The Japanese Monroe Doctrine

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THE JAPANESE MONROE DOCTRINE

By George H. Blakeslee

The political principle expressed in the phrase “a Japanese Monroe Doctrine” has been used more and more frequently by the Japanese to interpret and to justify their policy in the Far East. Occasionally other terms are employed to express much the same idea, such as “paramount interest,” “special interest,” “Asia for the Asiatics,” “Japanese leadership,” and “the right to live.” Whatever the name, a fundamental doctrine or policy has developed, and it constitutes a major factor in the affairs of Eastern Asia; it goes far to explain Japan’s specific actions in China as well as her general attitude toward the Powers in matters concerning the Far East.

The Japanese Government has made official announcement of this Japanese Monroe Doctrine. “Japan is responsible for the maintenance of peace and order in the Far East,” is the statement of the Japanese delegation in its report of February 21 to the Assembly of the League of Nations. Count Uchida, the Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs, in his address to the Imperial Diet on January 21, referred to Article XXI of the League Covenant, which recognizes the validity of the Monroe Doctrine under the designation of a regional understanding, and said: “The League of Nations Covenant very wisely provides that regional understandings shall be respected. In this sense, our Government believes that any plan for erecting an edifice of peace in the Far East should be based upon the recognition that the constructive force of Japan is the mainstay of tranquillity in this part of the world.” Although this phraseology is vague and diplomatic, the intent of the Japanese Government to claim the rights of a Monroe Doctrine for the Far East is perfectly clear. Viscount Ishii, when acting as the special ambassador of Japan at Washington in 1917, spoke of a Monroe Doctrine for Asia and asked Secretary Lansing to recognize that Japan had a “paramount interest” in China. In his recently published Memoirs, this distinguished Japanese statesman writes: “From our point of view, Japan possesses interests superior to other Powers in China as a whole, especially in the contiguous regions, much as the position of your country in the Western Hemisphere, especially in Mexico and Central American countries.”
To interpret correctly Japan's present conduct in China, and to forecast her probable action in the future, it is essential to know what the Japanese have in mind when they speak of a Japanese Monroe Doctrine. What are the rights which Japan asks other Powers to recognize and respect? And the further query then arises whether after all the claim of a Monroe Doctrine for the Far East is really justified.

The idea of a Monroe Doctrine for Asia arose in Japan shortly after the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, and has been emphasized by the Japanese during the periods when they have been carrying on an aggressive foreign policy. During the World War, when Japan succeeded in driving Germany out of China and the north Pacific, it had a wide acceptance. Afterwards, especially following the Washington Conference, there was a period of a few years during which it gave way to a "friendship policy" toward China. Little was heard at that time of the Japanese Monroe Doctrine. But during the present acute Sino-Japanese controversy it has once more been brought forward and with added insistence.

According to a few writers the area within which the Japanese Monroe Doctrine is applicable includes the entire continent of Asia. A larger number would limit it to the countries of the Western Pacific. But for all practical purposes it represents the policy of Japan toward China in general and Manchuria in particular. The various principles which are included within this extremely elastic doctrine may be summarized under the headings self-defense or security; Pan Asia; special rights and interests; leadership and guardianship; and the right to live, or economic penetration.

On the principle of self-defense Japan is opposed to any territorial aggression in China by any foreign state. She fought two wars to drive Russia from Southern Manchuria and Germany from Shantung, and she obtained from the Chinese Government in 1915 a declaration that "Hereafter no port, bay or island along the coast of China will be ceded or leased to any foreign country." Recently Viscount Ishii wrote as follows in an article in FOREIGN AFFAIRS: "Generally speaking, our policy in China has been based upon the belief that the establishment of an imperium in imperio upon her soil by any powerful third nation or group of nations is not only derogatory to her integrity but is also incompatible with our own security. In this we have been
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actuated by the same principle incorporated in the Monroe Doctrine."  

"Pan Asia," or corollary slogans such as "Asia for the Asiatics" and "Back to Asia," are representative of a policy which has widely different meanings. As used by some Japanese it is defensive; its aim is to protect Asia from the attacks or encroachments of Europe and America. With others it is primarily cultural and commercial. But it is sometimes used in an aggressive sense; all European and American political influence should be eliminated from Eastern Asia, and the entire region should be organized under Japanese political control. In the beginning, however, due to Japan's victory over Russia, Pan Asia represented a sentiment genuinely shared by all the nations of the continent. At one time the movement received the support of some of the leading Chinese, notably by Dr. Sun Yat-sen. But today it has no reality outside of Japan.

The claim that Japan possessed "special interests" and a "special position" in China, particularly in Manchuria, has long been maintained by practically all Japanese. Some of the Powers, by treaty and special agreement, have recognized the validity of this general contention. Yet, notwithstanding the frequent definitions and explanations which have been given, the real meaning of these terms, as the Lytton Report points out, is somewhat obscure; it is not clear what privileges and responsibilities they would give Japan in China. In the famous Lansing-Ishii Agreement of 1917, after long negotiations as to the exact phraseology, the following wording was finally adopted: "The Governments of the United States and Japan recognize that territorial propinquity creates special relations between countries, and, consequently, the Government of the United States recognizes that Japan has special interests in China, particularly in the part to which her possessions are contiguous." It shortly became evident, however, that Secretary Lansing and Viscount Ishii, while they agreed upon the same phrase, had entirely different concepts in mind. Secretary Lansing understood that the expression referred particularly to the commercial and industrial advantage which Japan enjoyed in China due to its geographical position, and that the words had no political significance. Viscount Ishii, however, has insisted that these special interests of Japan "were principally political." In his recently published Memoirs he states that they

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1 FOREIGN AFFAIRS, January 1933, p. 227.
give to Japan a heavier responsibility concerning China's problems and a greater right to express herself regarding them than have the states of Europe and America.

The majority of Japanese evidently believe that Japan's special interests cannot be limited to material investments and concessions nor to the advantages accruing from geographical situation, and that Japan's special position gives her vital but intangible rights and responsibilities in China. Some claim that Japan has a status of hegemony or paramountcy in China and the right to maintain peace and order. This point of view so impressed the Russian Ambassador in Tokyo in 1917 that he wrote confidentially to his home government: "The Japanese are manifesting more and more clearly a tendency to interpret the special position of Japan in China, inter alia, in the sense that other Powers must not undertake in China any political steps without previously exchanging views with Japan on the subject — a condition that would to some extent establish a Japanese control over the foreign affairs of China." The degree of control in China as a whole, both political and economic, to which the Japanese Government (at least in 1915) believed that it was entitled on account of Japan's special position, was made evident by the Twenty-One Demands, particularly the famous Group V, which in the opinion of the high Chinese officials would have placed "the Chinese State in a position of vassalage through exercising a control over important parts of its administration and over its industrial and natural resources, actual and prospective." In northeastern China the special position desired was shown by the Demands of Group II which would have made South Manchuria and Eastern Inner Mongolia an economic sphere, where Japanese would have had a virtual monopoly of railroad construction, public loans and foreign advisers. A further effort to obtain recognition of Manchuria and Mongolia as a Japanese sphere was made in 1919–20, when a request was made that these regions should not be included in the new banking consortium on the ground that Japan had "very special relations" with them. Although more liberal Japanese leaders, such as Baron Shidehara, have interpreted the "special interests" and "special position" in such a way as to be consistent with the Open Door and the integrity of China and with the legitimate rights of China and the foreign Powers, many of the nationalistic and military leaders have used these phrases, and still use them, as justification for attempting to obtain for
Japan such extensive and exceptional privileges and such rights of supervision as would necessarily impair the sovereignty of China and the provisions of treaties.

Another principle included within the Japanese Monroe Doctrine is the right of Japanese leadership in the Far East. Although this claim to leadership has been made by many prominent Japanese, from Marquis Okuma to the officials in the present government, it received especial emphasis in 1930 following the friendly addresses in Tokyo of Ambassador Castle, who compared the purpose of Japan to maintain peace in Eastern Asia with the purpose of the United States to maintain peace in the western hemisphere. From the press discussion which followed, as well as from the comments and statements of various public men, it appears that the Japanese people as a whole believe that Japan is entitled to a position of leadership in the Far East which other nations are under obligation to respect. The result of recognizing this position might be largely sentimental and involve no limitation upon the diplomatic action or initiative of other states. But some Japanese have certainly interpreted this right of leadership as implying that other Powers should take no independent action in China without previous consultation with Japan.

The "right to live" doctrine, or the right to economic expansion, is interwoven with the political ideas which make up the Japanese Monroe Doctrine. When the Japanese apply the principle to Manchuria they call it the "life line" doctrine, since they regard the resources of that region as necessary for the economic life of their country. In discussing these needs, the great majority of Japanese statesmen and writers have for years insisted that they have no territorial ambitions. Yet many of them also state that Japan must expand. The expansion which apparently the majority desire is an expansion of economic and political control, without the extension of Japanese sovereignty. This economic expansion, in the view of Japanese liberals, including the Shidehara school of politics, involves no aggression and aims only at close economic cooperation between Japan and China, an economic entente brought about by friendly mutual agreement. The "right to live" doctrine, however, as now presented, demands more than this; it claims the right to share in the development and use of the natural resources of China, particularly in Manchuria, whether China gives her consent or not. This claim is based, in Mr. Matsuoka's words, upon the "legitimate
rights of a nation which is compelled to find an outlet somewhere.” A former Premier of Japan, Mr. T. Hara, expressed this idea in 1921 by an unusual interpretation of the Open Door: “By ‘open door’ I do not mean a complete throwing down of national boundary stones. What I have in mind is the removal of the economic insecurity of some peoples by extending to them the opportunity for free access to the world’s resources, eliminating other artificial economic barriers, and adjusting as much as possible the inequality arising from the earlier discrimination of nature and of history.” Dr. Y. Takaki, Professor in the Tokyo Imperial University, a particularly able and fair interpreter of Japanese-American relations, has recently written, in explanation of the current Japanese point of view, that the idea of an economic bloc uniting Japan and Manchukuo is “a sine qua non of the ‘Japanese Monroe Doctrine.’” General Sadao Araki, the present Minister of War and the intellectual leader of the elements now in control in Japan, has recently stated that, since “mankind has the right to live upon the earth,” no country with abundant resources has a right to deny these to another country which is overcrowded and is insufficiently endowed by nature.

From this survey it is evident that the Japanese Monroe Doctrine contains a number of different political principles. The precise meaning of any one of them, or of the general and inclusive Doctrine itself, cannot be stated exactly; no official definitions have been made. The content in each case must be judged by the statements of the political leaders and the writers who appear to present the dominant Japanese thought, and by the action of the Japanese authorities. But at least it is clear that the Japanese Government has a Japanese Monroe Doctrine for the Far East, and that it claims a position for Japan which it regards in a general way as comparable to that occupied by the United States in the American hemisphere.

In fact, however, there is only a slight similarity between the Japanese and the American Monroe Doctrines. The American Doctrine, as officially defined, is solely a policy of self-defense. It is limited to expressing the opposition of the United States to any non-American state seizing territory or political control in this hemisphere. It does not claim special interests, hegemony, or economic privileges. The Japanese Doctrine, to be sure, does contain this same principle of self-defense, for it admittedly opposes territorial or political encroachments by non-Asiatic
powers. But this political principle is merely a small part of the Japanese Doctrine.

It is really the Caribbean policy of the United States which the Japanese have in mind when they speak of the American Monroe Doctrine. Their references are all to the relations of the United States to Mexico, Cuba, Panama and Nicaragua. The Caribbean policy was first officially differentiated from the Monroe Doctrine by Secretary of State Hughes in 1923. But from the beginning of our history the American people have felt both a greater interest in, and a greater responsibility for, the Latin American republics in this region than for those more distantly situated.

Between the Japanese Monroe Doctrine and the American Caribbean policy there are both similarities and differences. There is a certain similarity between the general situation of Japan in relation to Manchuria and China and of the United States in relation to Mexico and the countries of the Caribbean. Both the United States and Japan are strong Powers facing countries which are weak in political organization and military strength and which are torn by frequent civil war. Both are capitalistic and industrialized, in contrast with their neighboring lands which are essentially agricultural. Both have shown administrative and organizing ability of a high order. Both have national interests, strategic and commercial, which they regard as vital — the United States, the Panama Canal; Japan, the South Manchuria Railway. Both have very large investments: the United States approximately $3,293,000,000 (1929) in Mexico and the republics of the Caribbean (not including Venezuela or Colombia); Japan between $800,000,000 and $1,000,000,000 (the yen reckoned at par) in Manchuria.

In view of these factors, the United States and Japan have developed policies which have certain points of likeness. Both are determined to prevent foreign aggression or control in the respective regions in which they are especially interested. Both have announced that they feel a measure of responsibility for a minimum degree of peace and order — a responsibility which other Powers have appeared to recognize in the case of the United States, but have not recognized in the case of Japan. Both propose to give reasonable and necessary protection to their vested interests and to their nationals and their property. And both have used military force from time to time to carry out their policies.

The Japanese insist that their military action in Korea and in
Manchuria and northern China has also been similar to the military action of the United States in the Caribbean. They maintain that they have merely been applying the "police power doctrine" of President Theodore Roosevelt. They claim that in overthrowing the Chinese Government in Manchuria, Japan was abating a neighborhood nuisance, as the United States did when it overthrew the Spanish Government in Cuba; that in recognizing the independence of Manchukuo, they were following the example of the United States in its recognition of Panama; and that their entire course of action in Manchuria has been in line with the American policy in the Caribbean region as manifested by American military interventions in Mexico, Nicaragua, Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

Although there are certain similarities between the respective positions, policies and actions of the United States and Japan there are also decided differences. The position of Japan in Asia in certain important respects fails to parallel that of the United States in America. The United States is a vast territory with a great population vis-à-vis a dozen Caribbean republics, each with a relatively small area and population. Japan, on the other hand, is a country with a relatively small area and population vis-à-vis the vast territory and great population of China. An attitude which therefore appears natural for the United States to take toward the Caribbean states does not appear natural for Japan to take toward China.

As to the principles contained in the Japanese Monroe Doctrine, some of the most important of them have no counterpart in the American policy. The doctrine of the right to live, the life line, and economic expansion are exclusively Japanese. The United States does not need to use military force to induce the Caribbean republics to permit American capital to find profitable investment. The doors are voluntarily wide open. It does not possess or seek an exclusive economic concession in any Latin American republic; it has never asked that the railroads, the foreign capital, or the mineral resources should be reserved for American citizens. Nor has it demanded that any Latin American country should open its natural resources against its will. Nor do there appear frequent statements in the American press that the status quo in the Caribbean should be changed to the economic and political advantage of the United States.

The outstanding instances of American military action in the
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Caribbean, whatever points of similarity they may have to those of Japan in Manchuria, certainly differ from them in important respects. Even in regard to Panama, where the early recognition by the American Government has been severely criticized both at home and abroad, there were important differences: the United States at least violated no international treaties, and acted in accordance with the desires of the local population. In Cuba the vital fact is that the United States, after driving out the Spanish Government at the cost of a war, and then organizing a new administration, turned the island over to the Cubans and withdrew. If the Japanese should follow the same course in Manchuria—if after establishing a new government they should restore the political and economic control of the country to its people, and then withdraw under terms and conditions similar to those under which the United States withdrew from Cuba—world opinion would be much more favorable to Japan. In Mexico, after the United States had felt it necessary to effect a military occupation of Vera Cruz in 1914, it accepted the proffered mediation of Argentina, Brazil and Chile, and, as a consequence, withdrew its troops. The following year, when conditions in Mexico were anarchic, the American Government convened a conference of six Latin American states and agreed with them upon joint action. Later, when the Mexican Government entered upon a definite course of legislation—aimed at Americans—to restrict foreign economic opportunities in Mexico, the United States Government accepted the legislation, provided only that it should not be retroactive or confiscatory.

In contrasting the American Caribbean policy and the Japanese Monroe Doctrine, it is particularly important to consider the essential purposes of the two. On examination they appear fundamentally different. Although not every action taken by the United States in the Caribbean can be completely justified, its policy, nevertheless, particularly in recent years, is clear. In addition to the usual duty to protect American life and property, it aims to help the backward Caribbean countries to establish and maintain conditions of stability and prosperity. The United States does not wish to seize territory, directly or indirectly, or to assume political or economic control. And when it has seemed necessary to intervene in some revolution-tossed land, it has effected the necessary reorganization and has then withdrawn. This has been its history, frequently repeated, in Mexico, Cuba,
Nicaragua, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The policy of the United States is to maintain the status quo in the Caribbean. The Japanese Monroe Doctrine, if it may be judged by the action of the Japanese Government and the statements of many Japanese leaders, has aimed to overthrow the status quo in Manchuria to Japan's own advantage. As for the present Manchurian situation, there is no parallel in the Caribbean. To make one, it would be necessary to imagine that the total population of the ten Latin American republics in this region (not including Colombia and Venezuela) was all in northern Mexico. If the United States should make an unjustified military occupation of this imaginary northern Mexico containing 30,000,000 people, overthrow the administration, organize a movement for independence, set up a new government, control it by several hundred American officials and advisers, maintain it by an American army, extend its territory by a military campaign, and take over its railroads and public utilities — then the United States would be doing in the Caribbean essentially what Japan has done in Manchuria, a course of action which many Japanese justify on the basis of their Monroe Doctrine.

Finally, is there any justification whatever for a Japanese Monroe Doctrine? The answer depends upon the definition of that Doctrine. To certain interpretations of it American statesmen have given definite approval. It was President Theodore Roosevelt who suggested to Viscount Kaneko in 1905 that Japan should establish a Japanese Monroe Doctrine for Asia; but he clearly had in mind merely the protection of the Orient from European encroachments. Secretary Bryan in 1915 officially recognized that "territorial contiguity creates special relations between Japan and these territories" (South Manchuria and Eastern Inner Mongolia); and Secretary Lansing in 1917 recognized that "Japan has special interests in China, particularly in the part to which her possessions are contiguous." Ambassador Castle in 1930 said that "Japan must be and will be the guardian of peace in the Pacific." These and other similar recognitions of certain principles contained in the Japanese Monroe Doctrine were all postulated upon the assumption that the Doctrine would not be used for aggressive purposes.

For many of the claims which the Japanese are making upon the basis of their Monroe Doctrine there appears to be no adequate justification. They are not entitled to exercise paramount
interest in China, or guardianship, or leadership to such a degree as to interfere with the free initiative of other Powers. In some respects, to be sure, Japan has a great superiority over China; but in other respects she is inferior, particularly in potentialities. Should China, with her vast territory, her great population, and her able people, develop a stable and reasonably strong government, then the Japanese Monroe Doctrine would at once disappear; for China has the making of a world Power greater than Japan.

There are other Powers also which have close and important relations with China, long antedating those of Japan. They cannot be expected to surrender these and merely follow Japan's leadership. Russia has long been deeply interested in its neighbor to the southeast. Great Britain has far greater investments in China proper than has Japan. The United States also regards itself, in the words of Secretary Stimson, "as one of the leading powers on the Pacific Ocean," and "has rested its policy upon an abiding faith in the future of the people of China." America's long and cordial friendship for China, and her great educational and social services to that country, have given it an important position in the discussion of Chinese problems. In view of the historical position of these Powers, there is no justification for a demand that Japan alone should be recognized as the guardian of China.

A Monroe Doctrine for Eastern Asia, such as a liberal Japanese Government would probably formulate, one in harmony with the spirit of Japan as revealed in the period following the Washington Conference, might well receive the recognition of other Powers. The happiest solution of the Far Eastern problem, as the Lytton Report has pointed out, would be a cordial cooperation between China and Japan, based upon mutual agreement and good will. But a Japanese Monroe Doctrine exemplified by the military advance through Manchuria and Jehol, in the face of a hostile China, without regard to the position of other Powers, and in violation of international treaties, is difficult to justify. In fact, the present issue between Japan and the other states of the world boils down in large measure to Japan's demand that she be granted a free hand in Manchuria and to the refusal of the League of Nations and the United States to accept the full consequences of what the Japanese call their Monroe Doctrine.