



## Squaring the Circle on Spheres of Influence: The Overlooked Benefits

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## Squaring the Circle on Spheres of Influence: The Overlooked Benefits

Whether spheres of influence stabilize or disrupt international security and how the United States should respond to efforts by other actors to establish spheres is at the forefront of contemporary grand strategy debates. For many in Washington, the answer is clear: spheres of influence are dangerous and destabilizing relics of centuries past which have no place in the modern world. In this rendering, spheres contradict American values, threaten to upend the liberal international order, promote great power competition, and ultimately destabilize international politics writ large. And at a time when many in Washington claim that Moscow and Beijing are crafting their own spheres in Eastern Europe and Asia, the policy implications of this position are clear: if a choice must be made between opposing or acknowledging these efforts, the United States must actively resist their creation.

Nevertheless, both history and theory offer reasons to be skeptical of this widespread opprobrium. For one, the historical record for recognizing another great power's sphere shows mixed results. With the benefit of hindsight, for example, we can see that attempts by Britain and the Soviet Union to satiate Hitler's territorial ambitions by granting Germany a limited sphere of influence—first, the Sudetenland at the Munich Conference in 1938 and then Poland in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939—were strategic disasters.

At other junctures, however, great powers struck deals regarding spheres of influence that stabilized interstate relations and, at times, helped protect smaller states from predation. Even a cursory glance at history reveals this

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trend. For example, the nineteenth century's Concert of Europe—Europe's longest period of great power peace before the postwar era—rested on Europe's major powers creating and then accommodating one another's spheres of influence. Likewise, historians such as Marc Trachtenberg and Lloyd Gardner have persuasively shown that the stability of Europe's Cold War order relied on separate American and Soviet spheres, and the understanding that each superpower would each manage its sphere helped limit events that might roil international politics.<sup>1</sup>

Insofar as this period also corresponded with the creation of a “liberal order” within the US-led bloc, it is also difficult to claim that all spheres are inherently damaging to weaker states. Above all, one of the hallmarks of US foreign policy since the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 has been the creation and maintenance of an American sphere of influence in the Western Hemisphere. Not only did this help protect the newly independent states within the sphere from being recolonized by European great powers—albeit at the cost of American dominance—it also reduced potential points of friction between the United States and those great powers. And while the United States has a long history of intervention into states within its sphere, there have been remarkably few interstate wars between states in Latin America—a “long peace” that some scholars attribute partly to American dominance.<sup>2</sup>

Given the historic record, treating all spheres of influence as axiomatically bad for international stability makes little sense. Instead, policymakers need to consider the costs and benefits to spheres, and how these vary across time and space. With the downsides widely appreciated, this paper thus performs two tasks. First, we underline the potential stabilizing effects of spheres on international relations. Although not without risk, we argue that spheres carry the potential to help stabilize relations among the great powers by (1) creating buffer zones and strategic depth that can limit the intensity of security competitions; (2) clarifying state interests and so reducing the risk of miscalculation; and (3) allowing greater room for negotiation and diplomacy when interests conflict.

**Under certain circumstances, spheres can help stabilize great power relations**

Second, we evaluate the potential benefits of spheres against their prospective costs by applying our logic to contemporary world affairs and, especially, a possible Russian sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. On

balance, we find that a spheres arrangement could yield major benefits for Washington by improving relations and reducing the likelihood of a major war. Meanwhile, the potential costs—including the sacrifice to US influence

and the risk that Moscow will overturn a spheres arrangement—are more limited than opponents acknowledge.

Before proceeding further, three caveats are in order. First, our goal in this article is not to advocate for contemporary spheres of influence, but rather to articulate the potential costs and benefits of such an arrangement. Second, outlining a potential spheres settlement does not legitimize the right of Russia or any state to violate the sovereignty of weaker states within or beyond their sphere. Spheres of influence should not be viewed as normative propositions justifying a great power's right to dominate a region. Instead, spheres of influence are descriptive statements reflecting the geographic boundaries wherein states are unwilling or unable to challenge another's dominance, given both the balance of power and balance of interests. As researcher Emma Ashford rightly puts it, spheres are thus “a measure of the practical limitations of a state's power and political influence.”<sup>3</sup> Finally, and related to the preceding, states can still pass judgment on and respond to another great power's bad behavior within its sphere. The key to a spheres settlement is that in reacting, these actors do not attempt to revise the boundaries of another's sphere.

The remainder of this paper proceeds in four sections. First, we define spheres of influence and lay out the conventional wisdom regarding their destabilizing effects. Second, we lay out a competing argument about how spheres can be a force for peace. The third section then applies our arguments to contemporary policy debates regarding Russia's bid for a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Finally, we conclude by outlining the broader implications of our argument for relations with China and US grand strategy.

## The Conventional Wisdom

Spheres of influence refer to territories where one powerful state implicitly or explicitly exerts dominant political influence over the foreign policy of weaker states within the area and seeks to exclude other great powers from extensive involvement with those actors.<sup>4</sup> Three elements of this definition are worth noting. First, spheres are fundamentally about great powers shaping other states' *foreign* policy. This distinguishes spheres from empires, in which great powers also determine the *domestic* policy of actors in their orbit.<sup>5</sup> Second, spheres of influence do not necessarily preclude other great powers from exerting *any* influence within the same space. Rather, the hallmark of spheres is that a single great power has primary influence; it is the leading—though not necessarily sole—power in an area.<sup>6</sup> Hence, while leading powers may tolerate some limited involvement from other great powers within a sphere in areas such as trade or cultural outreach, they draw the line at actions that would significantly

impact the foreign policy of subordinate states. Finally, while the term may conjure up notions of statesmen in smoke-filled rooms dividing the globe as they see fit, spheres can be formed either through explicit negotiation or implicit bargaining. In other words, spheres need not be formal devices—the key is that different actors understand where their influence ends and another's begins. Setting spheres' boundaries thus requires assessing the relative distribution of power and interests, changes therein, and adjusting one's geopolitical reach accordingly.

Regardless of their form, spheres are traditionally associated with the sorts of *realpolitik* diplomacy that prevailed among the European great powers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Partly as a result, they have

**Spheres are traditionally associated with European great powers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

long been castigated in American foreign policy discussions as destabilizing and imperialistic vestiges of an earlier era that should be excised from world affairs.<sup>7</sup> As far back as World War I, President Woodrow Wilson sought to mobilize the American people to take a more active role in world affairs by condemning spheres of influence.<sup>8</sup> Echoing Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt later praised the

creation of the United Nations in 1945 as fostering “a common ground for peace” that “ought to spell the end of the system of unilateral action, the exclusive alliances, the spheres of influence, the balances of power, and all the other expedients that have been tried for centuries—and have always failed.”<sup>9</sup>

The 21<sup>st</sup> century growth of Russian and Chinese power, meanwhile, has brought renewed criticism of spheres in US policymaking circles.<sup>10</sup> Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, for instance, condemned Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia by declaring that “the United States and our friends and allies ... are confident in our vision for the world ... a world in which great power is defined not by spheres of influence or zero-sum competition, or the strong imposing their will on the weak.”<sup>11</sup> Barack Obama returned to this theme following Russia's 2014 seizure of Crimea, warning that “the days of empire and spheres of influence are over.”<sup>12</sup> Donald Trump similarly denounced Russia and China's attempts to craft spheres of influence,<sup>13</sup> just as Joe Biden now decries spheres of influence for “lock[ing] in divides among nations” and threatening “a more parochial international order.”<sup>14</sup> And in an apt encapsulation of this bipartisan policy consensus, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken recently declared that “one country does not have the right to dictate the policies of another or to tell that country with whom it may associate; one country does not have the right to exert a sphere of influence. That notion should be relegated to the dustbin of history.”<sup>15</sup>

Analysts are equally critical. Tom Wright, for one, claims that a world “organized around regional spheres of influence would be much less stable and encourage revisionist states to test the limits of American resolve.”<sup>16</sup> Hal Brands takes a similar stance, contending that “the United States has resisted the creation of rival spheres of influence for most of its history” such that granting spheres to China and Russia today “would weaken the United States’ geopolitical hand” and produce “a far more dangerous world, divided into competing superpower fiefdoms.”<sup>17</sup> Summarizing this consensus, Robert Kagan baldly avers that “to return to a world of spheres of influence—the world that existed prior to the era of American predominance—is to return to the great power conflicts of past centuries.”<sup>18</sup>

In short, spheres of influence are held up to be highly injurious to international politics writ large, and tellingly, to US national security in particular. Per this narrative, allowing other great powers to seek or create spheres of influence primes international politics for arms races, insecurity spirals, and further attempts at conquest. Should this occur, this interpretation holds that the United States would struggle to remain competitive and face multiple points of friction that might lead to crises and war.

### **How Spheres Can Stabilize Great Power Relations**

Yet, there are good reasons to question the above line of argument. The conventional wisdom is correct that, at times, dominating or attempting to carve out spheres of influence have put states on a collision course with one another. Arguing that spheres cause conflict, however, hinges on a counterfactual: are states more prone to cooperate without spheres? The conventional wisdom says yes, but the logic of this claim is not defined. After all, international politics remains a dangerous business, in which the potential for great powers to threaten one another, trigger insecurity spirals, and provoke crises is ever present. Spheres *may* exacerbate this baseline potential for instability in some instances, but there is no reason to assume that a world with spheres is invariably less stable than a world without them.

Even more importantly, the conventional wisdom overlooks multiple pathways by which spheres may, under certain conditions, stabilize great power relations. First, spheres afford great powers influence over a geographic area beyond their homelands, thereby creating a buffer zone between them and potential rivals. Buffer zones, in turn, can stabilize relations by limiting direct contact with rivals and constraining opportunities for aggression by creating “strategic depth” for both sides.<sup>19</sup> When powerful rivals share a border, they must anxiously guard against any actions from competitors that could potentially threaten their

homeland or vital interests. Consequently, any number of events—shifts in power, military mobilizations, border disputes, or domestic turmoil—can spark crises or counterbalancing.<sup>20</sup> Spheres reduce the intensity of this security competition. With a buffer zone that potential aggressors must first subdue, both sides are less likely to consider their core national interests immediately imperiled by a rival's surprise move. The net effect is to decrease the frequency of crises and moderate the intensity of disputes when they do occur.<sup>21</sup>

Second, spheres can aid deterrence and defense. Once recognized—again, either formally or informally—spheres help clarify state interests and create red lines of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Acknowledging another state's sphere of influence is akin to acknowledging that the other state will respond aggressively to any challenges to their influence therein. This, in turn, decreases the likelihood of crises borne of uncertainty and miscalculation. Moreover, because great power interests are clearer when states have clearly articulated their spheres of influence, states can develop and fine-tune the military forces needed to protect their sphere without posing immediate threats to others.

Third, spheres can pacify relations amongst the subordinate states within them. Because a dominant state polices the foreign policy of subordinate states within its orbit, it can minimize the likelihood of these clients warring with one another. This policing can be accomplished with carrots, like the post-war United States in Western Europe; or sticks, like the post-war Soviet Union in Eastern Europe. Focusing on America's role as a "pacifier" in Western Europe since 1945, for instance, scholar Josef Joffe argues that by guaranteeing the security of subordinate states, Washington encouraged those states not to arm themselves, which in turn moderated the intensity of the security dilemma and eliminated the major "systemic cause of conflict" within the region.<sup>22</sup> In a similar vein, political scientist Ahsan Butt argues that dominant states can provide diplomatic channels for subordinate states to settle their disputes before they escalate to war, and cites this dynamic as an explanation for the surprising historic lack of wars between South American countries.<sup>23</sup> As the number of local crises subsequently diminishes, the international system as a whole may experience fewer conflicts that might draw in other great powers.

Fourth, spheres can limit great power adventurism. Great powers often seek to remake the international system to suit their interests.<sup>24</sup> Spheres afford them a defined space to do so. Dominant states can shape the foreign policy of subordinate states in ways that suit their security and economic interests.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, managing a sphere ties up resources and attention in a state's near abroad. Combined, this reduces the incentive for seeking further gains farther afield.

While the preceding four mechanisms show how spheres can temper security competitions, the final mechanism illustrates how they can also play a positive role for peace. In a world of mutually-understood spheres, great powers can use

concessions over the scope of their spheres as bargaining chips during negotiations with one another. During the Concert of Europe, for instance, the great powers regularly sought territorial compensation from one another in response to shifts in the balance of power among them, most notably at the Congresses of Vienna (1814-15), Congress of Berlin (1878), and via the German-Russian Reinsurance Treaty (1887).<sup>26</sup> These territorial concessions helped the negatively-impacted states accommodate themselves to potentially threatening geopolitical developments by ensuring that their core national interests remained intact. More recently, it could be argued that similar dynamics ended the Cuban Missile Crisis. After all, the deal that ended the crisis—the Soviets removing nuclear weapons from Cuba in exchange for the secret removal of America’s Jupiter missiles in Turkey, a promise not to invade Cuba, and (further afield) the understanding that the US was to oversee West Germany’s military evolution—was essentially a tacit agreement about spheres. Each side accepted changes to the scope and content of its preferred sphere of influence in order to keep the general peace.

**The deal that ended the Cuban Missile Crisis was essentially a tacit agreement about spheres**

### **Settle for Spheres with Russia?**

The preceding discussion carries tremendous implications for contemporary US foreign policy. The conventional wisdom holds that recognizing foreign spheres would be a recipe for disaster. In contrast, our analysis suggests that spheres could potentially have a stabilizing effect on great power relations. In what follows, we thus use the possibility of a Russian sphere in Eastern Europe to discuss potential gains and to evaluate prospective costs. For sure, following Russia’s brutal and thuggish invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the idea of acknowledging a Russian sphere of influence may seem morally repugnant and strategically unwise. Nevertheless, our point is not to advocate for or to precisely define where Russian and American spheres might fall. Rather, our intent is more narrowly to consider what acknowledging spheres of influence as a fact of international life—what we call “a spheres arrangement” or “spheres settlement”—would mean for international stability and US interests in Europe. And here, both the historical drivers of Russo-American security competition and the nature of the Russia challenge suggest that there may be underappreciated benefits to such an arrangement that need to be factored into the US strategy debate.



### **Background to Current Tensions**

For better or worse, Russia believes that it has been locked in an enduring spheres of influence competition with the United States over European security since shortly after the end of the Cold War. In this telling, the Cold War's division of Europe into two stable blocs has been replaced by a consistent campaign led by the United States to expand the western sphere into Russia's via the progressive and sustained enlargement of NATO and, to a lesser extent, the EU. From Moscow's perspective, Washington took advantage of Russia's economic collapse and military weakness following the collapse of the Soviet Union to expand its influence on the continent.<sup>27</sup>

Russian leaders have stridently and consistently pushed back against the growth of the US sphere. In the 1990s, Boris Yeltsin castigated the United States for encouraging Europe's re-division so soon after the Cold War.<sup>28</sup> In 2008, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev protested that the US and its allies should realize that "Russia, like other countries in the world, has regions where it has privileged interests. These are regions where countries with which we have friendly relations are located."<sup>29</sup> And as debates over Ukraine's prospective integration into NATO took off, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov urged the West to realize that "dragging Ukraine to one side, telling it that it needs to choose 'either or,' either with the EU or with Russia, is in fact trying to create such a sphere of influence. That is obvious and no nice words can change that."<sup>30</sup>

Moscow's concern with an expanding American sphere contributed to the progressive collapse of East-West relations and Russia's increasingly aggressive behavior in its near abroad. Two problems were manifest. First, with the United States rejecting the legitimacy of a Russian sphere while seemingly expanding its own, Russian leaders faced fewer reasons to trust Western promises that Russian strategic interests would be respected. Indeed, long before Russia's thuggish invasion of Ukraine put the nail in the coffin of cooperative East-West relations, Russian President Vladimir Putin flagged the issue, noting in 2007 that NATO enlargement "represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?"<sup>31</sup> Second, given this lack of trust, Russian leaders were less inclined to see diplomacy as a way to cooperatively resolve tensions with the West. This explains, for example, the Russian demand during the run-up to the Ukraine war for a formal treaty commitment prohibiting further NATO expansion; private assurances and tacit understandings from Washington would not suffice. With diplomacy off the table, it is unsurprising, though extremely lamentable, that Russia resorted to unilateral action—of which the Ukraine invasion is just the most evocative and horrific manifestation—to advance its interests.

### Evaluating Gains from Spheres

Because spheres settlements reflect a mutual recognition of the distribution of power and interests within a region, it is impossible to say what a Russian sphere would encompass, particularly as the distribution of power (1) is currently being contested in the context of the Ukraine War, (2) will change in the future, and (3) would need to be evaluated in a policy environment where Washington accepted foreign spheres. Purely as a heuristic, however, one could envision a Russian sphere encompassing much of the Caucasus, Belarus, some portion of Ukrainian territory, and potentially other areas along Russia's periphery. Rather than trying to identify precisely where a Russian sphere would fall, however, our purpose here is to ask what benefits might emerge from tacitly recognizing a Russian sphere. And against the current backdrop, a spheres arrangement may yield several advantages.

**What benefits might emerge from tacitly recognizing a Russian sphere?**

First, accepting a spheres arrangement in Eastern Europe could reduce Moscow's avowed fear of foreign encroachment and corresponding perception of a Western threat by affording Russia a buffer zone. "Russia's worldview and grand strategy objectives," Russian analyst Robert Person points out, "are the product of a deep and enduring sense of geopolitical insecurity that has conditioned its relationship with the outside world for centuries."<sup>32</sup> A combination of difficult-to-defend borders, close proximity to other great powers, and a history of devastating western invasions has created a "persistent sense of vulnerability that never lies far beneath the surface in the consciousness of Russia's rulers."<sup>33</sup> As former senior US diplomat Thomas Graham explains, "over the centuries, the dialectic of expansion and resistance created Russia's geopolitical space, roughly the territory of the former Soviet Union or Russian Empire. This is the sphere of influence Russian rulers consider essential to their security. This is why they have pushed back so vigorously against what they see as American encroachments on this sphere in the past fifteen years through, for example, the expansion of NATO..."<sup>34</sup>

Although many American and allied policymakers are loathe to accept the possibility, Russia's fear of encirclement due to the expansion of NATO and the European Union thus likely contributed to Russian bellicosity in recent years.<sup>35</sup> Putin himself addressed the issue in his 2007 remarks, cautioning that while NATO expansion might be seen in the US as bolstering democracy, the enlarging alliance remained "first and foremost a military and political" organization whose growing military reach worried Moscow.<sup>36</sup> This echoed warnings by Russian officials and some Western analysts as far back as the 1990s that NATO enlargement in particular would exacerbate Moscow's anxieties of foreign

encroachment, threatening, as George Kennan put it, “to restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations, and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.”<sup>37</sup> Perhaps most dramatically, the run-up to Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine saw a bevy of Russian officials underlining Moscow’s worries surrounding Ukraine’s growing diplomatic and military integration with NATO and the corresponding growth of US-led geopolitical influence on Russia’s borders. Many American officials have dismissed Russia’s concerns as unfounded or irrational, noting that NATO has no intention of invading Russia.<sup>38</sup> Still, the question is not whether Russia’s concerns are unjustified, but instead whether Moscow takes the threat of NATO expansion to its interests seriously—and here countless warnings from high-ranking Russian officials going back more than twenty years makes it very clear that they do.

With this in mind, a spheres arrangement could eliminate one of the primary sources of contention in the US-Russian relationship by affording Russia a buffer

**A spheres settlement could take us a long way toward breaking the escalatory cycle with Russia**

zone, and thereby ward off its fears surrounding Western encroachment and Moscow’s encirclement. In turn, a Russia that believes itself more secure may be more open to diplomatic solutions to other conflicts of interest and less likely to resort to force to advance its foreign objectives. And, in response, Washington will feel less need to bolster its own military presence in the region; this would have the further effect of limiting potential points of contact and confrontation between Washington and Moscow. At a time when

the US and Russia appear headed for a remilitarized relationship, only addressing the root sources of the conflict can break the escalatory cycle. A spheres settlement could take us a long way toward that end.

Second, and related to the prior point, a sphere of influence might constrain the risk of Russian military adventurism to shape the behavior of actors beyond the Russian homeland. While Russian aggression is partly driven by Moscow’s threat perceptions, it is equally true that Moscow seeks to inform the international behavior of states in its near abroad to suit Russia’s economic and security interests.<sup>39</sup> For better and worse, a Russian sphere would allow Moscow an arena to do so. To be sure, an increase in Russian influence in the region would come at the expense of its relatively weaker neighbors. Normatively, such an outcome cannot be greeted with glee, and indeed, these concerns may prove to be a dealbreaker to policymakers contemplating a spheres settlement. Still, the effect might be a boon for international stability and US-Russian relations. On one level, managing a sphere might tie up Russian attention and resources—no small issue given nationalist

populations and restive elites in many of Russia's neighbors, as well as Russia's traditional difficulty in garnering local support for its preferred policies. At the same time, a Russian sphere could sufficiently meet Moscow's desire for foreign influence such that further aggrandizement no longer becomes appealing given the prospective costs and benefits involved.

Third, a spheres settlement might aid deterrence and defense in US-Russian relations by clarifying geographic and diplomatic red lines. This, in turn, would limit the risk of inadvertent escalation amid a crisis. Indeed, even if there is a sustained military competition between the United States and Russia moving forward, the Cold War and common sense suggest that security competitions are safer when their red lines are clear and mutually recognized. Red lines also allow the US and Russia to optimize their military forces and other tools of statecraft to defend the boundaries of their respective spheres. In turn, such efforts can bolster deterrence while establishing familiar patterns of military-diplomatic behavior that can avert strategic miscalculations.

Finally, spheres may limit the risks of instability in Europe arising from the actions of smaller states. One issue concerns the understandable desire of smaller states, like Ukraine and Georgia, to garner American backing against Russia, even though such actions pull the United States deeper into a confrontation with Moscow, limit American freedom of action, and exacerbate Russia's concerns of encirclement and isolation. Believing that they have American support, these governments may feel more emboldened to directly challenge Russia rather than settle conflicts of interests. A spheres settlement would address this issue in two ways. On one hand, it would cap the likelihood that Washington would respond to such entreaties, thereby assuaging Russian anxieties. At the same time, it would also constrain allied incentives to adopt overly bullish stances by clarifying the limits of American support.

### **Potential Drawbacks**

Critics might raise moral and strategic objections to a spheres settlement with Russia. On the former front, skeptics warn of the humanitarian costs of a settlement and of the damage to America's own moral position in the world. On the latter, they flag problems in surrendering US influence in Europe and the dangers of trusting Russia to uphold a spheres arrangement. These concerns are valid but, for different reasons, overstated.

First and foremost, critics warn that abnegating American influence in a country as part of a spheres arrangement increases the odds that Russia will take advantage of the situation to subjugate that country's population and crack down on its political opponents. Russia's brutal onslaught in Ukraine has made it abundantly clear that these concerns are real and cannot be ignored.

Given this, many claim that the only morally acceptable outcome is to honor the aspirations of small(er) states not to be subject to Russian influence and so extend the US security umbrella. In reality, however, the situation is not so clear cut.

For one thing, it is likely that US efforts to respond to smaller states' requests for security backing tragically helped spur Russian aggression in Ukraine, Georgia, and beyond. As Kennan warned when NATO enlargement began in the mid-1990s, "there is going to be a bad reaction from Russia, and then [the NATO expanders] will say that we always told you that is how the Russians are—but this is just wrong."<sup>40</sup> For sure, US policy is by no means the sole driver of contemporary Russian behavior and we cannot automatically assume Russian thuggery would have been avoided even with a spheres arrangement.

**There is a powerful moral case to be made for a spheres settlement**

Still, the situation begs the question as to whether acknowledging a Russian sphere in its near abroad would have been more problematic from a human rights perspective than rejecting a spheres arrangement has been. Ultimately, and as the Ukraine war evocatively and tragically demonstrates, the suffering that can result from denying spheres may be just as devastating as the damage to

human rights that comes from accepting them—the harm may just manifest differently. As the US and Russia prepare for future rounds of competition, policymakers must recognize that there is a powerful moral case to be made for a spheres settlement, not just to end the violence recently visited upon Russia's neighbors, but to prevent similar humanitarian tragedies going forward.

Second, critics might contend that striking a spheres deal would undermine America's moral standing. Here, the United States could in principle end up sullying its reputation as a moral actor committed to the spread of liberal values if it abstains from supporting democracy and the rule of law within areas of Russian influence. Again, this is a valid concern, but the damage should not be overstated. At root, there is nothing in a spheres settlement that requires the United States to forgo passing judgment on and responding to Russian (or any actor's) behavior in its sphere. Rather, the point is that any response could operate within a spheres framework—for instance, imposing diplomatic or economic sanctions in support of a moral cause rather than attempting to overturn or revise the boundaries of the settlement. Case in point, the United States made US-Soviet diplomacy and economic ties contingent upon addressing Soviet human rights abuses for much of the Cold War, eventually helping to improve the plight of the Soviet people. Just as the US worked within the Cold War spheres settlement to pursue a moral course of action, so too could the US operate in Europe going forward.

As for strategic costs, critics caution that spheres of influence would needlessly abnegate future US influence over countries such as Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia. The reality, however, is that the US would gain little from such influence even if it were obtained. The United States already dominates European political, economic and security affairs thanks to its existing alliances and economic relationships with Western, Central, and most Eastern European states. Given their relatively small size and geographic distance from the US, forgoing influence over actors that might move into a Russian sphere would not significantly change this situation. And since Russia itself would have to accept an American sphere—presumably centered on Western and Central Europe—a spheres arrangement would effectively reinforce the exceptional influence the US currently holds.

Meanwhile, the risk of Moscow overturning a spheres settlement is overstated. Overturning a spheres settlement requires that Moscow have the intent and capability to do so. As noted, however, there is significant evidence that Moscow actually desires a spheres arrangement. Though arriving at the precise boundary lines is likely to be complicated, there is thus no reason to assume it would not buy into such a framework once established. Of course, Moscow might accept a spheres arrangement today only to try to expand its influence in the future. Here, however, two other factors are relevant. First, and to a degree underappreciated by many analysts amid the Russian attack on Ukraine, Moscow looks to have fairly limited aims in its near abroad and beyond. Tellingly, it only invaded Ukraine after a multi-year (and ham-handed) coercive diplomacy campaign to prevent Ukraine from further moving toward the US; similarly, Moscow only directly intervened in Syria when it appeared a friendly regime was on the verge of collapse. These are not the hallmarks of a deeply revisionist state inclined to use military force as a first resort to overturn the status quo. Moscow might thus want to revise the boundaries of a spheres settlement over time (as might the US as well), but it seems unlikely to risk overthrowing such an arrangement at the drop of a hat.

At the same time, Russia appears militarily incapable of challenging a spheres settlement for the foreseeable future. Russia's military is slowly recovering from its post-Cold War collapse but—as shown in both the Georgian and Ukraine wars—it remains limited in its ability to operate far afield or to sustain high-intensity combat operations against capable opponents; it can project power against relatively weak neighbors in its near abroad, but not much further. America's GDP and defense expenditures currently dwarf Russia's more than twelve to one—a remarkable discrepancy even before Washington's NATO allies, five of whom have GDPs larger than Russia's, are added into the equation. Even if future improvements are made, it would likely be decades before Russia could credibly

challenge the United States and its partners. The upshot is that Russia seemingly lacks the capacity to challenge a spheres arrangement even if it so desired.

In sum, whereas the received wisdom is starkly critical of spheres, we have suggested that there are theoretical reasons to believe spheres might yield security gains under certain circumstances, and evaluated the merits and drawbacks of a spheres settlement in Eastern Europe to that end. Further evaluation is undoubtedly needed, and space and research limits preclude analyzing all facets of the issue in a single article. To be clear, this finding also does not mean that Washington *should* embrace a spheres settlement as the best path forward in its relationship with Moscow. Rather, it more points to the importance of evaluating spheres of influence holistically. And here, the bottom line is simple: despite their costs, spheres also entail potential benefits, and should not be dismissed out of hand when debating US strategic options in a world increasingly rife with great power competition.

## **Pivoting to China and Beyond**

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So far, we have focused on assessing the potential benefits of spheres to international stability and US national security by evaluating their application within US-Russian relations. To evince spheres' broader applicability, it is worth concluding by briefly considering their implications for contemporary Asia, where the possibility of a Chinese sphere of influence has also garnered significant attention. Moreover, because the possibility of a Chinese sphere encompasses questions over heavily maritime spaces, it helps refine the concept's application to an environment where establishing precise geographical divisions is inherently more complicated and fluid.

Just as the United States sought to expand its influence within the Western Hemisphere as a rising power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, China will likely seek greater clout in East Asia if and as its power continues to grow in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>41</sup> As with Russia, it is therefore impossible to specify the precise boundaries of a Chinese (or American) sphere, as this process will require Beijing and Washington to regularly assess their respective core interests and to establish the limits of their military and diplomatic capabilities. As a heuristic, a Chinese sphere today might encompass much of the First Island Chain—where China looks to have the military power to severely hamper US power projection—and parts of southeast and northeast continental Asia (e.g., North Korea, Myanmar); again, though, this is simply an illustration.

Regardless of where the lines are drawn, accepting a Chinese sphere could offer real benefits to US-Chinese relations and international stability. The United States presently maintains a major and growing presence in Asia that

any Chinese leader would likely prefer to see reduced as China's power rises. In addition to formal defense treaties with South Korea and Japan, Washington has cultivated security ties with many of China's neighbors. It has also embraced "strategic ambiguity" towards Taiwan, a policy that leaves the extent of the US military commitment to the island in the event of Chinese aggression intentionally vague. If Washington and Beijing were to one day come to blows, it seems most likely to occur amid a crisis wherein one side miscalculated the other's resolve regarding Taiwan or a maritime dispute within the South or East China Seas, where China has several ongoing territorial disagreements with its neighbors—many of whom have close ties to the US—and the US Navy maintains a significant presence.

In this context, there may be several benefits of a spheres arrangement with China. First, a settlement could reduce the likelihood of war by limiting potential flashpoints, establishing red lines of acceptable and unacceptable behavior for both sides, and potentially creating diplomatic channels between Beijing and Washington. If and as China's power continues to rise, some degree of competition between the United States and China seems inevitable. Within this competition, however, a spheres settlement could help limit the scope and intensity of competition by clarifying where each side's vital interests fall—in effect, focusing attention on how each side could best defend its core interests. As an important byproduct, because the US and China would effectively have responsibility for stability in Asia, they would be mutually incentivized to work out diplomatic mechanisms for managing any crises that ultimately erupt.

**The potential benefits of a spheres arrangement with China are evident**

Second, a spheres settlement could limit foreign adventurism by encouraging Beijing and Washington to direct their energy towards maintaining and defending their spheres. A policy centered around spheres could be especially valuable for the United States, which as a relatively declining state that must project power into Asia, risks overextending itself by attempting to defend distant areas of contestable geostrategic importance. In effect, spheres may help Washington and Beijing engage in mutual containment in a way that bolsters each side's deterrence and defense capabilities, thereby reducing the odds of conflict. Third, by clarifying the extent of America's commitments, it may minimize the likelihood of conflict emerging from weaker states that feel emboldened by US support to challenge one another (or China directly).

Lastly, a spheres settlement could assist in structuring the ways in which US-Chinese competition manifests. Again, some degree of competition is inevitable



as the distribution of power shifts. With a spheres arrangement, however, the US and China can use adjustments in the boundaries of their spheres to facilitate diplomatic bargains and negotiations as power changes hands. This can be done either on its own—changing spheres' boundaries to track the distribution of power such that neither party has incentives to use force to press for more—or as chips at the diplomatic table, for example, altering spheres' borders in exchange for concessions on other issues in dispute (e.g., trade or arms control). Regardless, a spheres arrangement could move the US-Chinese competition to a debate over the scope and content of their spheres rather than a contest focused on military brinksmanship, arms racing, and/or the use of force.<sup>42</sup>

In sum, a spheres settlement may help the superpower security competition stay a cold rivalry rather than a hot war. Still, a spheres settlement with China would not come without risk. For one, accepting a Chinese sphere would require that the United States forgo primary political influence within that region. Critics warn that this would harm American economic interests, imperil democracy throughout Asia, and undermine the entire rules-based liberal world order. Furthermore, by this logic, granting China a sphere may only embolden Beijing to expand its ambitions and challenge American interests elsewhere.

Critics are right that acknowledging a Chinese sphere means abnegating some American political and economic influence. Still, these risks need to be viewed in perspective. First, the combination of large water barriers and nuclear weapons reduce the risk that China could directly threaten the United States even if it so wanted. Moreover, it is worth noting that China has a relatively solid track record of making territorial concession for the sake of stability. China scholar Taylor Fravel, for instance, found that since 1949, China has settled 17 out of its 23 territorial disputes because it was willing to make significant concessions to the other side in order to strengthen its borders.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, there is no reason to assume that the fate of liberal democracy hinges on what China does in and around East Asia. Just as liberalism flourished in the United States and Western Europe during the Cold War despite communist autocracy in the Soviet Union and its clients, so too is there no automatic link between what happens in China and the states it influences and the US and its partners.<sup>44</sup> As such, the US does not need to mechanistically resist the growth of Chinese influence to ensure liberalism's contemporary success so much as it may need to bolster liberalism's appeal as a way of ordering modern life, while ensuring that the United States exemplifies its own values. Finally, China's economic and military growth is likely to continue regardless of whether the US acknowledges a Chinese sphere. Barring a domestic implosion, only a major war or concerted economic embargo could feasibly affect this

trajectory. Since neither of these appear in the offing, the overriding question is how US policy should adapt to this changing strategic environment.

Under these conditions, a spheres settlement with Beijing may have more to commend it than appears at first glance. States facing a decline in their relative power often look for ways of bolstering their capabilities, whether by spurring their own growth or launching preventive wars against rising states.<sup>45</sup> Still, such opportunities are not always possible or, in a nuclear-armed world, advisable. As an alternative, a spheres settlement could allow the United States to refocus its capabilities toward protecting its core interests, while minimizing the likelihood of war with China over issues of less geostrategic significance to Washington. This policy is not without risk, and it is unlikely to resolve all underlying conflicts of interest with Beijing. Still, the stabilizing effects of spheres should not be overlooked as ways of reducing the risks inherent in great power relations amid a power shift.

Ultimately, spheres of influence are realities in international politics. Although the United States rejects their existence as a matter of policy, doing so is strategic delusion. Rather, the narrower choice facing American strategists is whether to acknowledge their existence and work toward using spheres to the US advantage, or to commit US time and resources toward keeping others' spheres as limited as possible. To a degree underappreciated by many in Washington, the former option has much to commend it: done well, spheres can be a source of stability in great power relations by creating buffer zones, establishing geographic and diplomatic red lines, discouraging great power adventurism, pacifying relations among weaker states, and providing pathways for negotiation between great powers. Responsible statecraft thus means giving spheres of influence renewed consideration.

**The fate of liberal democracy need not hinge on what China does in and around East Asia**

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