sought to emulate” the United States’ power.<sup>32</sup>

### *The pretext: Robert Kagan’s euroscepticism*

The analysis of euroscepticism in Robert Kagan should follow both a descriptive and explanatory model according to which it is, first, subordinated to Kagan’s explicit commitment for asserting American exceptionalism and second, an argumentative tool which purportedly would strengthen his option for the resurgence of ideological *realpolitik*. In fact, Kagan is committed to what I would call ‘geopolitical euroscepticism’ and uses multidisciplinary arguments in order to prove its validity. For instance, in one of his works dedicated to the comparative examination of the United States and European legal systems, Kagan discriminates between two essentially different political and judicial cultures: on the one hand, the US political and judicial culture might be descriptively assessed as participatory, litigant, pragmatically oriented, negotiation oriented and more flexible, while the European one, on the other, is rather hierarchical, bureaucratic, normative, decisionist and rigid.<sup>33</sup>

In Robert Kagan’s case, it is rather inaccurate to speak about a form of outright euroscepticism; in fact, in one of his most popular books, he admits that the American hegemonic and unilateralist stance in the present state of world affairs may be inferior to the postmodern idealistic European conception, but the latter does not constitute a realistic and effective approach to present-day global challenges.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, his alternative to the desirable but useless European project would be the assertion of a Huntingtonian “uni-multi-polar” solution that should “accommodate the US wariness of their global role”.<sup>35</sup> Kagan deals extensively with his euroscepticism in some important newspaper and magazine articles and also in his 2004 book, *Of Paradise and Power*. In real terms, Kagan’s euroscepticism should be understood as a paramount suspicion towards the success of the European projects in international affairs.

In one of his articles, entitled “In Europe, a Slide toward Irrelevance”, Kagan lists the most problematic aspects with which the European Union is confronted and which represent decisive obstacles to the assertion of its solid global posture: loss of self-confidence, a strategy of “turning inward”, increasing pessimism, egoistic interests, procedural difficulties in the areas of immigration and assimilation, disunity and a visible lack of capabilities in the military field and on the issue of

<sup>32</sup> Kagan, “Not Fade Away...”, *op. cit.*

<sup>33</sup> Kagan, *Adversarial Legalism: The American Way of Law*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> Kagan, *The Return of History*, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>35</sup> Kagan, “A Changing...”, *op. cit.*

leadership. The European Union looks like a “miraculous organization” and, because of its weakness, has a rather irrelevant role in global politics; in Kagan’s words, the European Union is “akin to the chorus of a Greek tragedy, endlessly commenting and pronouncing judgment on the actions of the protagonists”.<sup>36</sup> It is not by accident that Kagan frequently oscillates between a benevolent mood of metaphorical expression and subtle irony: elsewhere, he uses a quite suggestive vocabulary when comparing the international cooperation between the European Union and the United States, by saying that the American role is that of “making the dinner”, while the European self-assumed duty is that of “doing the dishes”, following his already famous dictum according to which “Americans are from Mars, and Europeans are from Venus”.<sup>37</sup>

In the article entitled “Different Philosophies of Power: Europe and America”, Kagan drastically distances the European vocabulary of power (i.e., international legislation, transnational negotiation, posthistorical Kantian paradise, aversion to force, rejection of traditional power, enforcement of regulations) from the American postulates associated with the meanings of power (i.e., noble effort, strength and determination, militarism). He concludes that “Europe’s Kantian order depends on the United States using power according to the old Hobbesian rules”.<sup>38</sup> This state of European dependency is consistent with its practical irrelevance; in a memorandum addressed to President Barack Obama, on January 23, 2014, in which Robert Kagan and Ted Piccone formulated further recommendations for American conduct in international politics, the explanatory “background” used as a justification was silent about the featured European role in global politics, briefly mentioning – *en passant* – only the reinforcement of the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP).<sup>39</sup> This minor status of the European Union in global politics has been pervasive since the formulation of the Bush doctrine by Charles Krauthammer in June 2001 and the Iraqi war of 2003; as far as the latter issue is concerned, Europeans doubted the positive consequences of democratization in Iraq, fearing perpetual factionalism among Islamic groups.<sup>40</sup> At least within the decade 2003-2013, the effective international cooperation between the United States and the European Union was rather weak, with the notable exception of the Sarkozy-Merkel commitment to join the major American directions in foreign policy.<sup>41</sup> One of the main criticisms addressed to Kagan refers to his rather purpose-oriented and arbitrary selections of certain historical episodes which confuse and mislead the reader: in his triumphalist march, Kagan “disparages the United Nations, ignores UN peacekeeping, the World Bank and the IMF and is dismissive of the European Union”.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Kagan, “In Europe, a Slide Toward Irrelevance”, in *The Washington Post*, June 15, 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Kagan, “Power and Weakness”, in *Policy Review*, June/ July 2002, pp. 3, 8.

<sup>38</sup> Kagan, “Different Philosophies of Power: Europe and America III”, in *International Herald Tribune*, May 27, 2002.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Kagan, Ted Piccone, “Reassert U.S. Leadership of a Liberal Global Order”, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/reassert-u-s-leadership-of-a-liberal-global-order/>

<sup>40</sup> Robert Kagan, William Kristol, “What to Do About Iraq”, in *The Weekly Standard*, January 21, 2002.

<sup>41</sup> Kagan, *The Return of History...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>42</sup> Keohane, “Hegemony and After...”, *op. cit.*, p. 3.



One of the most comprehensive considerations of the European Union's weaknesses and irrelevance in global affairs is provided by Kagan in his study *Power and Weakness*; starting from postulating the three basic points of divergence between the United States and Europe (i.e., efficacy of power, morality of power, desirability of power), Kagan states that the present-day situation of the transatlantic partnership is a reversed historical context, distinct from the geopolitical realities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the United States was weak and praised peace and commerce, while the strong European empires stood for power politics.<sup>43</sup> But the geo-strategic centrality of Europe was dissolved after 1990; anticipated by "Gaullism" and "Ostpolitik" during the Cold War era, the 1992 European Maastricht agenda fostered the multipolar view in international politics. What in the post-war period politics of appeasement signified, a sophisticated approach to foreign affairs, was transformed, in the aftermath of 1990, into renewed sophistication v. oversimplification, subtlety v. direct approach, tolerance v. radical solutions, diplomacy v. confrontation, process v. result, accommodation to failure v. overconfidence. Even if Kagan admits that these simplistic oppositions are rather "caricatures", nevertheless he observes that there are many more points of convergence between American democrats and republicans, despite their political rivalry, than between any American politician and social-democrats in Europe, for instance. Additionally, even if Europeans are more conscious today about this transatlantic divide than the Americans are, there has always been a rift between Americans and Europeans; in fact, what historically distanced the American mentality from the European one were different attitudes concerning progress and a reactionary outlook,<sup>44</sup> while the present-day European apprehensions would point at the American belligerent temperament, superficial categorizations, coercive approach, non-cooperation and unilateralism.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, because of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ideological disasters, Europeans are also apprehensive about strong ideological commitments.

Another study of Kagan's signals the essential ambivalence of European powers, this back and forth between the "litany of complaint" and the "lament about disengagement",<sup>46</sup> when it comes to a proper understanding of the overall European mindset about the United States; as always, Kagan provides illustrative examples without considering at least notable exceptions. Everything serves his purpose of mildly asserting his geopolitical euroscepticism, juxtaposing the American supposedly hypocritical and versatile conduct in global affairs (e.g., "the rebalancing strategy") to the European ambivalent and equivocal attitude (e.g., "both decrying and inviting" the American power politics).<sup>47</sup>

The most consistent approach of what I have termed Kagan's geopolitical euroscepticism was formulated in his book *Of Paradise and Power: America*

<sup>43</sup> Kagan, "Power and Weakness", *op. cit.*, pp. 3, 5-6.

<sup>44</sup> Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America's Place in the World from Its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the Twentieth Century*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006, pp. 294-295.

<sup>45</sup> Kagan, "Power and Weakness", *op. cit.*

<sup>46</sup> Kagan, "The Ambivalent Superpower", in *Politico Magazine*, March/ April, 2014.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*.

*and Europe in the New World Order*. According to Kagan, the most divisive issue which sharply separates the United States of America from Europe today is a philosophical, even a metaphysical disagreement about where exactly mankind stands on the axis between the “laws of the jungle” and the “laws of reason”;<sup>48</sup> the only possible solution to render the dispute irrelevant “is to readjust to the new reality of American hegemony”.<sup>49</sup> But, for Europeans, this drastic verdict is certainly too much. Everything started, according to Kagan, with the loss of the European will and spirit to power and their replacement with the cultivation of virtuous weakness, in the aftermath of the great European empires’ collapse.<sup>50</sup> When Hitler’s Germany refused to consent to the politics of appeasement and returned to power politics, the Europeans proved to be helpless, so that, during the Cold War era, they entered a long period of “strategic dependence” on the United States. The post-Cold War victory of liberalism opened a new promising age of multilateralism, global cooperation and interdependence, but as it would very soon become obvious, Europe has turned inward, due to both its incapacities to respond to the new global challenges and its programmatic isolationism; in fact, there has been a pervasive shift in the European geopolitical vocabulary from “the West” linguistic fixation toward the more focused idiom of “Europe” (i.e., the European Union).<sup>51</sup> Instead of a compromising strategy of “assertive multilateralism”,<sup>52</sup> Europeans and Americans have adopted a version of multilateralism in disguise, for very different reasons, and these approaches have generated reciprocal suspicions: while Europeans have mainly accused Americans of arrogance and perfidy, Americans have condemned the European weakness and ingratitude.<sup>53</sup> Such oversimplifications and generalizations make the very substance of Kagan’s mostly psychological investigation and the shaping of his “geopolitical euroscepticism”.

*The mission: assertive American exceptionalism  
in Robert Kagan*

The problem of American exceptionalism represents the trademark of Kagan’s investigations, mobilizing his expertise and subtending all his other momentous conceptions and appreciations. As he warns us, due both to the propensity and the pre-eminence of the United States in global affairs,<sup>54</sup> American exceptionalism “should not be doubted”,<sup>55</sup> a statement explicitly

<sup>48</sup> Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order*, New York: Vintage Books, 2004, p. 91.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 97.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 52.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 43.

<sup>54</sup> Following a model of explanation according to which *la mission civilatrice* of the United States has always been an intricate relationship between power and interests, Kagan observes that the starting point of American exceptionalism was the “security problem”, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; attempting to solve this dilemma, Americans turned from “ambition to power” (*Dangerous Nation...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 301-303). In my view, this monumental book represents the cornerstone of Kagan’s assertive American exceptionalism.

<sup>55</sup> Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power...*, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

postulating Kagan's assertiveness, devotion and certainty about the historical role of his native country in spreading its values worldwide. Combating declinism and isolationism and doubting the effectiveness of multipolarism, Kagan seems to deal with the idea of present-day exceptionalist America in terms of "engagement as a purpose" by asking the incumbent president Barack Obama, for instance, to push for sanctioning the Iranian policies of enriching uranium.<sup>56</sup> Elsewhere, manipulating a psychological puzzle, Kagan tries to convince president Obama that a declinist America in the present-day world is not a winning strategy because it "stirs no emotions".<sup>57</sup> Instead of this pessimistic and complacent American declinism, Kagan reminds us about president Clinton's understanding of America as "the indispensable nation" without which the progress of humanity and world prosperity would not have been possible: "Americans have been Atlas carrying the world on their shoulders", writes Kagan.<sup>58</sup>

This quasi-apologetic and energetic view on the role of the United States in world politics was also the mark of his latest book *The World America Made*; in addition to the last two parts of his work, entirely dedicated to a pervasive anti-declinist argumentation, Kagan's defence of exceptionalism is consistent with the dismissal of the "national myths" and the rebuttal of the American "way of life" dogma, both associated with pacifism and the denunciation of American leadership in the world.<sup>59</sup> Kagan's approach of the American exceptionalism theme is an all-encompassing redemption of great patriotism, deep sentiments and compelling rationality aimed at dismantling all sorts of American "anxieties".<sup>60</sup>

The story of American exceptionalism started in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Monroe doctrine represented probably the first significant assertion of the United States' role in international affairs, continued with the subtle and missionary conceptions of the *Manifest Destiny* idea, and flourished at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the rapid industrial and technological progress propelled America as a global political force. As the grand narrative goes, an illusive impetus of Wilsonian idealism was rapidly suffocated by substantial and strong impulses of *machtpolitik* in the interwar period to which the then United States president Franklin D. Roosevelt responded severely, by attempting to eliminate "once and for all"<sup>61</sup> Europe from world power. The bipolar confrontational Cold War era further expanded the global responsibilities of the United States in order to balance the various "sophistications" of European strategies in global affairs, such as appeasement, containment, détente, rapprochement, which were guided by hesitations, deterrence and weakness. For Kagan, all of these historical events constituted the anticipative matter for unfolding the high tide of American

<sup>56</sup> Kagan, "Is Obama Being Played?", in *The Guardian*, October 29, 2009.

<sup>57</sup> Kagan, "President Obama's Foreign Policy Paradox", in *The Washington Post*, March 26, 2014. This "faddish declinism" (Kagan, "Still No. 1", in *The Washington Post*, October 30, 2008) of Fareed Zakaria or Francis Fukuyama was considered an intelligent strategic option in the use of a better management of conflicts and power politics; but, as Charles Krauthammer pointed out, decline is not an exigency, but an option (Kagan, "Not Fade Away...", *op. cit.*).

<sup>58</sup> Kagan, "Superpowers...", *op. cit.*

<sup>59</sup> Kagan, *The World America Made*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012, pp. 9-13.

<sup>60</sup> Christopher A. Preble, "The Critique of Pure Kagan", in *The National Interest*, June 28, 2012.

<sup>61</sup> Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power...*, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

exceptionalism at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the post-Cold War times brought about the promise of worldwide liberal and democratic globalization, understood in terms of the already classicized term of “Americanization”. Two basic possibilities were foreseen at the twilight of the past century: either a multipolar world order or a unilateral American leadership in world politics. The Huntingtonian hybrid of “uni-multipolarism” was also an optimistic projection of the world’s future mapping of international affairs: one scholar inspiringly associated this view with a Copernican reconstruction of world politics, with the United States, the sun and all the others, its orbits.<sup>62</sup> However, this uncertainty concerning the future configuration of world power brought about at least three distinct versions of power politics, as they were embodied within the ideological agendas of the relevant world forces: first, the United States aimed at invigorating an original, realist doctrine of uni-multipolarism; second, the European Union formulated its own postmodern and post-historical version of “soft power” politics, and third, Russia and China designed their autocratic plans for playing a big hand in world affairs. Kagan does not seem to have high expectations from self-declared democratic autocracies, like Russia and China; but they can at least be contained if the European powers do not isolate themselves and enter an ideological disagreement with the United States. Moreover, Kagan postulates the following aporia: “the Europeans passage into post-history has depended on the United States not making the same passage”.<sup>63</sup> In the present global context of turbulent inflation of power politics, the American solution of *realpolitik*, albeit baffling, offers a pragmatic alternative for the outdated post-Cold War normalcy: “fewer concessions to international public opinion, less deference to allies, more freedom to act as the United States saw fit”.<sup>64</sup> This perplexed statement by Robert Kagan was metaphorically formulated in the “future of freedom” postulate through Fareed Zakaria’s comparison of the American hegemon with Odysseus who should remain unbiased by public requests (the Sirens).<sup>65</sup> The odyssey of American exceptionalism ends in the contemporary assertion of American unilateralism which should not be intimidating to the United States’ allies, despite its double standard approach on matters of international legalism, expansionism, militarism and muscular politics.<sup>66</sup> After all, the current American status of military superpower entails both the need and desire for testing it,<sup>67</sup> but benevolently, by a “behemoth with a conscience”.<sup>68</sup> Probably, this is the key for understanding the ironically formulated title *Dangerous Nation*, the epic of American exceptionalism, in terms of “expansion and ambition, idealistic as well as materialistic”,<sup>69</sup> which counteracts pure and ethereal visions of isolationism and idealism about world politics.

<sup>62</sup> Bacevich, *op. cit.*, p. 71. According to Kagan, the new American world order would be equivalent to the spread of democracy, reduction of poverty and, most importantly, the prevention of future wars (not pacifism, but benevolent use of power).

<sup>63</sup> Kagan, “Power and Weakness”, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>64</sup> Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power...*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

<sup>65</sup> Kagan, “The Ungreat Washed”, in *The New Republic*, July 7 and 14, 2003, apud Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003.

<sup>66</sup> Kagan, *The Return of History...*, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 50.

<sup>68</sup> Kagan, “Power and Weakness”, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>69</sup> Kagan, *Dangerous Nation...*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

*The relentless ideologue*

Certainly, Robert Kagan is neither a comfortable intellectual posture to deal with, nor a convenient figure to argue in favour of or against. Most of his ideas should be assessed cautiously, avoiding either partisan, dogmatic and propagandistic appraisals or non-reflective, mimetic and uncritical affiliations to his doctrinarian approaches. I would also invoke a characteristic *style* of thinking and arguing about his subject matters: Robert Kagan is willingly persuasive, militant and almost unscrupulous in following his *cause* – that of defending and promoting the peculiarly American conduct and set of traditional values in and about foreign policy. His ideological agenda is insistently and meticulously pushed forward in order to change the hesitant mind-set, to stir new passions and commitments and to influence high political officials to pursue what he really thinks about the genuine mission of the United States in the present-day world affairs. For instance, if he really wants to promote thinking about the United States, according to the pre-established agenda and criteria of postulating the revolutionary and missionary thesis about America, he will have nothing more to do than to provide a sound and purportedly objective argument by carefully selecting the matters supporting his purpose-oriented story, contrary to the mainstream thinking according to which, for instance, the United States lacks the revolutionary passion and tradition. The result will be the *organon* of his thought, in this case his 2006 book *Dangerous Nation*.

But this is not all. Kagan is also highly committed to offering moral advice to the public about the aims of his ideas and this may happen even to the detriment of the categorical imperative or the universal value of morality. For instance, writing about “the moral conundrum of humanity”, Robert Kagan would have no moral restraint in saying that “moral ends cannot be achieved without some immoral actions”.<sup>70</sup> This statement may stand as an honest remark or as a lucid consideration of real historical realities, but it cannot escape accusations of cynicism, hypocrisy and even imposture.

Let’s consider, for the present scope of this study, the issue of Kagan’s euroscepticism. In one sound analysis of the conservative tradition in the United States, John Kekes places scepticism in general as an intermediate stance on a continuum axis between the extremes of rationalism and fideism.<sup>71</sup> If Kekes is correct, then it follows that Kagan is reluctant about both accepting a sound rationality concerning the European mission and purpose and committing himself to an uncritical fideism in this respect. What I have termed “geopolitical euroscepticism” in Robert Kagan would be, accordingly, consistent with his rejection of the European thinking on the future of global politics and with his distrust about both the European means and goals for achieving the postmodern global harmony. Apart from these ideological considerations concerning Kagan’s approach to euroscepticism, there is his main suspicion that the

<sup>70</sup> Kagan, *The Return of History...*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>71</sup> John Kekes, *A Case for Conservatism*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998, p. 199.

Europeans have ideologically moved beyond any substantive valorisation of power politics. This is both his highest concern and stupefaction: abandoning any genuine meaning to a concept the Europeans themselves invented (i.e., power politics), the new European perspective on global politics would be instead a deflationary conception using the surrogate vocabulary of multilateral governance, international law, diplomacy, negotiations, patience and inducements; in brief, what Europeans offer, in Kagan's words, is a "transcendence of power",<sup>72</sup> in the form of a promising but illusory alternative to power politics.

A vast majority of critics, having read Kagan, raised a few eyebrows; his broad generalizations, faulty definitions, misleading comparisons and partisan perspectives stem mainly from his historicism (i.e., his goal-oriented research and pre-established agenda). Above all, his stubbornness in following a central thesis obscures details and leads to the lack of compelling arguments.

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<sup>72</sup> Kagan, "Power and Weakness", *op. cit.*, p. 17.

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