

The Obama Doctrine

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The Wall Street Journal

25 November 2011

Since 2009, China's challenge to American primacy in Asia has become too stark to ignore. Last week President Obama gave his response. On his Asian journey he enunciated what truly deserves to be called the Obama Doctrine. It is perfectly clear. The United States will resist China's challenge to its primacy in Asia, using all the instruments of its power to strengthen and perpetuate the preeminent leadership it has exercised in the region for decades.

Mr. Obama also sketched plans to implement this doctrine by reorganizing Asia under new U.S.-led regional structures which exclude China. His Trans-Pacific Partnership creates a new economic framework for the Asia-Pacific without China, while an expanded defense presence in Australia signals his aim to build armed strength in Asia and draw friends and allies into a larger and tighter strategic coalition against China's growing military weight.

Of course, Mr. Obama hopes that the resolve he has shown will persuade China to drop its challenge and accept U.S. leadership once more. But his doctrine clearly implies that if China cannot be persuaded, it will be compelled. This is very ambitious. Indeed it is America's most ambitious new strategic doctrine since Truman committed America to contain the Soviet Union.

Some will dispute that comparison. They will say the policy is not containment, and the adversary is not the Soviet Union. But think about it. America's aim is to resist an expansion of China's influence in Asia by building an economic and strategic coalition of friends and allies around its geostrategic periphery. The Obama Doctrine lacks the ideological dimension of Cold War containment—but it mirrors the geostrategic and political essence of the Truman Doctrine. It walks like a duck and quacks like a duck.

And is China the Soviet Union? In many ways it is not. China is still much weaker militarily than the Soviets were, and less threatening. But relative to the U.S., China is much richer than the Soviets ever were, and that makes it in the long run a much more formidable adversary. Indeed it is the most formidable strategic competitor America has ever encountered, because it is the only one ever to approach the U.S. so closely in sheer economic weight. And that has nothing to do with overblown doom-saying about American decline. It simply flows from China's remarkable growth.

These sobering reflections prompt two critical questions: Where does the Obama Doctrine lead? And what are the alternatives?

Where it leads depends first on the Chinese. The idea that they will simply cave in is just wishful thinking. That leaves only two possibilities. One is that China's economy stumbles. This seems to be what Mr. Obama expects. He clearly had China in mind when his major speech in Canberra last week foreshadowed the failure of any country which is not a democracy. Maybe he'll be proved right. But people have been predicting the failure of China's Market-Leninist model for thirty years now, and for thirty years the model has delivered growth at 10% per year. Americans would be unwise now to assume that China will fail anytime soon.

If it doesn't, we can expect China to push back against the Obama Doctrine. And we can assume that America will then push back in turn. What follows then is steadily escalating strategic competition between two very powerful rivals, playing out in a setting that gives China big asymmetrical advantages. That will carry immense costs for America, and even bigger risks.

One risk is that escalating strategic competition will disrupt the vital economic relationship between the U.S. and China. Many hope that the two countries' deep interdependence will prevent their rivalry getting out of hand. But that will only happen if both sides are willing to forgo strategic objectives to protect their economic cooperation. With the Obama Doctrine, the President has declared that he has no intention of doing that. Why should we expect the Chinese to act any different? So it is more likely that escalating rivalry will soon start to erode economic interdependence between the two nations, at great cost to both.

The other risk is the growing chance of conflict. A war with China over Taiwan or the Spratly Islands is simple to start but hard to end, and could very easily escalate. China is a nuclear-armed power capable of destroying American cities, and the threshold for nuclear exchanges in a U.S.-China clash might be dangerously unclear and disastrously low.

So the Obama Doctrine seems to lead in some very dangerous directions. Those dangers might nonetheless be worth running, if the only alternative was to stand back and let China take over Asia. And many people see us facing this stark choice—a choice between re-asserting U.S. primacy in Asia and abandoning the region to Chinese hegemony.

But these are not the only possibilities. We can imagine an Asian future dominated neither by America or China. Beijing and Washington could share power, each balancing and restraining the other. This would be much less congenial to most of us than the uncontested U.S. primacy of the past 40 years. But it would be much better than the escalating rivalry that looms today, and much better too than unrestrained Chinese hegemony.

Of course this could only work if both China and the U.S. agree to make it work. We cannot be sure that such an agreement has ever been possible. But it was always worth exploring. The window for doing that was never large, and is closing fast. The way things are going, the two countries will soon be so deeply entrenched in rivalry that a deal like this becomes impossible.

That's why the Obama Doctrine is a very serious mistake. It commits America to a strategic confrontation which will cost it dearly, which it might not win and which it could quite possibly avoid without sacrificing its vital interests in Asia. America should step back from the Obama Doctrine and explore the possibility of a deal with China to build a better basis for peace in the Asian Century.

That will not be as popular with today's American voters as the muscular resolve he showed in Asia last week. But it might earn him the gratitude of their grandchildren, which was how Bismarck defined the difference between a politician and a statesman.

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