

The Chinese Version of the Monroe Doctrine and Its Implications for Regional Maritime Security¹

Captain Sukjoon Yoon

I . Formulating the Problem

With the continuing rise of China, everyone would like to know how her new power will be articulated at sea. Throughout history China has emphasized its continental power, so the contemporary prominence of maritime power must be deemed extraordinarily. Within China, recent developments are portrayed by policymakers, analysts, and the media, as a return to the natural order of things; with China regaining her rightful place in the world, and taking up the mantle of a great power once again. Outside China, many view the establishment of the Chinese as a major maritime power to be a serious threat to America’s long-term strategic position in the East Asian Sea. China appears to be becoming a great maritime power *per se*, with all the attendant political, economic and military might. China also seems determined to dominate the East Asian Sea so as to take control of its geopolitical predicament, and may seek to impose its will upon neighbouring counties after the fashion of the Kaiser’s Germany a century ago.

There have been clear indications that China is seeking to reestablish its traditional regional supremacy. Besides treading on the toes of the US, which is explicitly committed to ensuring freedom of navigation, and maintains a naval presence in the region, the prospect of Chinese domination also alarms all the nations bordering the East Asian Sea, who are united in resisting China’s aspiration to control it. They fear something similar to the US Monroe Doctrine of 1823 which was applied in the Western Hemisphere, whereby China might even declare “no-go-zones” in some areas. For the time being, the East Asian countries have merely expressed their concerns, having seen the Chinese move toward maritime dominance by laying the groundwork for a sustained sea power competency, rapidly developing a significant and advanced naval capability.

It is not difficult to identify significant differences between China’s application of a Middle Kingdom mentality to its neighbours, and the Monroe Doctrine applied by the US to the great European powers of the 19th century. In some ways, however, the situations are analogous, principally inasmuch as China is focused primarily upon its own development and treats the East Asian Sea as being crucial to its economic prosperity, being unwilling to tolerate third-party involvement in China’s territorial claims and bilateral disputes with its weaker neighbours around the region.

II . The Chinese Version of the Monroe Doctrine Emerges – Three

¹ This paper is based on Suk-Joon Yoon, “Chinese Maritime Hegemony and Implications for Korean Policy on China,” *Dokdo Research Journal*, vol. 15, Autumn, 2011 with the addition of some recent maritime security developments.

Examples from 2010

China seems to view the nearby seas as an arena in which it can show its commitment to a sino-centric regional reordering, and its return to a Middle Kingdom mindset. This was evidenced by three incidents occurring during 2010: the strong Chinese opposition to the proposed ROK-US naval exercises in the Yellow Sea following the sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan* in March and the artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island in November; the unwavering hard-line stance taken by China over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands² incident in the East China Sea; and the unilateral Chinese territorial claims made during 2010 to the Spratleys and Paracels in the South China Sea. On each of these occasions, China displayed its growing confidence and physical power, demonstrating its implacable determination to assert its maritime supremacy.

The first case in point came after the sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan* in March 2010: China voiced its strong opposition towards proposed ROK-US naval exercises in the Yellow Sea. This response by the Chinese clearly reveals how sensitively they view the Yellow Sea, and the strategic importance which they accord to it. Korea and the US had intended to hold the exercises, code-named "Invincible Spirit," in the Yellow Sea, shortly after the sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan*, as a reactive deterrent to North Korean aggression. China effectively put a stop to them, however, declaring, "We oppose any military exercise held in the Yellow Sea bordering China." Korea and the US were therefore obliged to hold the exercises in the East Sea instead, on September 25, 2010. China's intention to impose its version of the Monroe Doctrine was further demonstrated by its reaction to the North Korean artillery bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island on November 23, 2010. When North Korea's indiscriminate shelling was reported in the international press, China initially expressed its displeasure at the attack, because such a blatant act of military provocation had been committed while China was hosting the Asian Games at *Guangzhou*. When Korea and the US announced their plans to hold joint naval exercises in the Yellow Sea, however, China objected on grounds that they would heighten military tensions in the Yellow Sea and infringe upon China's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Korea and the US held the military exercises within Korea's EEZ instead, on November 30, 2010.

The second case concerns an incident in Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands in the East China Sea, when China's unyielding hard-line position showed a new attitude of resolve. No direct clash occurred, and Japan handled the Chinese fishing boat and fishermen in full accordance with Japanese law, yet instead of seeking a resolution between the parties through negotiations under international law, China responded by applying direct pressure in a number of unrelated ways, using any and all means available. Specifically, China (i) prohibited Chinese tourism to Japan; (ii) ceased the export of rare earth metals to Japan; (iii) imposed tougher export/import procedures between China and Japan; and (iv) encouraged nationalist anti-Japanese protests. This marked a significant change from the stance that China had taken in previous territorial disputes over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands. Such behavior has rung alarm bells across East Asia, causing Korea and Japan to reassess their views. They had previously viewed the rise of China in a generally positive light, but they now anticipate a far more pessimistic outlook, expecting China to strive for dominance, by increasingly imposing specious policies of Chinese exclusivity in the Yellow Sea and East China Sea.

² Also known as the Senkaku Islands in Japan, and the Pinnacle Islands in the English-speaking Western press. Use of the Chinese name herein implies no preference for their claim.

The third case concerns the generality of China's territorial claims. China's attempts to impose its version of the Monroe Doctrine in the South China Sea has rattled the East Asian countries and particularly alarmed the US. Disputes over the Spratleys and the Paracels in the South China Sea have become a focus for regional worries about Chinese maritime expansionism. It has become apparent that China views the South China Sea in terms reminiscent of an earlier imperial power – Germany – and believes that the island groups of the South China Sea, some of them lying nearly 1,000 km south of China's Hainantao province, could provide *lebensraum* – literally, 'survival space' for Chinese economic growth and development. China apparently intends to exploit the enormous reserves of oil, gas and minerals believed to lie beneath the South China Sea. More disturbingly, China's navy has been conspicuously interested in the South China Sea as a justification for expanding its naval power into the Indian Ocean, at a time when the US seems to be on its way out of the region. China's unilateral territorial claims, which form a U-shaped arc around the South China Sea, have become ever firmer and more insistent during the past couple of decades. China declares that its maritime territorial sovereignty in the South China Sea is an essential "core interest" for China's national security, in which it cannot tolerate the involvement of any third parties, proposing that outstanding issues should be resolved through bilateral settlements with its much weaker neighbours.

The US claim that its military presence in East Asia is purely for the purpose of ensuring freedom of navigation is sometimes seen, especially by some ASEAN members, as a tool for the US to exert pressure upon China. China itself believes that the US is simply using the freedom of navigation issue as an excuse to intervene in the disputes of the South China Sea, and also to maintain US dominance in the region, given current budget constraints. Washington asserts that ensuring freedom of navigation in the South China Sea is in the US national interest, and the leaders in Beijing take this as a direct response to their own "core interest" rhetoric.

China's policy with regard to the South China Sea has remained consistent since it was articulated in February 1992, when Beijing passed a law claiming all the islets of the South China Sea as its territorial waters. Recent events, however, make clear the Chinese intent to impose something like a modern version of the Monroe Doctrine, and the US, whose assets operate along the South China Sea on a daily basis, will be especially impacted. China sometimes harasses US vessels, including the USNS *Victoria* in 2007, and the USNS *Impeccable*, which was conducting a military survey off Hainantao in 2009. Then in July 2010 they prevented forcefully protested a joint drill in the South China Sea between the Vietnamese navy and a US 7th fleet task unit based around an aircraft carrier. This latter case represented the most serious military altercation between China and the US since 2001, when a US navy EP-3 surveillance plane made an emergency landing in Hainantao after being intercepted by a Chinese jet fighter. Conflict between the US and Chinese representatives at the Asian Regional Forum (ARF) meeting of July 2010, over US involvement in the disputes of the South China Sea, led to a diplomatic standoff between them. The South China Sea seems destined to be a litmus test for China's attempts to implement its version of the Monroe Doctrine and create a Sino-centric regional maritime order.

III. What China Wants from the Chinese Monroe Doctrine: An End to "Third-Party Interference"

In seeking to impose maritime hegemony in the Yellow Sea and the East China Sea, China's reasons are ironically similar to the historical policies of the US, in Central and South America, and of Japan, in East Asia. Just like China, the US and Japan opposed "third-party interference" in those areas. China's response to the sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan* and the artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island was similar to the Monroe Doctrine, adopted by James Monroe, the fifth President of the US, in the mid-19th century; and China's stance concerning the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands incident was analogous to the concept of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, promulgated by Japan in 1938.

Consider the similarity between China's maritime hegemony in the Yellow Sea and the US Monroe Doctrine, by which, in December 1823, the US declared its regional predominance. It stated the US Monroe Doctrine that no European powers or other third parties should colonise any country in North America, South America, or the Caribbean Sea, nor should they interfere in America's affairs; and that the United States would consider any European power ignoring this doctrine to be a hostile country. China made a similar declaration, after the sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan* and the artillery bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island: "China opposes any military exercises carried out by the United States, which is a third party, in the Yellow Sea, one of its key bodies of water" Viewing this as a "Chinese Monroe Doctrine," whereby China intends to say "Hands off the Yellow Sea" to other powers, then sooner or later Beijing must maintain order by itself, which means it must attempt to institutionalise and consolidate China's traditional interests in the Yellow Sea.

Likewise, the pressure which China applied during the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands incident can be considered analogous to the Lugou Bridge (aka Marco Polo Bridge) Incident in 1938, after which Japan established the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" to promulgate its supremacy in East Asia, seeking to free the region from US and British influence. It would seem that China has in mind a similar kind of "Chinese version of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere." In September 2010, during the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands incident, China excluded the US, a third party, from any involvement in the maritime territorial disputes between China and Japan, applying China's own unique standards and principles. In practice the US took little action, being slow to respond to China's recent coercion of Japan, just as it had remained silent in response to Japan's declaration of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Beijing thus claims for itself the right to control the maritime security of the East China Sea, rather than entrusting it to outside sea powers whose goodwill may prove fleeting. The demands made by China during the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands incident can also be compared with the oppressive demands made by Japan, in the late 19th century, to the Qing Dynasty of China.

The events occurring during the last decade in the seas around China, have led to direct maritime disputes between the vessels of China and the US, and caused a variety of complex diplomatic and security challenges to the relationship between Beijing and Washington. Given its geographic proximity, China's options have multiplied as its military power has grown. Whereas the US can only benefit from upholding the principles of freedom of navigation and the peaceful settlement of disputes in the South China Sea, China is in a contentious position, with a claim that is untenable under international law.

China has made an uncompromising declaration of the Chinese Monroe Doctrine, designating the South China Sea as a “core interest” wherein no outside interference will be tolerated, and leaving no space for negotiation over its territorial sovereignty. It would seem that the Chinese government has backed a diplomatic winner, insofar as there are two distinct elements to US policy in the South China Sea: the US takes no position on the legal merits of the competing claims to sovereignty, and it maintains that freedom of navigation is a fundamental US national interest. Thus the US is content merely by not being restricted in its military survey operations within the EEZ of the South China Sea. It is debatable whether the US has truly elevated the South China Sea to the sphere of its vital national security interests, rather than being essentially a regional maritime security issue. In contrast to many other China-watchers, it is the opinion of this author that the South China Sea is unlikely to remain a significant foreign policy issue for the US for the indefinite future. It seems probable that the Chinese government will ultimately achieve its aim of controlling the South China Sea, in line with the declaration that “fiat is law.”³

IV. The Chinese Monroe Doctrine vs the US Monroe Doctrine: Some Conspicuous Differences

Generally speaking, the 1823 US Monroe Doctrine forbade any expansion of European control over American territory beyond that which they already exercised. This is an appealing precedent for China, which under the doctrines of “peaceful coexistence” or “harmonious world”, has been happy to accept its neighbours’ dependence upon the Chinese influence in this region for the sake of their own security. There are, however, a number of obvious differences between the US Monroe Doctrine of the 19th century and the Chinese Monroe Doctrine as it affects East Asia today.

First and foremost, the Chinese Monroe Doctrine is not international law but merely a policy imposed unilaterally by China. Although the US Monroe Doctrine seems not to have any formal legal status, having been declared by the US President in his annual message to Congress in 1823, it was readily acceptable to the countries of the region. It is very difficult to find any justification for the sino-centric principles underlying the Chinese aspiration to establish maritime hegemony in the seas around China; much less to bind other countries to the observance of it. International law gains force from the consent of other states, and China’s East Asian neighbours are not inclined to placidly approve the imposition of the Chinese Monroe Doctrine, whereas the 19th century neighbours of the US were broadly supportive of the US Monroe Doctrine.

Second, the US Monroe Doctrine made no claim to US political or military control of the Western Hemisphere. During the 19th century the US considered their policy a defense of all American republics against European encroachment. This is hardly the case with China, however, whose exaggerated maritime territorial claims are based upon sparse and dubious historical evidence used as a means to legitimize its territorial expansionism. Whatever the outcome for the seas of East Asia, whether a balance of powers or a hierarchy prevails, the Chinese intent to impose its own version of the Monroe Doctrine will remain a major influence. The East Asian countries have glimpsed

³ The phrase “fiat is law” is borrowed from James R. Holmes’s analysis of the US Monroe Doctrine in 1823. See James R. Holmes, “An Indian Monroe Doctrine but What Kind?” *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, vol. 128, April 2008, pp. 20-25.

the future of maritime security in the region, and they are looking to their own survival.

Third, the US Monroe Doctrine did not demand that Washington should entirely abstain from cooperating with European powers in the region. In reality, some limited informal collaboration was acceptable, as when the US navy worked together with the Royal Navy to combat the slave trade in Caribbean waters. By contrast, there is no evidence that the Chinese and the US navies have ever jointly conducted maritime security patrols or surveillance activities in East Asian waters, though they have worked together in the Gulf of Aden to interdict Somali pirates. This failure to cooperate suggests to many China-watchers that East Asian waters will instead become a theater for maritime competition between China and the United States, leading to increasingly more frequent and serious friction between the two navies in the years to come.

Fourth, to what extent might the Chinese Monroe Doctrine ultimately be expanded? The US Monroe Doctrine gave the US a free ride on the maritime security furnished by the Royal Navy for most of the century, allowing it to conserve its own resources for internal development. The Chinese Monroe Doctrine, in contrast, seems intrinsically expansionist, being built around a sino-centric maritime reordering, especially of the seas around China. Will China seek to reestablish the kind of regional maritime primacy which it enjoyed in the 15th century during the Ming dynasty? Then surely now is an auspicious moment for China to expand its naval presence beyond East Asian waters. This will not be easy in the near future because the Chinese navy lacks the necessary capabilities, yet it is well-placed to make a start on the project by playing a more active role in maintaining maritime order and stability in the Indian Ocean.

Fifth, the US Monroe Doctrine was essentially defensive. A typical sort of operation carried out under this doctrine was to dispatch naval forces in support of the weaker nations of the Western Hemisphere when they had defaulted on their foreign debts to European banks. The Chinese Monroe Doctrine, on the other hand, seems to be fundamentally offensive in nature. China may be seeking to fashion a corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, demonstrating the principle that “fiat is law.” China has recently completed the renovation of the ex-Soviet aircraft carrier *Varyag*, which had its first sea trials in August and November 2011. Remarkably, these large-scale maneuvers by Chinese naval task forces were carried out off the eastern coast of Taiwan. This has disturbed the countries of East Asia, being the clearest manifestation so far of the Chinese navy taking an offensive posture on the high seas, and resulting from China's ongoing military modernisation. China claims that the *Varyag* is not intended to confront US Navy aircraft carriers in the Yellow Sea and the East China Sea, but she seems to be too heavy if her task is simply to protect China's maritime territories. Many military experts believe that the possession of an aircraft carrier will have a significant downside for China, perhaps outweighing any anticipated benefits, at least in the short-term. It seems far-fetched to interpret the Chinese Monroe Doctrine as being primarily defensive.

V . Lessons for the Countries of East Asia

First, the East Asian countries should make urgent efforts to persuade China to use diplomatic tools to advance its interests in the seas around China, rather than flaunting its military prowess as it did in 2010. It is important that the Chinese Monroe Doctrine,

with the prospect of Chinese domination of its surrounding seas, in particular the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea and the South China Sea, does not unnecessarily provoke fear among its neighbours. Of these, the Yellow Sea and the East China Sea have a "dual structure" involving both confrontation and cooperation. This makes it essential for all parties to work together, closely and cautiously, to prevent a perceived threat from the Chinese Monroe Doctrine impacting issues of maritime boundary delimitation and maritime territorial sovereignty. It would be rash to conclude that China's naval modernisation has no linkage with its emergent maritime hegemony in the Yellow Sea and the East China Sea, but as yet no direct connection can be drawn between China's increasingly capable sea power and the maritime boundary and sovereignty matters covered by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The Chinese leadership is known to be skeptical as to the value of deploying the *Varyag*, an old Soviet-model aircraft carrier, on military exercises.

Second, striking a balance between the rise of China and the US decline really makes excellent strategic sense for the countries of East Asia. In the worst case scenario, assuming that China continues to maintain its own version of the Monroe Doctrine over the next few decades, then Beijing is likely to try and push Washington out of Asia. The East Asian nations would then be facing very serious consequences, indeed their very survival would be threatened. They are unlikely to forget what happened before when China was integrated, and much more powerful than the surrounding countries. Historically, an increasingly powerful China became ever more harsh and dictatorial toward its weaker neighbours, in stark contrast to the situation which prevailed when the US was only the hegemonic regional power. East Asian countries can therefore be expected to conduct a "dual-track strategy" attempting to balance their leverage between the two powers. They will seek to enhance their alliance with the US, in hopes of containing China, whilst simultaneously developing their economic interactions with Beijing, so as to offset their dependence upon Washington.

Third, it would be very helpful if a research group could be established, comprising maritime experts from all the countries of the region, including China, in order to promote clear communication and thus avoid unintentional incidents between the rival nations. By such means we might hope to forestall any aggravation of the delicate situation in the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea and the South China Sea. The group should include experts in maritime law, maritime security, and maritime diplomacy; as well as industrial, economic, and security specialists. Each of these fields is currently handled separately, under the auspices of its own cooperative body or bodies, and in accordance with their own individual procedures. The new research group would promote bilateral and multilateral dialogue and cooperation, thereby mitigating risk and allowing confidence building. Perhaps this group might operate at a semi-governmental rather than a governmental level, the better to propose practical resolutions. It would also be helpful for contending countries to jointly conduct oceanographic research activities on the waters in dispute, so as to set baselines and principles based upon scientific standards, and to accurately delimit the maritime boundaries.

Fourth, it is especially important that the East Asian countries and China make determined efforts to create a mechanism for the avoidance of collisions at sea, and to encourage preventive diplomacy. The most urgent need is to prevent unintentional encounters in the Yellow Sea between their navies. To that end, all countries should move towards the adoption of expedient protocols analogous to the Agreement of Incidents at Sea, which prevailed between the US and the former Soviet navies during

the Cold War, or the Code for Unalerted Encounters at Sea (CUES), which applies in the Western Pacific among the navies of several countries, They should also seek to codify the prior notification of military exercises. In addition, they should strive, through preventive diplomacy, to prevent the escalation of any conflicts and disputes which may occur. This means avoiding physical confrontation and instead acknowledging and making use of methods like capability sharing. The rival nations should thus be able to find common ground on the interpretation of UNCLOS as it applies to East Asian waters, and also on a mutually agreed response to a variety of unconditional and non-military threats. Findings of joint studies made by the Expert Research Group between the East Asian countries and China could also be disclosed, where this is deemed necessary and appropriate. A trilateral forum of a similar character has recently been set up, in Seoul, in September 2011: the Korea-China-Japan Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat was established to find a new framework of cooperation to discuss matters of common interest among the three countries, and it is even hoped to identify opportunities for bilateral cooperation between the Chinese and the ROK navies, in the pursuance of common maritime security.

VI. Conclusion

The stance taken by the Chinese in response to these maritime conflicts in 2010 has given rise to serious concerns among the East Asian countries as China seems intent upon establishing its own version of the Monroe Doctrine. Until this turn of events, China had been behaving as a responsible stakeholder in upholding regional security, adhering to its declared foreign policy approach known as "China's peaceful rise" and "harmonious world." China's recent behavior has contradicted this line, however, which has had a strong negative impact on the East Asian countries' perception of Chinese intentions. They now fear a return to a traditional Middle Kingdom mentality, with a dominant China attempting to reshape the regional order by means of its tremendous economic, political and military influence.

These recent conflicts have alerted China's weaker neighbors, the Republic of Korea, Japan and the ASEAN nations, to the dangers that could follow from such a rapid and unexpected emergence of a Chinese Monroe Doctrine. All of these countries recognize the potential for increasingly harmful and unwelcome consequences, and they perhaps interpret these developments rather more seriously than the other countries of the region, having each of them felt the crack of the Chinese whip. Previously, they had believed that political and military conflict with China could be managed by means of expanded programs of exchange and collaboration with China, having been seen as a responsible and cooperative partner. They had also hoped to see China playing a mediating role between East Asian countries and the US, denying the latter any pretext to infringe upon regional interests.

These hopes were confounded in 2010, however, when they witnessed a catalogue of extraordinary altercations over maritime security which seems to foreshadow an entirely new foreign policy on the part of the Chinese. There was the unyielding Chinese opposition to ROK-US joint naval exercises being held in the Yellow Sea in response to the sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan* and the North Korean artillery bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island; also the ruthless way that the Chinese enforced their will during the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands crisis in the East China Sea, by blatantly bullying the Japanese into releasing the Chinese fishing vessel and its crew, overriding the

Japanese juridical process; and the Chinese use of coercion and force to advance their claims to the Spratleys and Paracels in the South China Sea, which are disputed by ASEAN nations. In the wake of these events, it is hardly surprising that the countries involved regard this newly confident and forceful China to be moving towards a sino-centric regional reordering, in effect a rebirth of the Middle Kingdom. China's apparent intention to impose its own version of the Monroe Doctrine across the seas of East Asia has obliged its neighbours to review their medium- and long-term national security strategies, and they have already begun to make preparations to cope with the further negative consequences which they now anticipate will follow from the rise of China.