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# ***Crises and strategic perimeters***

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*Dr Bell examines the concept of strategic perimeters (as opposed to spheres of influence), how it has changed over time since the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, how it can precipitate international crises and how it is playing out in the contemporary, multi-polar world.*

The crisis the world went through over Georgia in 2008 was a sort of reverse mirror-image of the most important crisis of the Cold War, that over the Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962. That does not mean dismissing the obvious immediate cause, the tension between Georgia and Russia over South Ossetia, but that issue would not have been dangerous to the world without the tension between Moscow and Washington over the Bush plan to install the components of a United States missile system in Poland and the Czech Republic. The future of oil pipelines, especially the BTC (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan) pipeline which takes oil from the Caspian to the Mediterranean coast of Turkey and passes close to the Georgian capital, perhaps was also involved because of the global worries over oil supplies. But the real reason why the episode brought back memories of Cuba in 1962 was that in each case what was central to the crisis was a decision by the chief policy maker of one great power to intrude on the 'strategic perimeter' of another.

In 1962, that was Khrushchev installing Soviet missiles in Cuba, because Castro feared a United States invasion. Recently, it has been the United States installing missiles inside the Russian strategic perimeter on the much less plausible allegation that Iran might some day feel emboldened to launch missiles at Europe. Luckily, the world does not currently live on a knife-edge of tension as it did during the Cold War, so the crisis was relatively rapidly defused. But on the other hand, the world is a lot more complex now than it was during the Cold War. Instead of two superpowers glowering at each other in a bipolar strategic balance, we now have a world of six great powers: the United States, the European Union, China, Russia, India and Japan. All of them, and a lot of other governments including Australia's, have strategic perimeters that they worry about, more or less audibly. The potential of those worries to precipitate war-bearing crises between the great powers is the focus of this essay. And it is particularly important now, because a complex set of new strategic perimeters is about to emerge in an area that would until recently have seemed very improbable, the Arctic.

## **Strategic Perimeters**

That brings up the point of considering what exactly is a strategic perimeter, who defines it, how it may be

adjusted over time, and how the potentialities for crisis inherent in the concept, especially in the case of the great powers, may be reduced, or at least contained. The first point to note is the concept should not be confused with that of a sphere of influence. The distinction is easiest to see in the Chinese case. China nowadays has a sphere of influence in both Latin America and Central Africa, but not even the most ambitious Chinese strategist is likely to define China's strategic perimeter as running through those regions. As a brief definition of a strategic perimeter for any country, one might describe it as a geographic zone in which the strategic capacities of other powers are a matter of watchful concern to the armed forces and the government.

The most assertive and ambitious historic claim for a strategic perimeter was the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, in which the United States, despite it having not much of a navy at the time, in effect claimed the entire western hemisphere as its strategic perimeter, posting a 'keep out' notice to the great powers of the time. That was a unilateral political decision, not in any way based on consultation with other governments or peoples of the area claimed – nor was much note taken of international law, diplomatic convention or United States ability to enforce the edict. United States naval capacity was quite low until decades later. So, all in all, the doctrine was a model for many such claims in times to come. The long-term influence of the doctrine, as seen even today in relations between the United States and its southern neighbours [Venezuela for instance at the moment] is already a subject of whole libraries of scholarly works, many of them viewing it with justified dismay.

## **Changing Relationships among the Six Great Powers**

But to get back to the recent crisis over Georgia in the currently fast-transforming and economically preoccupied world of six great powers, the fact that it was the President of France who took the first diplomatic initiative of the crisis, in his capacity as the temporary president of the European Union, was in my view a symbol of that recently changed reality – though the crisis was also essentially limited by the United States Defense Secretary saying early and bluntly, that there was no prospect of United States military forces

being involved, except on a humanitarian mission. Georgia's then president, Mikheil Saakashvili, is entitled to reflect bitterly on the candid observation of a previous United States Secretary of State that the great powers do not commit suicide to further the national interests of minor allies.

The one surprise in the United States policies during most of the George W. Bush presidency was that Chinese sensitivities in such matters seemed to have been much more carefully considered than Russian ones. That, however, was certainly not the case during the first seven months of the Bush first term. In fact, China and the United States then appeared on a collision course, especially during the episode of the forcing down of a United States surveillance aircraft by the Chinese armed forces on Hainan Island. The aircrew were only briefly detained, but the aircraft itself was held for much longer. [Chinese technologists must have found the opportunity for close inspection quite a godsend.]

But the whole United States-China relationship was transformed by '9/11'. Once the policy-makers in Washington had decided on the campaign in Afghanistan, not even the most dedicated China 'hawk' there could deny the overwhelming strategic necessity for Chinese goodwill, at least for the time being. United States troops would have to be deployed and supplied either through Pakistan or Central Asia, preferably both, and Chinese influence in those areas meant that Chinese co-operation was vital. As the years went on, it also became clear that Chinese co-operation was crucial in restraining the nuclear ambitions of North Korea. Even the developing economic co-dependence of the two economies imposed consensus. China needed the vast United States market to build up its now enormous foreign currency reserves, but the United States needed the flow of cheap Chinese goods to restrain inflationary pressures at home.

That economic bond so far has had no parallel in the case of Russia. The Europeans are a closer and more obvious market for the oil and gas that Moscow has to sell. In time, however, if the oil shortage goes on for as long as has been forecast, and future sources available to Russia in the Arctic are as abundant as some people hope, liquefied natural gas from Russia via the new Arctic route to the United States Pacific coast might have some cost advantages. By that time, the strategic perimeter of China might be the one in question.

### **The United States and China**

To understand how China has been regarded in Washington, we must look at how the definition of strategic perimeters has evolved since 1948. By that year, the United States had given up hope of a Kuomintang victory in the Chinese civil war. Mao's forces stood ready for him to proclaim victory: the remnants of the opposing army were preparing to retreat to Taiwan, still then called Formosa and defined as a province of China. In those circumstances, the

State Department prepared a study on future United States policy which was issued in due course as the Acheson White Paper of 1949. Its prime strategic implication was a United States withdrawal from the Asian mainland, in favour of a strategic perimeter based on the 'island chain' from the Aleutians via Japan and Guam, down to Australia. South Korea was not within that perimeter, nor was Taiwan, still then, as I said, regarded as a province of the mainland....

Unfortunately, when the policy changes suggested became known to Kim Il Sung in North Korea [a protégé of the Russians rather than the Chinese], it inspired him to ask Stalin for a green light to invade South Korea, and Stalin duly obliged. Northern troops moved south in June 1950. Since United States troops were still in occupation, it was inevitable that war would result, and President Truman in that crisis decided that Taiwan as well as South Korea should come within the United States strategic perimeter. That meant the status of Taiwan became a possible future cause of war between the United States and China.

That 1950 Truman decision about Taiwan has now stood for over 60 years and has, theoretically at least, continued to present a possible *casus belli* between the United States and China for all that period. But time has eroded any such prospect now to less relevance, provided that China continues to play its cards prudently. There is some evidence that the United States strategic perimeter may be in process of very gradually moving away from the Asian mainland, back towards the 'island chain' as in the Acheson White Paper of 1949, and with echoes also of Nixon's Guam Doctrine of 1969, given the massive build-up currently of United States strategic capabilities on Guam.

The consequent erosion, assuming it persists, of two possible occasions for war between China and the United States over the last sixty plus years [Taiwan and South Korea] is an encouraging instance of a factor in international relationships expressed in the phrase 'a war delayed may be a war avoided'. It does not always work: sometimes a war delayed is one entered on worse terms. But in the Taiwan case especially, social and economic change in the two societies have made it logical. The Taiwanese in their millions have opted to work on the mainland, marry on the mainland and invest on the mainland. In 2008, they voted for the old Kuomintang party which has always insisted on a 'one China' policy. At present, the emphasis on both sides of the Taiwan Straits is on maintenance of the *status quo*, but given the economic convergence of the two societies, it seems reasonable to assume a gradual change to political consensus.

If Taiwan does not want to be a battlefield, neither does South Korea. The enormous size of the Chinese economy and China's growing strategic clout, carry the implication that Beijing at some time in the future may feel entitled to claim that it is no more appropriate that the United States should be established inside its strategic perimeter [in which they obviously would want

to include not only Taiwan but the Korean peninsula as a whole] than that Chinese forces should have a similar role in, for instance, Mexico.

### **Sovereign Moral Rights of Small Powers**

That brings up, of course, the complex question of the sovereign moral rights of small powers whose geographical position unfortunately makes them of interest to great powers who may at some future date be verging toward hostilities. It is already of painful importance in Europe, with the Ukraine, for instance, developing ambition to be a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) as well as the European Union.

To my mind there is a possible solution in that particular context. Membership of the European Union offers all the economic advantages of integration into Europe, without carrying the strategic commitments and implications of NATO. A bargaining process in which Russia conceded real political and cultural independence to its 'near abroad' in return for NATO abandoning the project [one of Bush's worst] of planting United States missile systems there should be tried. But that is now a concept for the Obama Administration in Washington; as is reconciling the security of Japan with the growing power of China.

Another also may be the new issue of competing claims in the Arctic. Five countries – Russia, the United States, Canada, Norway and Denmark – have some basis of claim there. Economically, there is an assumption in some quarters that the area may contain 90 billion barrels of oil, and more of gas, but of course Russia has marked geographic and technological advantages in

extracting those resources and may not be inclined to share them. Under the Law of the Sea convention, the arguments may revolve round what is called the Lomonosov Ridge, part of what the Russians claim as their continental shelf. May be in time the successful Antarctic settlement could provide a better model. The Inuit people and the animals of the Arctic are among the first victims of climate change, since the ice-shelf has been melting fast each summer.

### **Conclusion**

The Obama Administration in Washington has an even more complex agenda than Truman faced at the beginning of the Cold War. But it need not go again along the path to Cold War. Prudent and creative diplomacy to sort out the issues arising about strategic perimeters in the missile age is what is required. Luckily, the two dominant crises of the moment, over economic and environmental issues, which involve Russia and China as well as the rest of us, also impose close global cooperation.

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