

# Review

[Home](#) > [Review](#) > Others

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SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE

## Beyond the Chinese 'Monroe Doctrine'

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**Protesters shouting slogans during a rally outside the Chinese Consulate in Manila last Thursday to protest against China's alleged military incursions into the disputed Spratly group of islands in the South China Sea. -- PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS**

THE escalating tensions in East Asia over the territorial disputes in the South China Sea have revived two crucial questions facing Asia's strategic future: Whether China is pursuing a 'Monroe Doctrine' over its neighbourhood, including the South China Sea area; and how far can China's neighbours go in acquiescing to its rising power.

The Monroe Doctrine was first enunciated in 1823 by then United States President James Monroe as the policy of a rising United States. It forbade European powers to either colonise or interfere in the affairs of states in the Western Hemisphere - in reality, the United States' Latin American and Caribbean backyard. The essence of the Monroe Doctrine was to deny European powers the Latin American and Caribbean region and establish US regional hegemony.

Some see parallels between that policy and the implications of China's rise today. The South China Sea is China's backyard. Like the US in the 19th century, China is a rising power.

In his 2001 book, *The Tragedy Of Great Power Politics*, University of Chicago professor John Mearsheimer argued: 'A wealthy China would not be a status quo power but an aggressive state determined to achieve regional hegemony.'

Chinese military modernisation appears to be headed exactly in such a direction, developing what military analysts term as 'anti-access, area denial' capability. In March last year, the Commander of the US Pacific Command, Admiral Robert Willard, warned: 'China's rapid and comprehensive transformation of its armed forces... challenge our freedom of action in the region', and 'potentially infringes on their (US allies') freedom of action.'

The evidence for a Chinese Monroe Doctrine - recognised by Mr Michael Richardson in these pages recently - can be seen from its recent actions in the South China Sea, such as extending its naval deployments into the region, placing new markers on disputed islands (claimed also by the Philippines), imposing a fishing ban in waters claimed by Vietnam, and generally discouraging oil explorations by all other claimants, including cutting the cables of a Vietnamese vessel.

Will the Americas' past be Asia's future then?

But there are major differences between the two historical contexts, which make the Monroe Doctrine parallel less than apt.

First, in the early 19th century, there was no countervailing force, whether another regional power or an offshore balancer, available to block US regional hegemony over its backyard. The rivalry between Britain and France, the two European powers that theoretically might have posed a counterweight, constrained them in the Western Hemisphere.

China today not only faces the US - an offshore, although some say a 'resident', balancer - but also regional balancers such as India, Japan and Russia, should it seek regional hegemony of the kind the US was able to achieve in the 19th century.

Second, the Monroe Doctrine came at a time of a historic shift in US economic development. From December 1807 to March 1809, Congress had imposed a near total embargo on US international commerce, a policy that, along with the 1812 US-British war, not only helped the development of US domestic industry, but also lowered overall US international economic interdependence.

In this climate of reduced dependence on foreign trade, US policymakers had less to worry about with regard to the damage to its economic interests that European powers, retaliating against their exclusion from the Americas, might have caused the US by cutting off its trade routes.

Compare this to China's dependence on commerce today. According to a recent report in *China Daily*, over 60 per cent of China's gross domestic product now depends on foreign trade. Imported oil accounts for 50 per cent of its oil needs. China's economy operates within a much more interdependent global economic order than was the case for the US in the 19th century.

China's commerce and hence prosperity depends very much on access to sea lanes through the Indian Ocean, the Malacca Strait and other areas over which it has little control, and which are dominated by US naval power. India too has significant naval power in the Indian Ocean.

So if push comes to shove, an aggressive Chinese denial of South China Sea trade routes to world powers, and the disruption of maritime traffic the resulting conflict might cause, would be immensely self-injurious to China. It would provoke countermeasures that will put in peril China's own access to the critical sea lanes in the Indian Ocean and elsewhere.

Chinese leaders are not oblivious to this fact of life. The truth is that they may not have the option of pursuing an aggressive posture. The costs will simply be too high.

China itself has repeatedly assured the international community that it does not intend to impede freedom of navigation in the South China Sea or resolve disputes there with force. But what Beijing has not clarified is how it might reconcile this policy with its policy of assertiveness - imposing fishing bans and forbidding oil explorations by other claimants which do not recognise China's maximalist territorial claims in the area.

This leads us to the second question: How far will China's neighbours go in accommodating its status as a rising power. In an article for the Harvard University journal *International Security* in 2004, I had argued that China's then much-talked about 'charm offensive' will quickly unravel if and when it departs from a policy of reassurance and asserts its military muscle.

My position then was contrary to those who argued that China's rise might recreate a tributary system-like regional order in East Asia, a benign version of the Monroe Doctrine, with lesser neighbours voluntarily 'bandwagoning' to growing Chinese power.

We are now witnessing a rapid dissipation of China's 'soft power' as a result of the South China Sea dispute. We also now see South-east Asian countries standing up to China with the help of the US. Though Chinese officials insist that Beijing has no intention of resolving the dispute by force, for China's neighbours (especially Vietnam and the Philippines), as well as many regionally based commentators, China's actions speak louder than its words.

Faced with this predicament, senior Chinese political leaders, including President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao - and not just its defence minister (despite his impressive debut at the last Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore) or ambassadors in the region - should issue statements to clarify China's intentions and policy. The task should not be left to media outlets controlled by the military or to Chinese 'think-tank' experts, who seem incapable of rising above their understandably patriotic commentaries that are simply not credible to outsiders.

Beijing does have a point when it says that since not all Asean member states are party to the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, Asean as a whole should not be involved as an interlocutor with China on the dispute.

But this point is valid only insofar as the issue of competing territorial claims, or even joint development, is concerned. China should indeed get serious in initiating meaningful bilateral

talks with the other claimants over joint development (which, after all, was originally proposed by China itself) and addressing territorial issues, as it has done with most of its neighbours with the exception of India over land borders.

But bilateralism alone would not suffice. China should not forget that Asean - or the East Asia Summit, with which it is closely involved - has the responsibility of reducing tensions and addressing threats to regional stability as a whole. And nothing challenges regional stability more at this point of time than the South China Sea dispute.

Hence, China should be willing to discuss the tensions over the South China Sea with Asean with a view to reducing tensions. An immediate meeting between China and Asean member states at the foreign ministers' level would be timely and helpful in restoring China's rapidly eroding 'soft power' in the region.

China cannot impose a Monroe Doctrine in the region. But bilateral talks with the claimants and multilateral dialogue with Asean can dispel the perception that it is trying to do so.

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