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Rethinking China's Monroe Doctrine

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Synopsis

It is too early to worry about China's Monroe Doctrine. Asian countries need to think about how to deal with its new Nixon Doctrine in the near future.

Commentary

THE "MONROE Doctrine" is gaining popularity in both scholarly and policy discourses on Asian security. Specifically, scholars and pundits are warning that China will adopt its own "Monroe Doctrine" to dominate Asia and "kick America out." China has simultaneously faced standoffs in the East China Sea and South China Sea, engaged the United States and Russia geopolitically, and showed a tough stand toward Hong Kong.

It seems that Asia will soon be "back to the future" and a new Cold War between China and the United States is looming in the Pacific region. However, the assertion of a Chinese version of the "Monroe Doctrine" is mistaken.

Why is the "Monroe Doctrine" not right for China?

First, China does not have the capabilities to dominate Asia. China's military spending is still less than one third of the United States'. Although the World Bank predicted that China's GDP in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) will surpass the United States by the end of this year, the Chinese government itself denied the validity of this forecast. On soft power, despite some praise of the "Chinese model," China remains far behind in making its cultural and political values welcome around the world.

In a word, China still has a long way to go to catch up with the United States in all dimensions of power. Even if China could finally match American power, China still cannot lead or dominate Asia given the impact of globalization and economic interdependence. No nation can independently address many non-traditional security threats and challenges, such as terrorism and drug trafficking. The United States has learned to lead through collaboration with other nations and institutions. So should China.

Second, China never intended to dominate the region. Chinese President Xi Jinping promoted a "China Dream" for national rejuvenation, not an "Asian Dream". The reference point for Xi and other Chinese leaders is the "hundred years of humiliation" since the Opium War and not the "tributary system" of the Middle Kingdom. No Chinese leaders want to rebuild the Sino-centric order because China has been socialized into the international community, respecting state sovereignty and the principle of non-interference into internal affairs.

There is no denying that China is becoming stronger with its economic achievement. However, a strong China

does not necessarily entail aggressiveness and dominance. As seen from history, what China wants is respect and an appropriate status in the international system.

Two possible explanations

If China is not setting up its own Monroe Doctrine, then, why the diplomatic and territorial troubles now?

There are two possible explanations. First, China's foreign policy is still going through some strategic adjustments. China is searching for a grand strategy to behave like a great power in world politics. With its unprecedented power in modern history, Chinese leaders need to learn how to use, not abuse, the newly accumulated capabilities.

Consequently, there is a learning process or even a learning curve for Chinese policymakers to overcome. China has a complicated political system and the difficulties in coordination within the bureaucratic system may at least partially explain China's surprising and even unwise decision to take on almost all its maritime challenges at the same time.

It is not easy to be a great power, especially to be a responsible one. The Chinese government needs to reflect on its own foreign policy, thinking about how to strengthen its "peaceful rise" commitment with real actions, instead of mere words.

Secondly, China's assertiveness may be part of the "bargaining process" between China and the outside world. With growing power, China, by nature, will need to bargain for a new position, a new status, or a new term with the outside world, especially the United States. The current turbulences in China's bilateral relations with other countries may be a normal "bargaining process" in which both sides at the table intend to test the bottom line of the other.

The United States launched a "pivot to Asia", later termed "rebalancing", to show its commitment and test China's intention in Asia. China tried to set a new status quo in the East China Sea and South China Sea to demonstrate its own resolve in territorial disputes. Understandably both sides at the negotiation table intend to maximize their own interests.

However, all nations also need to remember that the art of negotiation is to find the equilibrium between seemingly incompatible interests, and diplomacy is to avoid wars, not to ignite conflicts.

What should Asian countries do?

Should Asian countries worry about China's Monroe Doctrine now? It is still too early to do so. What Asian countries need to do is to shape China's policy choices if possible. Asian countries should not exaggerate the threats associated with China, nor behave accordingly. China needs time to accomplish its strategic adjustments and negotiate a new deal with the outside world. As Joseph Nye Jr. once wisely warned about the self-fulfilling prophecy, "if you treat China as an enemy, it will become one".

Asian countries should also continue to engage China as before. They should let Chinese leaders know that the international community welcomes a strong and responsible China, not an arrogant Middle Kingdom. They should encourage China to continuously participate in and socialize through multilateral institutions.

ASEAN can play a significant role in embracing China into the rule-based and norm-oriented community. Basically, China can change the world by means of the use of force or transformation through rules. Other countries should encourage China to become a rules-maker in the new regional order, in which it has to be restrained by the rules and norms it has set for others.

Last, but not least, other Asian countries should prepare for a world without a Pax Americana. The US' reiterated commitments indicate the eroding confidence between the United States and its regional allies. With continuous defense budgetary cuts, the United States will need its Asian allies to share its defense burden in the region.

While China's Monroe Doctrine may be worrisome in the future, the immediate concern for Asia will be a new version of the "Nixon Doctrine", through which the United States left its Asian allies to "take care of themselves". Now, it is time for Asian countries to think about a regional solution for a post-American era.

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