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Xi Jinping's 'Monroe Doctrine': Rebuilding the Middle Kingdom Order?

By Sukjoon Yoon

Synopsis

Xi Jinping's declaration that China should strive to become a "true maritime power" is redolent of a Chinese version of the Monroe doctrine or the old Middle Kingdom order. The recent issues in the East and South China seas demonstrate China's incremental pursuit of its ambition to be the dominant maritime power in the region.

Commentary

CHINESE PRESIDENT Xi Jinping's conception of true maritime power is intertwined with several complex issues: internal factors about the legitimacy of his leadership and external factors like territorial disputes in the East and South China seas which concern sovereignty.

East Asian nations must consider the implications of China's approach and its impact on the region: is it possible to influence and countervail China by standing together, even as Beijing pursues its salami-slicing strategy?

Xi Jinping's four thrusts: Chinese Monroe doctrine?

From Xi's remarks it seems that he is more committed to a long-term maritime strategy than his predecessors. He is basically attempting to restore the ancient Middle Kingdom regional order through four thrusts:

First, establishing new high-profile organisations dealing with maritime policy and strategy, especially the States Security Committee; second, upgrading naval capabilities to counter the US pivot to Asia and back up its civil maritime law enforcement; third, reframing issues relating to the East and South China seas away from prevailing international law and towards what China sees as its historical rights; and fourth, demonstrating China's ostensible goodwill through participation in international forums and multilateral exercises in the region.

Xi Jinping can afford to be patient. Certainly the current maritime policies being pursued by China are intended as a warning, especially to the US, not to intervene in Chinese affairs in any part of the East and South China seas. Xi also expects US influence in the region to continue to weaken. Current Chinese policy is readily understood as a Chinese version of the Monroe doctrine, which the US declared in 1823 to deter the European great powers from interfering in seas the US construed as its natural sphere of influence. Could this be a contemporary rendition of the old Middle Kingdom regional order dominated by China?

China is implicitly challenging the collective defence posture encouraged by Washington, as the self-appointed guardian of the Indo-Pacific region. It is easy to empathise with the concerns of China's smaller and vulnerable neighbours, who have bitter memories of living as tributary states to the Middle Kingdom, when all of the surrounding seas were a medium for the projection of China's overwhelming power and influence.

Xi will not be satisfied until this system has been recreated around modern-day China. Despite being very vocal in defence of China's core national interests, however, he has yet to issue any detailed doctrine concerning how China's maritime forces should interact with, and, by implication, ultimately protect, its neighbours.

Impact: slicing the salami

Xi Jinping seems determined to establish China as a maritime power through an incremental strategy. Following lessons learned from the historical advances of Western colonial powers, China will gradually become more and more assertive across a wider and wider maritime area, whilst, crucially, avoiding any serious reaction from the US, until the Chinese position in the East and South China seas is beyond challenge.

Those nations that most cherish their ability to act independently will feel the greatest impact, and any who attempt to obstruct Xi's salami-slicing tactics will quickly experience the consequences of China's displeasure. The nations of the region must understand the real purpose underlying Xi's true maritime power policy - nothing less than the restoration of China's traditional maritime order.

Recent examples of China's incremental approach include: declaring an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea, in November 2013; enforcing new fishing regulations, in January 2014, which oblige all foreign fishing vessels to apply for permission before entering a vast swath of the South China Sea, including areas contested by Vietnam and the Philippines; and unilaterally moving an oil rig into Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea on 1 May.

Time and circumstance are on Xi Jinping's side. A war-weary US is unwilling to chance any serious maritime confrontation with China. Although the US military is attempting to rebalance its naval powers to the Asia-Pacific, after financial sequestration it lacks the resources to do this quickly or effectively; and US forces are also still engaged in other regions like the strife-torn Middle East, as well as acquiring new commitments in Europe to check Russia's westward advance through Ukraine.

China, meanwhile, can take the long view and lean on its rivals in the disputed areas as opportunity allows, slicing the maritime salami whenever it becomes possible. In this situation, where the struggle between the two great powers of the region is becoming ever more open, the other regional powers, especially those which can be characterised as middle powers - ASEAN, India, Australia, Canada, Japan and South Korea - are therefore seeking to establish strategic cooperative partnerships and networks with one another. Such efforts have, however, so far not been coherent, nor is it clear how effectively they could cooperate to resist China.

In fact, all the countries of the region are fearful of Xi's drive to turn China into a maritime power, since none has forces on a scale to match China's, and they have very little military leverage to resist its might.

What can regional nations do?

So where does this leave them? Throughout the region there is an earnest desire to believe that Xi Jinping really does want China to be a responsible player in maintaining maritime peace and stability; they can only hope for greater restraint in the use of "reactive assertiveness", "tailored coercion" and "forceful persuasion" to pursue its claims in the East and South China seas. At least there is now a policy to avoid the use of naval warships for law enforcement in the disputed waters.

Although none of China's neighbours in the Asia-Pacific region can match its maritime capabilities on an individual basis, they could work together to respond to China's long-term policy of its version of the Monroe doctrine. They should do everything possible to deter Xi's salami-slicing tactics, without escalating maritime tensions, to prevent China from establishing a fait accompli in which the Middle Kingdom regional order is reconstructed.

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