



# Beijing's Ménluó Doctrine

## If it was good for America, should it be good for China?

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**B**eijing has an incremental foreign policy in the South and East China Seas which appears to parallel America's Monroe Doctrine. When the increasingly assertive young America declared that the Western Hemisphere was off-limits to the great colonial powers of Europe, President James Monroe's eponymous doctrine altered the nature of trans-Atlantic relations. In retrospect, China is essentially following America's footprints in trans-Pacific affairs with its own Ménluó (a transliteration of Monroe) Doctrine in the Asian Seas.

Beijing's competing claims primarily involve the Diaoyu (or Senkaku in Japan) islands dispute with Tokyo, the Paracel (or Xisha in China, Hoang Sa in Vietnam) archipelagos conflict with Hanoi and the Scarborough shoal clash (or Huangyan island in China) along with the Second Thomas shoal (known as Ren'ai in China) with Manila. The ever-more powerful China has now engaged in a number of other territorial disagreements with Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Taiwan over the resource-rich regions of the South China Sea. Beijing exclusively claims that a U-shaped swathe of this maritime region—just south of Hong Kong and Hainan Island—historically belongs to China. The disputed waters demarcated by the so-called "nine-dash-line"

on Chinese maps, which Beijing now puts on its Chinese passports, has elevated into an international issue.

President Barack Obama seems to understand the delicacy of historical analog and future prospects for the Sino-American relationship—the most important bilateral relationship in the world. The evolving complexity ranges from the ever-changing regional and bilateral relations with nations in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) to Myanmar and Japan. Now, it is with the Philippines and Vietnam. In April, a few days after making a strong statement about the US treaty obligations to defend Japan over the Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea, Obama reiterated at a news conference in Manila that the Philippines and Vietnam should bring the disputed claims against China before an international tribunal under the Law of the Sea Treaty of the United Nations.

During this four-nation tour of Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, and the Philippines, Obama emphasized the US commitment to the "rebalancing" policy in the Pacific, stating that "coercion and intimidation is [not] the way to manage these disputes." Obama's rebalancing policy, which was previously introduced as the "Asia pivot strategy" by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, involves a restructuring of US military in the Pacific regions, especially a new deploy-

ment of 5,000 Navy personnel at Darwin in Australia and the strengthening of American forces at Okinawa military bases in Japan, located east of the East China Sea.

As China unilaterally declared the new Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over parts of the East China Sea, Beijing continued to engage in requesting the identification, location, and control of civil aircraft in its designated zone. Within the “nine-dash-line” maritime region, China has the disputed fishery-rich Scarborough shoal claimed by the Philippines and the Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil rig (or HD-981) near the Paracels—claimed partly by Vietnam. In all of these assertive actions by the Chinese, the US and its allies—including the old (the Philippines) and the new (Vietnam)—do not have a straightforward geostrategy to deter Beijing’s forceful and unilateral behavior.

### ***History Repeats Itself***

The Monroe Doctrine experience in the Caribbean and Latin America reminds us of the influence of historic links in geostrategies. Despite America’s self-assured foreign policy in the nineteenth century, for example, a number of Caribbean islands still continued to maintain close relations with their colonial masters over the Atlantic, but the United States never went to war with them. In recent years, the Chinese investment and commercial engagement in America’s backyard have begun to accelerate as these island nations and Latin American countries turn to Beijing for better trade relations and long-term investment on infrastructure development. In reality, the Monroe Doctrine has had mixed results as economics triumphs over politics.

Beside territorial disputes and political tensions, China is the largest trading partner with stakeholder countries in the South China Sea—along with America, Africa, and elsewhere. For all nations, economic development and human progress are the vital concerns; political freedoms follow later—just as America’s experience of “the Hamiltonian means to Jeffersonian ends” created greater freedoms for all Americans. In *Peaceful War: How the Chinese Dream and American Destiny Created a Pacific New World Order*, I explain this narrative of the American experiment, in which Jeffersonian equality for women, Native Americans, and African Americans only materialized years later, after painful human struggles, but Hamiltonian strategies sustained the financial and economic livelihood and development of the United States.

For China, Deng Xiaoping’s economic reform and trade liberalization must bring Hamiltonian economic progress—with a strong central government, a state-run banking system, and a modernized naval force. President Xi Jinping is now pursuing his Chinese Dream—a strategic variation of the American Dream with Chinese characteristics—for the growing Chinese middle-class.

Xi has unwillingly unleashed an organic process for Jeffersonian aspirations of freedom to thrive. He has allowed the Chinese people to travel abroad (over 100 million last year), Chinese students to study overseas (over 300,000 in the United States alone), and over five million Chinese workers

to engage in infrastructure projects in Africa and elsewhere. Freedom in media—especially in social media like microblogs—is greater than ever before. Yet, the Confucian union will continue with the Communist Party.

### ***Pacific World Order***

An unprecedented transformation has silently taken place in China. This evolution has been relatively peaceful. America must reflect on its own historic footprints in the Pacific, especially with the tragic legacies of the Philippines and Vietnam. In all this, President Obama now realizes the limit of American power (in Egypt, Syria, and Ukraine) even with its unparalleled military superiority in the world. Likewise, China will soon recognize the limitation of its assertive dominance in the Pacific region and its economic hegemony in the world.

With China’s so-called “Peaceful Rise,” there has emerged a Pacific new world order, for which America’s Asia “pivot” or rebalancing strategy constitutes a “leading behind” plan. As Americans are weary of the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, the Obama administration’s priorities must be focused more on the nation’s infrastructure development and job creation. Congressional leaders understand that America’s global military outreach has been exhausting, and the primacy of American power has always come with the strength of national endowments and innovations in policy.

As the United States expands its energy self-sufficiency with new sources of gas and oil in North America, our economic interests in the oil-rich Middle East and our traditional alliances in Europe have begun to change. Given all this, Obama’s Asia “pivot” strategy is neither a pivot nor a rebalance; it is about trade, investment, and finance as epitomized by his Trans-Pacific Partnerships to make international trade benefit its citizens and others. US Trade Representative Michael Froman said that this trade pact “is the cornerstone of the Obama administration’s economic policy in the Asia Pacific” and “an ambitious, comprehensive and high-standard agreement” to be negotiated and concluded by twelve countries. It is a Hamiltonian strategy with corporate interests. This has exactly been the grand strategy of post-Deng China, which Beijing has seemingly emulated from the Hamiltonian America that advocated a strong federal government, a powerful federal reserve bank, and a robust military force.

### ***American Traditions in Action***

Obama continued to use Jeffersonian rhetoric like his famous crossing of the “red-line” speech on Syria and played the reluctant but vocal actor over the Russian annexation of Crimea. With China, the situation is more delicate as the two nations truly need each other. For example, the American military requires Chinese funding, as our defense expenditure is part of our national debt to China. Thus, our over-arching national interests are directly related to economic and trade relations that are driven by American and multinational corporations, which are also linked to our national defense.

With the evolving tensions in the East and South China Seas, State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said that the United States was concerned about China and its “dangerous conduct and intimidation” in the Pacific. Directly referring to the HD-981 rig in the Paracels, she added that “China’s unilateral decision to introduce its oil rig into these disputed waters [with Vietnam] is provocative and unhelpful.” Furthermore, referring to Japan and South Korea, the Deputy National Security Advisor at the White House remarked that “we have reaffirmed our support for our mutual defense treaties with allies in the region, and have supported the efforts of the Philippines to pursue international arbitration to resolve maritime disputes.”

For the latter, Washington and Manila have signed a defense agreement to have regular joint military activities, occasional training exercises, and rotational troop visits at the Subic Naval and Clark Air Force Bases (which were returned by the US Forces to the Philippines in 1991). Yet, American rhetoric has signaled that the Philippines must use the international tribunal process for conflict resolution, which purposefully sent an ambiguous policy message to Beijing.

Unlike the US-Philippines pact, Washington does not have a defense treaty with Hanoi, but the potential for American access to Cam Ranh Bay—a deep-water naval base on the South China Sea—is a sensitive matter for Beijing. The Chinese and Vietnamese militaries have direct contacts at the highest level; the two communist governments also share close economic and trade ties. Recent political posturing in Hanoi and Washington may signify a change of policy, which might shift the balance of power in the South China Sea.

### *A New Type of Rebalance*

When the state-owned China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) decided to locate the sophisticated US\$1 billion HD-981 oil rig within the contested Exclusive Economic Zone near the Paracel Islands, it sent more than a message of economic necessity; it is, in essence, a démarche. Once again, with another oil rig in the planning and building of an airport and library, and settling Chinese people on the Paracel Islands, Beijing basically claims the sovereignty of the maritime territory demarcated by its historical but controversial “nine-dash-line”.

There is another element to this strategic posture. A few years ago, the US-based Exxon Mobil made two exploratory drillings and discovered significant reserves of oil and gas near the Paracels. (The US Energy Information Administration, however, maintains that no substantial oil and gas reserves exist in the area). The CNOOC rig is carefully situated in proximity to these potential deposits. The American economic and corporate interests will complicate the matter. It is no longer just an issue of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, but a global one including the US and China.

Political rhetoric will remain active while economic interests that tie these countries together are difficult to ignore. The stakeholders—especially the Philippines and

Vietnam—can ill afford to alienate China and its much needed economic and developmental aid. Especially as the geographically-distant United States can hardly fulfill the material needs and aspirations of its Pacific allies and friends. All of these multifaceted relationships work simultaneously with competing national identities and economic interests.

### *Military-to-Military Relations*

The economically intertwined Sino-American relationship has now shifted to the deepening of military-to-military relations for greater confidence-building and cooperation. US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel’s visit to the first Chinese aircraft carrier—the Liaoning—in April was followed by a celebrated reciprocal visit of General Fang Fenghui, chief of China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to tour the nuclear-powered USS Ronald Reagan in San Diego in early May. In Washington, Fang also met with his counterpart General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, after welcoming him in a full red-carpet honors ceremony at the Pentagon and subsequent visits to military installations. This is an encouraging sign of military-to-military relations as PLA Navy Chief Admiral Wu Shengli also visited the USS Carl Vinson last year.

As the Fang-Dempsey meetings took place in Washington, the HD-981 incident between China and Vietnam incited anti-Chinese protesters in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and elsewhere. Public protests—with damage to Chinese and other factories—would scarcely take place in Vietnam without the tacit approval of the communist government in Hanoi. As Washington warms up to Hanoi with the intention of providing military support (similar to the Philippines), Sino-American military relations are strengthening at the highest level.

With historical military links between the two communist parties and ever-increasing trade and investment between China and Vietnam, the two countries are trying to prevent further escalation. The damage to other factories owned by South Korean, Taiwanese, and Singaporean companies also signifies that these public protests are directed at

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the prevailing industrial and labor issues in Vietnam. Hence, both Beijing and Hanoi need to recognize the poor human working conditions of factories and try to placate jingoistic sentiments of their citizens, which still seem to resonate with the history of territorial invasion by the Chinese and armed resistance by the Vietnamese, including the relatively recent 1979 Chinese invasion of Vietnam.

### ***Changing Alliances***

The changing Sino-American relations in the Pacific underscore the geopolitical axiom of former British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston (1855-8, 1859-65), who suggested that Britain had “no eternal allies and no perpetual enemies, only interests that were eternal.” Shifting national interests and allegiances are still the currency of international affairs. At the recent ten-nation ASEAN summit, Vietnam failed to harness the needed diplomatic support against the Chinese installation of HD-981. As the calculus of power changes in the South China Sea, US Secretary of State John Kerry summarized the American position: “we want to see a code of conduct created; we want to see this resolved peacefully through the Law of the Sea, through arbitration, through any other means, but not direct confrontation and aggressive action.”

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When all nations are engaged in air navigation and maritime traffic for commercial purposes, it is imperative to follow a set of generally accepted protocols. The reality is that China acts like the United States did when the new nation declared its Monroe Doctrine. As the historical parallel paths seem to exist between the two powerful nations, Beijing has now transformed its “Peaceful Rise” plan into President Ronald Reagan’s “Peace through Strength” doctrine.

In the midst of territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas, a Sino-American psychological warfare has delicately begun to play out with General Fang’s visit to the American super-aircraft carrier the USS Ronald Reagan. The carrier underscores America’s supreme naval power that seemingly cannot be matched by China for years to come. The Chinese visit helped better understand that a potential military engagement—with the Pentagon’s Air-Sea Battle (ASB) concept—would be decisive in favor of the United States.

Even with the prevailing interpretation of such psychological war-games, which includes the media depiction of Sino-American corporate espionage and the on-going cyber-warfare as well as the editorial and opinions of major news outlets like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, American strategic designs for the containment of China are misplaced. Some Chinese strategists would like to view the evolving “new type of major power relations” through the prism of Cold War mindsets within a broader context of President Reagan’s proposed Strategic Defense “Star Wars” Initiative against the former Soviet Union.

### ***No Concirclement***

In all this, Obama’s rebalance strategy is not necessarily

a “concircling” (containment and encirclement) policy but deterrence with the simultaneous advancement of mutual interdependence for greater benefits. It is a new type of 21st century power relationship between the two economic powers guaranteed by Reagan’s “Peace through Strength” doctrine, for which a stable China—with its masterful Communist Party for Confucian unity—must be included in American geopolitical calculus.

Unlike the Soviet Union during the Cold War era, there is no overriding contest for political ideology between China and the United States, which is now basically driven by commercial and trade interests. The two economic front runners—as an exporter and importer, producer and consumer—have elevated trade as the center stage in Sino-American relations. For example, a nation that imports the unwanted chicken feet (\$677 million in 2008) from the

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United States prefers to keep their delicacy flow incorporated in the total \$36 billion American poultry market, according to the US Department of Agriculture.

President Xi tries to rejuvenate China’s glorious past (that kept with the United States until the Opium Wars) as Obama gleans through the American economic history and the Monroe Doctrine to see the future. Both nations are historically tied by commercial intercourse. However, it is unlikely that the classic ideas propagated in *The Clash of Civilizations* by Samuel Huntington at Harvard and *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* by John Mearsheimer at the University of Chicago would be realized within the evolving web of complex relationships. Huntington argues that the Confucian culture in China and Judeo-Christian values in America might lead to confrontation between the two civilizations, and Mearsheimer claims that a rising power has historically tended to clash with the existing great-power nations.

Indeed, political realities and economic necessities on both sides of the Pacific are different and alliances are constantly changing. China needs the overseas markets and natural resources to sustain its economic growth. To maintain global superiority, American military and intelligence agencies must have expansive budgetary allocations, for which Washington needs Beijing.

These are powerful incentives; both governments in Beijing and Washington understand that a conflict or a proxy war (through American allies or Chinese vassal states) would be counterproductive and catastrophic. Reflective—but not over-confident and reckless—leadership is needed to avoid the likelihood of tragedies envisioned by Huntington and Mearsheimer. ¶