



## **American Foreign Policy: The Problem of Applying the Monroe Doctrine Everywhere**

Doug Bandow

September 30, 2020

When the new American nation was created, it was a lightweight in an international political game dominated by heavyweights. The U.S. was forced to develop a serious, measured, and realistic foreign policy.

The colonists outlasted the British during the Revolution in part because the New World revolt triggered an Old World war, in which the United Kingdom also had to fight France and Spain, which allied with the colonies. London's North American battle became secondary. Yet French and Spanish assistance for the colonists remained limited, intended only to weaken the UK. The absolute monarchies did not desire a strong, independent republic on a continent where Paris and Madrid still possessed colonies.

It was a dangerous world for the weak, young nation. Nevertheless, the purchase of Louisiana from France in 1803 removed one threat from the continent. America survived – barely – another military round with Britain in 1812. A decade later colonial revolts against Spain seemed to dispatch the last serious regional rival.

President James Monroe then announced in 1823 that European efforts to recapture old or conquer new colonies would be seen as exhibiting "the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States." At the same time, he publicly eschewed intervention in European affairs.

This was pure chutzpah, given America's evident lack of a military capable of enforcing such sentiments. Nevertheless, the proclamation was a fine effort to bolster US security. Europe, the fount of war for centuries, should stay out of Washington's neighborhood. And the US would not get entangled in the Old World's endlessly disastrous conflicts.

For decades America informally huddled behind the British navy, which effectively precluded any other nation from threatening the US or the region. Not until 1917, when the sanctimonious megalomaniac Woodrow Wilson dragged the country into World War I in order to remake the globe, did Washington violate Monroe's pledge to eschew European involvement. The consequences of that conflict – a far worse and broader conflagration just a generation later – justified Monroe's warning.

The end of World War II led to America's systematic and continuous meddling in European affairs, and everywhere else, too. The Monroe Doctrine corollary about avoiding imbroglios in the Old World was superseded by the Cold War, in which many allied nations, especially in Europe, desperately sought US engagement. After all, better to be defended by America than to

have to do the job themselves. Cashing in their self-respect to save money seemed like a fair bargain to many.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact led to another dramatic change. In effect, Monroe's initial threat, intended to warn away interference in the New World, was expanded worldwide: America, and only America, is entitled to intervene everywhere – in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.

The new policy was meant to ensure peaceful and pliant governments everywhere. The US no longer went to war to defend the homeland. Instead, Washington policed a de facto global empire. The US dismantled countries, engaged in nation building, enforced existing borders, participated in civil wars, and demanded that adversaries behave according to American dictates.

After the Soviet Union's collapse the ultimate interloper, Uncle Sam, extended the transatlantic alliance up to Russia's border, just 84 miles from St. Petersburg, demonstrating how much US policy had changed. The country which once ordered foreigners to stay out of its neighborhood told Iran and Russia they had no place in Syria and Moscow that it had no compelling interests in Georgia, Libya, and Ukraine, areas all now claimed to be of vital concern *to America*. In Asia Washington insisted that it should manage affairs in the Asia-Pacific while China had no right to aggressively press its territorial claims, including over Taiwan, in its own region.

While still insisting on the Monroe Doctrine in the Western Hemisphere – the Trump administration reacted with near hysteria to Chinese, Iranian, and Russian involvement in Venezuela – US officials roundly denounced proposals that Washington accept spheres of influence by other powers. For American policymakers, the entire world had become Washington's sphere of influence. Every other nation, such as Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates in Yemen, was to operate at America's sufferance. When it comes to intervening in other nations' affairs, one country would be more equal than all others.

Unfortunately for the US, the new Monroe Doctrine doesn't work as well as the original version. Although two centuries ago Washington really couldn't stop any European power from meddling in Latin America, it still wasn't easy for them to do so. The Atlantic Ocean provided a huge barrier and newly awakened nationalism throughout the Americas posed an even bigger threat. Eventually Washington also developed a potent military.

France's effort to conquer Mexico while the US was consumed by the Civil War ended disastrously. The Soviet Union's placement of nuclear-tipped weapons in Cuba more than a century later nearly led to nuclear war. Washington met Soviet support for revolutionary regimes in Latin America with a sharp military response. The outsiders' current involvement in Venezuela is mostly play-acting, intended to inconvenience the US, interfering with plans for regime change. Little of substance is at stake. China is also looking for economic opportunities elsewhere in Latin America, but Beijing's involvement is opportunistic, not menacing.

However, Europeans, Asians, and others are not inclined to leave their own neighborhoods to Washington's control. For instance, Moscow has been allied with Syria for a half century. The Soviet Union was the first nation to recognize Muammar Khadafy's revolutionary government in Libya. Moscow won't allow America to treat the Middle East as if it was Central America.

Russia's interest in Georgia and Ukraine is even greater. Grant that Moscow has behaved badly. Nevertheless, Western officials lied to or misled their Soviet and Russian counterparts about

expanding NATO. The West flouted Moscow's interests in Serbia, while taking advantage of Russian weakness. Seeking to include Georgia and Ukraine in NATO, which would press the U.S.-led alliance up against much of Russia's border, is seen by Moscow as an intolerable affront.

The desire of Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO doesn't matter. Washington's primary concern should be for the American people. Attempting to exclude or override Russian security interests on its border directly threatens Moscow and thus guarantees perpetual confrontation and possible conflict. One can imagine the delirium that would have enveloped Washington had the Soviet Union engineered the overthrow of Canada's prime minister or Mexico's president and invited one or the other nation to join the Warsaw Pact. The wailing and gnashing of teeth would have been heard around the world.

Similar is China's reaction to Washington's attempt to preserve Asian-Pacific waters as an American lake. The PRC is as close to Taiwan as America is to Cuba, and Beijing claims sovereignty over the island. The Chinese government unsurprisingly refuses to treat Taiwan as within America's sphere of influence. The Xi government cares deeply about US attempts to dictate sovereignty and security issues along the PRC's borders.

Imagine the reaction in Washington if China sent its fleet along the Eastern seaboard and into the Caribbean and attempted to dictate US policy toward Cuba. "Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute!", ran the slogan when the so-called Barbary Pirates seized American shipping in the Mediterranean two centuries ago. Now the slogan would be Hundreds of billions for defense! Which should help Americans understand why Beijing will never allow the US to treat Taiwan as the equivalent of Cuba, its future to be determined in Washington.

The desire to have the world's most powerful nation right the world's wrongs is strong. Russia should not have seized Crimea. China should not forcibly annex Taiwan. And much more.

However, Washington's unprincipled interventions – dismantling Serbia is fine while carving up Georgia is criminal, invading Iraq is justified while subverting Ukraine is terrible – are a prescription for more and greater war, not peace. Unless US policymakers learn how to restrain themselves, they are likely to discover from painful experience that it is easier to defend the Monroe Doctrine close to home than to impose an external variant on other states.

With Washington beset with political discord and fiscal crisis, America's brief moment of perceived hyper-dominance and attempted global hegemony are over. US policy needs a reset to reality.

*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.*