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The Monroe Doctrine was a central pillar of U.S. foreign policy for nearly two centuries. Despite being a bulwark, it was certainly malleable. Initially designed to ward off further European colonization in the Americas, it was later used to justify U.S. territorial expansion, support military interventions in the Caribbean region, and maintain a Cold War-era anti-Communist consensus in the western hemisphere. Although Secretary of State John Kerry in November 2013 announced that “the era of the Monroe Doctrine is over,” debates about its significance continue.¹

Juan Pablo Scarfi’s article focuses on shifting interpretations of the Monroe Doctrine at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the aforementioned U.S. military interventions in the Caribbean region proliferated. Ostensibly, such measures were undertaken to protect Latin America, not only from European powers but also from Latin Americans themselves. President Theodore Roosevelt’s December 1904 ‘corollary’ to the Monroe Doctrine was the most famous articulation of this justification, one grounded in racist presumptions of non-whites’ unfitness for self-government. Of course, these interventions supported U.S. strategic and commercial interests above all else and signaled a new phase in the development of U.S. expansionism.

As Scarfi insightfully argues, Latin American politicians, jurists, and intellectuals challenged this hegemony in subtle but important ways by co-opting the Monroe Doctrine, the primary U.S. policy supporting interventionism. By grounding their interpretations in burgeoning notions of Pan-Americanism, these regional elites – including some in the United States – shifted prevailing conceptions of the Monroe Doctrine in four ways: “1) from a principle of intervention to one of non-intervention; 2) from a unilateral to a multilateral doctrine; 3) from a political to an international law principle; 4) from a national to a hemispheric

principle” (189). Such reimaginings reached fruition with the non-interventionist pledges of the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration during the 1930s.

Scarfi’s article sheds much-needed light for U.S. audiences on Latin American perspectives about the Monroe Doctrine and U.S. interventionism in the early-twentieth century. Perhaps the most important finding – one that is more implied than explicitly articulated – is how these regional leaders tried to tame the so-called ‘Colossus of the North’ by using its own creation. These reinterpretations served to blunt the interventionist edges of the Monroe Doctrine that the Roosevelt Corollary sharpened.

Politicians such as Luis María Drago of Argentina and jurists such as Alejandro Álvarez of Chile were among the primary drivers of these interpretations that de-emphasized the centrality of the United States both in maintaining regional order and in defending Latin America from extra-hemispheric forces. Drago, for example, famously argued in 1902 that a foreign country should not resort to military interventions to recoup unpaid public debts, as Great Britain, Germany, and Italy were doing in Venezuela that year. Instead, he maintained, nation-states must work through legal channels to reclaim what they were rightfully owed.

According to Scarfi, the Drago Doctrine was important for two reasons: it “extended the scope of the Monroe Doctrine from a national principle to a continental policy of absolute non-intervention” and it made a compelling case for the United States “to adapt itself to non-interventionist and multilateral standards” (200). As the Roosevelt Corollary illustrated two years later, however, the U.S. government was not immediately swayed by Drago’s position. Roosevelt subscribed to a unilateralist interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine, one that would maintain the United States’ freedom of action that included the right to military intervention.

Eventually, the U.S. government would come to rue these interventions and occupations – conducted in places such as Mexico, Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic – and see things Drago’s way. But that would not happen for another three decades.

Álvarez meanwhile provided another critical interpretation, one rooted in the burgeoning field of international law. As Scarfi shows, Álvarez saw America – in the hemispheric sense, not just the United States – as fundamentally different from Europe in terms of legal traditions. Whereas Europe was based on notions of “monarchical solidarity, political equilibrium, and intervention,” the American tradition was grounded more on a “general idea of solidarity, non-intervention, and state independence” (206). Álvarez maintained that the Monroe Doctrine was the “foundational basis” that affirmed this distinction and “was an authentic principle of international law” (207).

Álvarez’s argument, particularly its veneration of the Monroe Doctrine, was quite palatable to U.S. officials. His interpretation caught the attention of Elihu Root and James Brown Scott. Both men strongly advocated for adherence to international law during the early-twentieth century as a more effective way to bring about order and stability to the hemispheric system. Scott, a professor of law and advisor to Root, met with Álvarez in 1911. A year later, they were among the coterie that formed the American Institute of International Law (AIIL) in an attempt to institutionalize their promotion of international law. Root, a corporate lawyer who served as Secretary of War and Secretary of State, joined the AIIL as Honorary President. He did, however, have some reservations about Álvarez’s interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine. Root still saw it as a unilateral tool exclusive to the United States and not a “joint or common declaration by American states or any number of them” (212). And although the Monroe Doctrine was more accurately a statement of political principle – rather than one of international law as Álvarez claimed – it was based “upon the right of self-protection and that right is recognized by international law” (212).
By the 1930s, the debates about the nature of the Monroe Doctrine effectively shifted broader understandings of the policy. Pan-American conferences held in 1933 and 1936 produced declarations on hemispheric security, multilateral cooperation, and non-intervention. The Pan-Americanization of the Monroe Doctrine helped set the stage for these breakthroughs that scaled back U.S. military engagements in the region.

A broader study, perhaps, could shed light on how politicians, jurists, and intellectuals from countries that experienced U.S. interventions interpreted the Monroe Doctrine during this era. Jay Sexton, for example, references a proposal from Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz that “called for the states of the Americas to collectively enforce the Monroe Doctrine.” Scarfi makes no mention of this view. Instead, the article focuses on leaders from South America, where U.S. policies took a distinctly different approach, one that was more diplomatic and less interventionist. Moreover, additional narrative context would have helped to explain U.S. officials’ willingness to support Latin American interpretations of the Monroe Doctrine, in particular the costly and ineffective interventions in the Caribbean region that produced little stability and more anti-Americanism than Washington had bargained for. Over time, U.S. policymakers came to see this militant foreign policy as counter-productive. It was certainly an important factor that would have made Pan-American interpretations of the Monroe Doctrine – that is, sharing responsibility among other nations to bring about order and stability in the hemisphere – much more palatable to U.S. officials.

Nevertheless, Scarfi presents a welcome addition to the historiography of the Monroe Doctrine. His article builds on some of the key recent works on the subject by Sexton and Gretchen Murphy, as well as foundational studies such as Arthur P. Whitaker’s. Scarfi’s most significant contribution, though, is bringing in the voices and perspectives of Latin American jurists and politicians. Drawing from published primary sources, including the public writings of the principal actors under consideration, he successfully enriches Diplomatic History readers’ depth of understanding about this contentious policy during a pivotal time in U.S.-Latin American relations.


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