

Should Washington Consider Accepting a Chinese Monroe Doctrine?

By Ted Carpenter
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Washington has pursued a policy toward China that some American scholars have dubbed “conengagement”—a mixture of engagement and containment. The engagement component is primarily economic in nature. China is America’s third largest trading partner, and Chinese financial institutions now hold some \$1.3 trillion in U.S. government debt. The containment component is primarily strategic in nature, especially as the United States has moved to strengthen its military ties with such traditional allies as Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Australia, as well as develop such ties with new strategic partners (e.g., Vietnam and India). Those moves are motivated, at least in part, by a desire by the various parties to contain Beijing’s growing regional power and influence.

Beginning with the Nixon administration’s initial outreach to the Chinese government in the early 1970s, and continuing through successive administrations until the early years of the twenty-first century, the engagement aspect in U.S. policy was dominant. But during the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, the emphasis shifted. Containment, albeit implicit rather than explicit, has now become the principal feature—and that trend is accelerating. Washington prods its East Asian allies to devote greater efforts to defense, and U.S. officials seek to transform the bilateral alliances with those nations to cover broader, regional security contingencies. Especially during the Obama years, U.S. policy has tilted in favor of countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines, which are embroiled in territorial disputes with China involving the South China Sea, and has backed Japan in its contentious confrontation with Beijing over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.

Such informal manifestations of containment deceive no one—least of all, Chinese officials. Washington’s current strategy is fomenting growing tensions with China, and they could ultimately lead to a military collision in East Asia between the two powers. Perhaps most troubling, Washington has seemingly adopted a *de facto* containment policy almost by default, concluding that there are no feasible alternatives, despite rising

Chinese anger. Before we continue down that path, we should at least assess more seriously whether other, less confrontational and more sustainable, options exist.

One admittedly controversial option would be to accept the likelihood that China, by virtue of its greater population and mounting economic and military capabilities, is destined to become the dominant power in East Asia. Even the hint of recognizing Chinese regional pre-eminence, though, always produces shrill allegations of “appeasement.” And that term has an especially odious connotation because of the disastrous appeasement policy that the Western powers pursued toward Adolf Hitler in the late 1930s.

But so-called appeasement has a much longer and more productive history than the calamitous 1930s model would suggest. Indeed, the United States was the principal beneficiary of a milder version that Britain adopted in the 1890s. In response to a nasty boundary dispute between Venezuela and a neighboring British colony, London faced a stark choice. It could confront an increasingly powerful United States, which was mightily annoyed at what it perceived as a challenge to Washington’s cherished Monroe Doctrine barring European interference in the Western Hemisphere. The alternative was to concede that the United States was now the dominant power in that region and to accept Washington’s policy preferences. British officials chose the latter course, a move that ended decades of tensions between the two countries over various issues and created the foundation for what would ultimately become an extremely close alliance.

U.S. officials need to at least consider whether a similar concession might create the basis for a new, far less contentious, relationship with China while still protecting important American interests in the Western Pacific. In other words, is it time to recognize a Chinese equivalent of the Monroe Doctrine in East Asia—accepting that China is now the pre-eminent regional power? There are essential caveats to such a dramatic policy shift. At a minimum, Beijing would need to embrace not only the original logic of the Monroe Doctrine, but also the so-called Roosevelt Corollary. The latter, adopted during Theodore Roosevelt’s administration, promised Britain and the other European powers that the United States would maintain order in the Western Hemisphere and discipline irresponsible governments in the region.

That requirement would have direct applicability to a pre-eminent role by Beijing in East Asia. Specifically, China would need to accept responsibility for preventing rogue powers like North Korea from disrupting regional peace and tranquility. Even if that meant direct Chinese action to remove an offending regime in Pyongyang, Beijing would need to be willing to undertake such action. Reducing the danger of North Korean aggression against its East Asian neighbors (and perhaps someday even against the United States) would provide a significant benefit to America. Beijing’s willingness to undertake that responsibility would be a crucial prerequisite for any U.S. decision to accept China’s regional pre-eminence. Unwillingness on Beijing’s part to embrace the role of stabilizer would greatly reduce the appeal of a more accommodating U.S. policy.

Even with a responsible Chinese policy, there would be significant obstacles and objections to U.S. recognition of a Chinese equivalent of the Monroe Doctrine. Two problems especially stand out.

The United States was, by far, the leading power in the Western Hemisphere by the late nineteenth century, and it would become even more dominant in the subsequent decades. Countries such as Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina were no more than anemic competitors. Britain could proceed with confidence that, if it conceded hemispheric pre-eminence to the United States, Washington could maintain stability without serious challenge. Today's geostrategic environment in East Asia is much more complex. Although China is the leading regional power, it faces a credible competitor in Japan, which is also a U.S. treaty ally. Not only would Washington have to extricate itself from the alliance with Japan, there is no certainty that Tokyo would accept second place in the regional status hierarchy. The prospects for stability in East Asia, therefore, would be murkier.

An even more serious obstacle to applying the Monroe Doctrine model to East Asia is the great difference in political systems between the United States and China. It was reasonably easy for London to concede regional primacy to Washington, since both countries were liberal, capitalist democracies. Moreover, both of them shared major cultural features. Such unifying factors are absent in the Sino-American relationship. China is still a one-party, nominally communist, state, and it would not be easy for U.S. policymakers to place trust regarding geostrategic behavior in such a country.

Still, Washington should not summarily dismiss the Monroe Doctrine model as a basis for U.S. policy toward China in the coming decades. Given Beijing's rapidly rising economic and military clout, it will become difficult, perhaps prohibitively so, for Washington to maintain U.S. hegemony in a region thousands of miles distant from the American homeland. Officially or tacitly accepting Chinese primacy in East Asia may prove to be the least bad option available. And if China should gradually democratize, that option may become quite reasonable and attractive. In any case, U.S. policymakers need to consider alternatives to the fraying conengagement model before a crisis erupts in relations with Beijing.

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