

LIMITS OF SOVEREIGNTY

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"A state with a hierarchical structure is needed to keep the peace between conflicting members of society. But there is no world state to keep countries at bay when they have profound disagreements. The reality is that the structure of the international political system is anarchic, not hierarchic. Anarchic does not mean chaotic. It simply means that there is no ultimate arbiter. In an anarchic system, the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.

States can never be certain about the intention of other states. This means that the best way to survive is to be as powerful as possible relative to competitors. States therefore aim to maximise the military assets they control. This zero-sum competition for power, which sometimes leads to war, is what makes international politics a ruthless and treacherous business."

John Mearsheimer, University of Chicago

"The price of liberty, say the English, is eternal vigilance. But to be vigilant one must be aware of one's rights. It is important, then, to know what our freedom is founded on, and how far the state has authority to restrict it. In other words, strict limits must be placed on the right of one man to rule another. This indeed is the domain of politics."

Pierre Elliott Trudeau

We must distinguish between two types of sovereignty – domestic and international. In domestic matters, the Emir of Qatar has more autonomy (or sovereignty) than the President of the United States, simply because the American society has placed stricter limits *"on the right of one man to rule another."*

In international affairs, however, the issue of sovereignty is more complex. The three major military powers – America, China and Russia – are the most autonomous, but even their sovereignty has limits. All of these three powers have spheres of influence, defined by either geography or economic interests. Smaller states, which think the era of "spheres of influence" is over are destined for serious trouble.

Let's imagine that Canada and China – two sovereign states – decide to build a Chinese military base in Canada. America would never let this happen. Not much has changed since the Monroe Doctrine¹ was enacted in the nineteenth century. Why wouldn't Russia or China have the equivalent version of the Monroe Doctrine?

We must also remember that major military powers can be above the law, and they often are. The empirical evidence on this is crystal clear. Therefore, smaller countries living within the spheres of influence of major military powers must make every effort to avoid irritating those powers.

Singapore is currently in an awkward position. It is caught in the crossfires of China and America, and Singapore's current Prime Minister has openly expressed his concerns in the Foreign Affairs article entitled **"The Endangered Asian Century"** published in August 2020. For small countries, the worst place to be is in the crossfire of two major military powers.



¹ [The Monroe Doctrine in 21st Century](#)

Conclusion: The strategy on sovereignty consists of three parts. **First**, a modern, professional well-educated military. **Second**, a wise, well-educated foreign-relations team, which will establish and maintain trustworthy relations with the major military power of the region. **Third**, correctly distribute the domestic sovereignty between various institutions.

David Tavadian
Founding Partner

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