



For two hundred years, the Monroe Doctrine has been the cornerstone of US foreign policy. But for the last century, it has been plagued by a fundamental contradiction, one that imperils US security, writes Joseph E. Fallon.

The context for issuing the Monroe Doctrine was the need to establish a defensive perimeter around the US for protection against interventions by hostile European powers.

The paradox is that it was proposed to President Madison by British Foreign Minister George Canning who advocated "the United States and Britain jointly announce their opposition to further European intervention in the Americas."

However, on the advice of US Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, the Monroe Doctrine was promulgated as a unilateral declaration of the US by President James Monroe in his seventh annual message to Congress on December 2, 1823.

The Monroe Doctrine employed geography, not only of terrain but of distance, to guarantee the security of the US. Its foreign policy combined what became known in the 20th Century as "geopolitics" - "the geographic influences on power relationships in international relations", and "strategic depth" – "the distances between the front lines or battle sectors and the combatants' industrial core areas, capital cities, heartlands, and other key centers of population or military production."

For the first two decades of its existence, geography had placed the US in a vice - "a tool with

two parts [London and Madrid] that can be moved together...so that an object [the US] can be held firmly between them." The British Empire to the north threatened the US economy by its command of the seas. The Spanish Empire to the south and west threatened the US economy by its occupation of the port of New Orleans. "[W]ithout controlling New Orleans - the Mississippi's gateway to the ocean - [American] farmers would not have access to world markets." The US economy would be strangled, which is what Spain tried to do in 1784 when it closed the Mississippi River to US trade and commerce.

Ignoring the boundaries of the US established by the 1783 Treaty of Paris, whereby the Mississippi River was recognized as its western border, London and Madrid sought to confine the US to a sliver of land sandwiched between the Atlantic Ocean and the Appalachian Mountains. Deprived of two-thirds of its internationally recognised territory, which contained rich farmland, and denied access to the Mississippi River and the Great Lakes, the US could be made economically unviable.

If the US was to survive, it had to break this geopolitical squeeze. To do so, it first had to exercise control over the land between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. This was achieved by pioneers settling the frontier, a migration facilitated by a network of rivers: The Ohio, the Arkansas, and the Tennessee, which empty into the Mississippi.

With the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the US acquired strategic depth. It was able to expand west and following the Missouri River to reach the Pacific Ocean. This would outflank the British whose presence in "Canada" was concentrated in the east along Lake Erie, Lake Ontario, and the St Lawrence River.

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The Louisiana Territory gave the US control of most of the major rivers and best agricultural lands in North America, confining Spain to central Mexico with the Great American Desert as a natural barrier between them.

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By the Adams-Onis Treaty of 1819, the US obtained Florida from Spain, eliminating the eastern threat to US possession of New Orleans. Now the land bordered by the Atlantic Ocean in the east, the Rocky Mountains in the west, the Great Lakes in the north, and New Orleans in the south was part of the US.

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The reason for issuing the Monroe Doctrine four years later was specific. It was an anticipatory response to the risk posed by the fall of Napoleon to the strategic depth the US had acquired over the previous twenty years.

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Shortly after ratification of the Constitution of the United States in 1789, and for the next quarter of a century, Europe was convulsed by the French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1799), and then the Napoleonic Wars (1800-1815), as France sought to dominate Europe from Lisbon to Moscow.

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At first the wars advanced the security of the US by removing threats posed by France and Spain. Napoleon, forced to abandon his dream of a North American empire, sold New Orleans and the entire Louisiana Territory to the US. Under French occupation since 1808, Madrid no longer posed a threat to the western and southern borders of the US as it ceased to exercise effective authority over many of its colonies in the Western Hemisphere. Those former Spanish colonies also did not pose a threat to the US as most were soon beset by territorial fragmentation and political instability.

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However, as the European wars dragged on the US miscalculated. It abandoned neutrality and became a de facto ally of Napoleon. In 1812, seeking to take advantage of London's supposed military near exhaustion as a result of the Napoleonic Wars, the US invaded British North America, the Canadas and the Maritimes. Thomas Jefferson wrote the invasion was to be "the final expulsion of England from the American continent."

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It was a disaster for the US. Its invasion was repulsed. The British counter-attacked, invaded the US, then occupied and set fire to its capital, Washington City. Territory in Maine and on the Great Lakes was lost. In the North, New England States agitated against the war. Believing President Madison's Administration was nearing collapse, Massachusetts Governor Caleb Strong held secret negotiations with the British to conclude a separate peace. Fearing the New England States might secede, President Madison deployed military units to eastern New York State against possible invasion of Massachusetts and Connecticut. Justifying Madison's fears, the Hartford Convention of 1814-1815 adopted a resolution implying New England might secede from the Union.

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"Resolved. - That if the application of these States to the government of the United States, recommended in a foregoing Resolution, should be unsuccessful, and peace should not be concluded and the defense of these States should be neglected, as it has been since the commencement of the war, it will in the opinion of this Convention be expedient for the Legislatures of the several States to appoint Delegates to another Convention, to meet at Boston, in the State of Massachusetts, on the third Thursday of June next with such powers and instructions as the exigency of a crisis so momentous may require."

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Such a call was not new. New England politicians had advocated secession in 1796, 1800, 1803, and 1811.

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Three events averted secession and/or civil war. The "War of 1812" ended. Trade between the New England States and the UK was restored. And General Andrew Jackson defeated the British at the Battle of New Orleans. The victory ensured this port, so essential to the American economy, remained part of the US. A British victory would have likely seen possession of the port transferred to Spain. But now the US had to confront the consequences of the fall of Napoleon.

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Napoleon had been defeated and exiled to Saint Helena, an "island of 47 square miles...in the South Atlantic Ocean, some 1,200 miles from the nearest land." The victorious powers sought to restore the European political order Napoleon had overthrown. For the US, this meant possible intervention by European powers to restore to Spain her lost colonies in the Western Hemisphere or seize those newly independent countries as colonies for themselves. Either scenario envisioned hostile powers again bordering the US.

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Addressed to Europe, the Monroe Doctrine abandoned the aberration of "Mr. Madison's War" and reaffirmed the basic tenet of US foreign policy as set forth in George Washington's Farewell Address of 1796:

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*"The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements, let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop. Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none; or a very remote relation...Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course...Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a situation?...It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances*

*with any portion of the foreign world."*

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The Monroe Doctrine offered Europe a quid pro quo. The US would remain neutral in European affairs and would recognize all existing European colonies in the Western Hemisphere. In return, European Powers would not establish any new colonies in the Western Hemisphere. If they did, the US would consider such an act a threat to its security and respond accordingly.

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In the words of US Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, "[the world] must be familiarized with the idea of considering our proper dominion to be the continent of North America." North America defined US "strategic depth", the distance between hostile powers and the US "industrial core areas, capital cities, heartlands, and other key centers of population or military production." A US, which spanned a continent, would be protected in the east by the Atlantic Ocean, in the west by the Pacific Ocean, in the south by The Great American Desert, and in the north by climate and terrain.

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But the US was not a naval power and so lacked the means to enforce the strategic depth it sought with the Monroe Doctrine. If the Monroe Doctrine was to be implemented, the US would have to rely on the British Navy for enforcement, which it did.

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This was ironic, since the outstanding feature of US foreign policy from 1783 to 1895 was its aggressive, anti-British bias. It was characterized by repeated threats of war against the UK over "Canada" and Central America in 1839, 1844-1848, 1849-1850, 1852, 1854, 1856, 1859,

and 1894; and over London's recognition of the Southern Confederacy as a belligerent in the American Civil War, 1861-65.

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In 1895, The Great Rapprochement between the US and the UK resulted in the great contradiction of the Monroe Doctrine. The objective of the Monroe Doctrine ensuring no hostile power bordered the US was achieved. But the cost was abandoning the Monroe Doctrine's pledge the US would not intervene in European affairs.

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Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, another contradiction of the Monroe Doctrine has emerged. Washington refuses to recognise that securing defensive parameters is as legitimate an objective for Russia as it is for the US.

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Instead, the US promotes the expansion of NATO to the borders of Russia despite assurances made to Soviet President Gorbachev in 1991 that an expansion would never happen. The US backed the overthrow of democratically elected governments in Georgia and Ukraine because they were perceived as pro-Russian. The late US National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski called for abolishing Russia and replacing it with three strategically vulnerable states, a Russia confined to eastern Europe, Siberia, and a Far Eastern Republic. Any response by Moscow to these actions threatening its strategic depth or territorial integrity is termed by Washington as an act of aggression.

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The peril to the Monroe Doctrine is not Russia. The peril is that US fixation on Russia has

enabled China to emerge unchallenged as a threat to the US in the Pacific and in the Western Hemisphere.

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Beijing has occupied and militarised the disputed islands in the South China Sea. Its enlarged and modernized navy has "broken" the island chains created by the US in the Cold War to prevent Chinese expansion into the Pacific. In war games conducted in 2020, the Pentagon concluded China could defeat the US in battle and even threaten the strategic US territory of Guam in the western Pacific.

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In addition, China's growing influence in Latin America through economic investments presents a clear and present danger to the political, economic, and military security of the US.

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As Time magazine reported on February 4, 2021 : "The U.S. and China Are Battling for Influence in Latin America, and the Pandemic Has Raised the Stakes":

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*"For China, the investment brings political returns. In the past four years, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador and Panama have each switched their recognition from Taiwan to China. Gaining these kinds of alliances in Latin America offers Beijing invaluable votes at the U.N. and backing for Chinese appointees to multinational institutions. It also empowers China to embed standard-setting technology companies like Huawei, ZTE, Dahua and Hikvision—all sanctioned by the U.S.—in regional infrastructure, allowing Beijing to dictate the rules of commerce for a generation."*

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Lack of an effective US response to China's intervention in the Western Hemisphere reflects the epitaph for US foreign policy by President Obama's Secretary of State John Kerry in 2013: "The era of the Monroe Doctrine is over."

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*You can read his article on "Breaking the Island Chains" and other works at [www.defenceviewpoints.co.uk](http://www.defenceviewpoints.co.uk)*

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