

Ukraine, Taiwan, and the Uses of Spheres of Influence in Statecraft

Ambassador Chas W. Freeman, Jr. (USFS, Ret.)

Visiting Scholar, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University

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Security is a prerequisite for the prosperity, welfare, and economy of any society. Throughout history, nations have sought security through the establishment of empires, no-go zones [*cordons sanitaires*], buffer states, as well as military, economic, political, or cultural spheres of declared strategic interest or dominant influence. There are alternatives to these safeguards, among them systems based on the shifting coalitions of balances of power. But it is natural for states to want to have friends rather than enemies on their borders and for great powers to expect deference rather than challenges to their security from the collusion of lesser states with great power rivals.¹

Both nations and empires wax and wane. As they do, they shape political, economic, and military interactions in the regions around them or dependent upon them. Some states seek the protection of greater powers. Others reject and resist others' hegemony.² Spheres of influence are creations of statecraft intended to fend off potential competitors.

Why Spheres of Influence are Established

U.S. secretaries of state have recently taken to declaring that “the United States does not recognize spheres of influence.”³ In light of Americans' continued insistence on the validity of the Monroe Doctrine, this is more than ironic.⁴ The United States may refuse to recognize or respect other nation's spheres of influence or their right to establish them, but it insists on enforcing its own, which, though officially undeclared, is no longer limited to the Western Hemisphere but worldwide.⁵

Spheres of influence are assertions of an exclusive right to supervise or participate in deciding the alignments and affairs of another nation or nations in relation to still others either in general or in specific domains.⁶ As such they are manifestations of international contention between

¹ Consider the cautious approaches to relations with the United States of Canada and Mexico, both targets of past U.S. aggression.

² Hegemony generates its own antibodies.

³ <https://www.rferl.org/a/u-s-doesn-t-accept-spheres-of-influence-blinken-says-in-comments-aimed-at-russia/31241682.html>

⁴ <https://grahamefuller.com/washington-denies-reality-of-spheres-of-influence-a-new-pinnacle-of-hypocrisy/>

⁵ The U.S. continues to attempt to bring Cuba and other countries in Latin America, like Venezuela, to heel. Yet it rejects any effort by Russia to incorporate Georgia or Ukraine into a Russian sphere of influence as illegitimate, while insisting on its right to include both countries in its own sphere admitting them to NATO. In Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and North and South America, the United States is currently engaged in coercive diplomacy and economic warfare to exclude Chinese companies from any role in telecommunications or infrastructure investment. U.S. policies in the Indo-Pacific seek to sustain American military primacy and the hub-and-spoke alliance system that implemented policies of “containment” in the Cold War. In the Middle East, where American influence is visibly in retreat, the U.S. focus is on rolling back the sphere of influence its and its security partners' bungled military interventions in Afghanistan, Iran, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen enabled Iran to create.

⁶ For example, politico-military, economic, technological, etc.

peers.⁷ They can be formal⁸ or informal and defensive or domineering. Elites in the societies within them tend to learn the language of their sphere's dominant nation, to assimilate its industrial and military standards as well as its cultural and commercial practices, to send their children to study in its educational institutions, and to prefer its goods and services over those of its rivals.

The term "sphere of influence" first appeared in the division of Africa at the Berlin Conference of 1884 – 1885, which apportioned dominance of the continent between Britain, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. In 1885, a bilateral agreement between Great Britain and Germany divided control of the Gulf of Guinea between them. Each undertook not to interfere in the interests of the other in its designated sphere. In 1890, the two concluded a similar division of spheres of influence in East Africa.

The concept of spheres of influence inspired the organization of the United Nations Security Council, whose permanent members each brought with them dominance of distinct groups of other countries.⁹ The General Assembly, by contrast, enshrines the principle of the sovereign equality of states.

⁷ The concept of spheres of influence, like so many other elements of modern statecraft, emerged from the projection of power abroad by the many competitive powers that made up the European state system. Imperial China's position as the center of gravity in the "tributary state system" did not give it a sphere of influence in the modern sense. The tributary system might best be described as a "circle of deference." Unlike a sphere of influence, it was not part of a competition for hegemony with a peer competitor of China because there was none. Nor, despite insistence on deference to its court rituals by foreigners seeking the favor of the emperor, did China usually seek to regulate the behavior of so-called "tributary states" toward each other. Much like the nominal allegiance of European princes to the Pope, the sycophantic deference of lesser rulers to the Chinese emperor was a matter of self-interest as well as tradition. The emperor's recognition conferred trade advantages and prestige upon them and provided them with a measure of diplomatic, if not military protection from each other. It also encouraged China to leave them alone, rather than to attempt to make them outright vassals (as it did, with varying degrees of success, with Korea, Tibet, and Vietnam). In Asia, the sphere of influence was an artifact introduced by European, American, and, later, Japanese – not Chinese – imperialism and applied *to* China, not *by* it.

⁸ The "Monroe Doctrine" was the first formal declaration of a sphere of influence by any country, though the term itself was not used in diplomacy until 1885. In its original form, it was an effort to deny extra-hemispheric powers spheres of influence that might threaten U.S. security. (The 1904 'Roosevelt Corollary' transformed it from an instrument of strategic denial into an active assertion of U.S. dominance of the Hemisphere.) Proclaimed by U.S. President James Monroe December 2, 1823, on the advice of Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, the Monroe Doctrine demanded the respect of European colonial powers for the independence of states in the Western Hemisphere and declared that any effort on their part to "extend their system to any portion of [the] hemisphere [would be seen] as dangerous to [U.S.] peace and safety." In 1864, as the U.S. was preoccupied with its civil war, France installed Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian Joseph von Hapsburg-Lorraine as the emperor of Mexico. In 1865, with the civil war behind it, the U.S. massed 40,000 troops on the Mexican border and demanded that the French remove him. The French withdrew their forces from Mexico. Maximilian was then captured and executed by the forces of Benito Juárez.

In 1895, the United States threatened to go to war with Britain if it intervened in Venezuela.

In 1917, a German proposal of an alliance with Mexico helped persuade the United States to enter World War I.

⁹ As early as 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt envisaged a post-World War II world managed by what he called "the four policemen" or "four sheriffs," each of which would be responsible for maintaining peace in its sphere of influence. In his naïve conception, Britain would be in charge in its empire and Western Europe, the Soviet Union in eastern Europe and the central Eurasian landmass, China in East Asia and the western Pacific, and the United States in the Western Hemisphere. At the insistence of British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, France was later added and recognized as responsible for the affairs of its empire.

In the absence of an international system based on shifting coalitions to balance hegemonic ambitions,¹⁰ spheres of influence are inextricable from the rivalries between great powers like China, India,¹¹ Iran,¹² Russia, and the United States. This makes it timely as well as important to review them, their origins, their purposes, and their intensity, all of which vary from case to case. Understanding and coping with great power rivalry demands recognition of the interests that spheres of influence serve as well as the degrees of deference, subordination, or exclusiveness they seek to enforce.

History suggests that great powers establish spheres of influence to limit the autonomy of lesser states and thereby:

- exclude competitors from markets they wish to dominate with mercantilist policies,
- deny other powers influence in a region while enhancing their own,
- deny the strategic use of territory or resources to potential adversaries,
- forestall the incorporation of potential buffer states into others' spheres of influence,
- assure the ideological conformity or allegiance of client states and their elites,
- gain or maintain access to territory and facilities from which to project power,
- subordinate and exercise quasi-imperial control over lesser states.

Spheres of interest are instruments of statecraft and diplomacy designed to deter and counter prospective adversaries by measures short of war. They presume a relatively stable distribution of power in the international state system as opposed to one in which relations are fluid.

Spheres of influence demand deference and restrict the geopolitical or geoeconomic freedom of maneuver of the countries or regions within them. As such, they are inherently hegemonic. They fall into two broad categories: (1) passive, defensive efforts to deny influence to other potential other competitors, and (2) active, assertive efforts to dominate the strategic choices of the nations within them, usually to bar and counter the influence of a single rather than multiple adversaries.¹³ Each has different implications for competing powers, and each requires a distinct response from them.

¹⁰ In a system based on balances of power, a state that seeks hegemony will be balanced by coalitions among its rivals for hegemony. The classic exposition of such a system is Henry A. Kissinger's "**A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problems of Peace, 1812-22**," 1957.

¹¹ See note #16.

¹² Iran has created a politico-military sphere of influence in the Fertile Crescent (Iraq, Lebanon, occupied Palestine, Syria) and Yemen at the expense of Saudi Arabia and the United States. See also note #33.

¹³ Spheres of influence are not the same as colonial empires, communities of settler states, or linguistic communities. Spheres of influence preserve but constrain sovereignty; **colonialism** extinguishes it. The age of European global ascendancy that began with the 16th century and ended in the 20th included the establishment of new states through migration from other countries and created settler states. The primary example of a community of **sibling settler states** is the Anglosphere (Britain plus Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States), but there are others (e.g., France and Québec, Portugal and Brazil.) **Linguistic communities** are a legacy of imperial expansion, e.g., the Anglophone countries of the British Commonwealth plus the Philippines, the Arab world, the *Francophonie*, the Lusophone countries of Africa plus Timor Leste, and the twenty-plus countries where Spanish is the official language. There are obvious affinities among such members of former empires, but, unlike great power spheres of influence they are not the result of contemporary primacy by a single great power.

Exemptions from Spheres of Influence

Great powers trying to project their power or deflect that of potential adversaries seldom find it difficult to secure the deference of those they whose autonomy they seek to limit. Still, a few less powerful states or groupings of them have been able to preserve their national identities and autonomy through a combination of armed neutrality, studied inoffensiveness, and recognition or acknowledgment of their status by potentially predatory powers.¹⁴ These stances both deter and mitigate threats by others to subordinate or subjugate them.

The Origins of Spheres of Influence

Just as Rome and Carthage competed in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE to control peripheral areas of the western Mediterranean,¹⁵ in the 18th and 19th centuries, Britain, France, and other European imperialist powers competed to divide areas far from home, like India,¹⁶ China,¹⁷ Southeast Asia,¹⁸ and Africa,¹⁹ between them. The initial impulse for these divisions was mercantilist²⁰ but they evolved into primarily military contests aimed at geopolitical dominance.

¹⁴ For example, **Switzerland** has remained independent by virtue of the strategic convenience this offers the great powers that surround it, a tough citizen army trained to exploit its difficult topography for defense, and its scrupulous neutrality in times of peace as well as war. Its neutrality was recognized at the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

Austria was freed from great power occupation and exempted from their spheres of influence by the Austrian State Treaty of May 15, 1955.

Finland severed its union with Russia in 1917. It lost ten percent of its territory in the Winter War of 1939–1940, the Continuation War of 1941–1944, and the War of Lapland of 1944–1945. It has since refused to compromise its independence and distinctive democratic social order while prudently maintaining cordial relations with Moscow and avoiding obvious challenges to core Russian interests. Finland's conduct proves that there is nothing ideologically pernicious about prudent self-restraint that recognizes the potential perils of offending more powerful neighbors.

See also the discussion of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (**ASEAN**), below, and at note #39.

¹⁵ The three Punic Wars were fought from 264 BCE to 146 BCE and culminated in Rome's destruction of Carthage.

¹⁶ The 18th century military struggle between the British East India Company and the French *Compagnie Française des Indes* for direct control in India continued until the British victory at Plassey in the Seven Years War (1756 – 1763) ended it. The French, having been denied empire, then cultivated a sphere of influence with warring Indian states by supplying them with advisers and trainers, turning them against the British, and thus indirectly imperiling the British presence in India while Britain and France contested control in Europe. In response, the British cultivated and conquered Indian states, ultimately achieving imperial control of the subcontinent.

¹⁷ Foreign nations initially competed for trade with China by establishing “treaty ports” within which their law, rather than Chinese law, applied. They then sought to divide the Chinese hinterland into mercantilist spheres of influence within which only they enjoyed the right to trade, invest, and proselytize. On the eve of the Chinese revolution of 1911, Russia claimed the largest such sphere, followed by Britain, France, Japan, Germany, and Italy. The United States, under the “Open Door” policy it adopted after its conquest of the Philippines, abjured the establishment of its own sphere of influence in China but claimed equal access and commercial rights in others’ spheres. In 1895, Japan annexed Taiwan from China, while removing Korea from the Chinese sphere of influence. In 1905, it annexed Korea.

¹⁸ By the beginning of the 20th century, Southeast Asia other than Thailand (which had been divided into British and French spheres of influence) had been subjected to the colonial rule of Britain, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, and the United States.

¹⁹ This process culminated in the Berlin Conference (also known as the “Congo Conference”) of 1884-1885,

²⁰ Mercantilism is an economic policy designed to maximize the exports and minimize the imports for an economy. The states that practice it use all elements of state power, including the military, to protect home markets and defend their privileges in markets abroad from competition by others.

They persisted as political demarcations until overwhelmed by World War II and the subsequent end of the colonial era.

Formally declared primacy in a defined area, like the U.S. Monroe Doctrine's assertion of a unique right to exclude the Western Hemisphere to expanded influence by extra-regional powers or the proactive partition of China, the Middle East, and Africa between European great powers, was a feature of the 19th century colonial world order. As the century ended, spheres of influence constituted proto-imperial impositions of exclusive politico-military and ideological control on the societies within them.

Consistent with this, the 1904 Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine amended it to proclaim a U.S. right to intervene militarily to correct "flagrant and chronic wrongdoing by a Latin American nation." The new policy was implemented with vigor.²¹ In the 1930s, when Germany and Japan attempted to erode American primacy in countries like Brazil and Peru, the United States tempered its unabashed interventionism by adopting what it called a "Good Neighbor Policy." Still, during World War II, Washington felt free to kidnap and intern thousands of Latin Americans of German, Japanese, and Italian descent.²²

World War II, the Cold War, and Decolonization

The defeat of Germany in World War II and the subsequent Communist victory in the civil war on the Chinese mainland enabled the Soviet Union to control central and eastern Europe²³ as well as Korea north of the 38th parallel. In the first decade after the 1949 proclamation of the People's Republic of China, Moscow appeared to have gained paramount influence in China and north Vietnam.²⁴

The United States had previously restricted its aspirations to overlordship of the Western Hemisphere under the Monroe Doctrine. But, once engaged in a global struggle with the USSR for global strategic and ideological hegemony, it began to build new, extra-hemispheric spheres of influence based on treaties offering protection from the USSR to an expanding inventory of states in Europe and Asia. Within these spheres, America demanded varying degrees of allegiance from those it had offered to protect. In the context of the Cold War's static bipolar world order, they were an important stabilizing factor.

²¹ By 1904, the U.S. had already seized Cuba and Puerto Rico from Spain, threatened to go to war with Great Britain over Venezuela, and intervened to detach Panama from Colombia. It subsequently invaded Nicaragua, Honduras, Mexico, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Cuba, Panama, Costa Rica, and Grenada and engaged in covert regime change operations in many of these countries as well as in Chile, Venezuela, and Bolivia. The first version of the Monroe Doctrine had been passive and defensive. The second was active and domineering.

²² <https://gaic.info/history/the-world-war-ii-latin-american-internment-program/> & <https://www.latinousa.org/2014/06/13/japanese-peruvian-internment-camps/>

²³ Meeting with Joseph Stalin in Moscow, in October 1944, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, a committed imperialist, privately proposed specific percentages of influence to be exercised by each party in the countries of eastern Europe and the Balkans. Stalin agreed, but the subsequent imposition of what Churchill called "the iron curtain" ensured that, except in Greece and Yugoslavia, Soviet influence excluded any influential role for the British or other Western powers.

²⁴ The division of Korea and Vietnam laid the basis for subsequent wars to reunite them. In Korea, the north Korean invasion of south Korea failed. In Vietnam, the north Vietnamese were able to conquer south Vietnam.

In Europe in 1949, the United States sponsored the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to hold the USSR and its ideology at bay, submerge the traditional antagonisms of western Europe's great powers (France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom) in an American-led alliance structure, and facilitate the economic and political recovery of western Europe. As a purely defensive alliance of democratic states led by the United States, NATO very effectively served all three purposes throughout the Cold War.

In maritime Asia and the Pacific, having defeated Japan, Washington fell heir to Tokyo's wartime sphere of influence. To secure this sphere and thereby protect its new Asian client states, the United States began to build a series of bilateral alliances²⁵ to contain China, the USSR, North Korea, and North Vietnam.

America called the areas of the world in which it exercised dominant influence "the free world."²⁶ In the four-decade-long "Cold War" (1948 – 1991),²⁷ Soviet and American-led ideological and geopolitical blocs each sought to achieve dominant ideological and political influence everywhere they could and to prevent the other from doing so. The withering away of Euro-Atlantic nations' empires in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, with which this struggle coincided, created both independent states and apparent power vacuums. The newly independent states of the so-called "Third World" were fertile ground for both overt and covert US-Soviet proxy wars, notably in Indochina, West Asia and North Africa, the Congo, Lusophone Africa,²⁸ the Horn of Africa, and Afghanistan.

In 1961- 1962, The USSR took advantage of a recent (1959) regime change in Cuba to establish a strategic outpost ninety miles from the United States.²⁹ Cuba's defection to the Soviet bloc triggered a violent U.S. reaction to the challenge this posed to Washington's Monroe Doctrine assertion of hegemony in the Americas. The Soviets, in partnership with Cuba, looked for openings to entrench their ideological, if not their military influence in Nicaragua, Chile, and Grenada. In each case, the United States forcefully intervened to uphold its strategic paramountcy in the western hemisphere.³⁰ More recently, Washington has relied on economic

²⁵ These protective U.S. alliances included Australia and New Zealand (1951), the Philippines (1951), the Republic of Korea (1953), the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO, including Australia, France, New Zealand, Philippines, Thailand, and the United Kingdom, 1954), and Japan (1960).

²⁶ "Free" appears to have meant little more than 'not subordinate to the USSR or China.' The term was an appealing but inaccurate description of an agglomeration of democracies, dictatorships, military regimes, monarchies, and kleptocracies whose only thing in common was their affiliation with the United States rather than its adversaries.

²⁷ The Cold War began with the 1948-1949 Berlin airlift and ended with the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union.

²⁸ The 1975 revolution in Portugal led to the dissolution of the Portuguese Empire and to the emergence of pro-Soviet regimes in Lusophone Africa (Angola, Cabo Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and São Tome e Principe). With the demise of the USSR, these countries left the Soviet orbit and were increasingly connected to post-*apartheid* South Africa.

²⁹ This was an ill-considered response by the USSR to the U.S. emplacement of nuclear-armed missiles aimed at it from Turkey.

³⁰ These U.S. reactions included the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion and other efforts to produce regime change in Cuba, the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, the 1973 overthrow of the government of Chile, the 1981 – 1988 Contra war in Nicaragua, and the 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada.

warfare plus covert action to challenge and overthrow ideologically heterodox regimes in Latin American countries like Bolivia and Venezuela.

In the 1960s, Britain's need to reduce its overseas commitments "east of Suez" led it to concede its sphere of influence in the Persian Gulf³¹ to the United States. By 1967, countries in this region were independent but drawn to the United States by their need for protection from each other as well as from Iran. In the early 1970s, the United States buttressed China's exit from the Soviet bloc by offering it politico-military protection from the USSR. Later in the decade, Washington took advantage of Egypt's desire to make peace with Israel to remove it from the Soviet sphere of influence in the Middle East.³²

Spheres of influence do not necessarily disappear as colonial empires contract or are abandoned, though allegiances sometimes change. Since granting independence to its African colonies in 1960, France has maintained an internationally acknowledged politico-military and monetary sphere of influence in them, sometimes called *Françafrique*.³³ In 1968, the USSR retroactively justified its invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia by formally claiming a right to reverse any effort to dislodge its version of "socialism" in central and eastern Europe.³⁴ When applied to the 'Communist bloc,' this Soviet parallel to the Monroe Doctrine produced a definitive rupture in Sino-Soviet relations and opened the way for the United States to court China as a partner in the containment of the USSR.

Contemporary Spheres of Influence

Today, with the notable continuing exception of the Monroe Doctrine, spheres of influence are usually neither formerly declared nor negotiated between great powers. India's sphere of

³¹ Britain had dominated what is now the United Arab Emirates as well as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar since the early 19th century, when the British rulers of India intervened to eliminate piracy and secure lines of communication between India and the British Isles. Similar strategic concerns about lines of communication between Asia and Europe have driven the informal U.S. security commitments to Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states. The fall of the Shah of Iran and his replacement by Shiite Islamists hostile to the United States and the Sunni Arab monarchies of the Gulf encouraged them to place themselves under American influence and protection.

³² The 1979 "Camp David Accords" were accompanied by an Egyptian shift away from Moscow to allegiance to and dependence on Washington. Since then, Egypt has received substantial annual subventions from the United States.

³³ The French continue to police their African sphere of influence and to sustain a monetary union with them. The Euro-pegged currency known as the CFA franc is used in Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo. France requires these countries to maintain 65 percent of their hard currency reserves in the French Treasury.

³⁴ The USSR intervened in Hungary on November 4, 1956, and in Czechoslovakia on August 20, 1968. On November 13, 1968, in what became known as the Brezhnev Doctrine, Leonid Brezhnev, the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, declared that no member country could leave the Soviet-dominated Warsaw Pact or disturb a ruling communist party's monopoly on power.

influence in sub-Himalayan Asia,³⁵ Iran's in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen,³⁶ Australia's in the south Pacific,³⁷ and South Africa's in southern Africa³⁸ are informal. To formalize them would pose an obvious challenge to the Westphalian principles of state independence, immunity from military intervention, and sovereign equality on which the United Nations system and the post-colonial world order are grounded. But the fact that spheres of influence are undeclared should not obscure their continuing relevance.³⁹ They are assertions of military, economic, technological, and political dominance that are as likely to evoke challenge as acquiescence from others especially in periods of major shifts in balances of power and prestige.

Spheres of influence both constrain and stimulate great power strategic interactions. As such they are a factor that statecraft and diplomacy cannot ignore.

Post-Soviet Europe

Beginning in 1989, the Soviet empire and then the Soviet Union itself imploded, disappearing as a security threat to the rest of Europe, China, the Middle East, and the world. NATO's "Partnership for Peace"⁴⁰ briefly held out the promise of a Europe-wide cooperative security architecture in which the reconstituted Russian Federation as well as the United States would both participate and play a stabilizing role. But instead of dismantling the alliances and protective arrangements it had established to deal with now vanished Cold War threats, as the 1990s proceeded, Washington embraced the Russophobia of central and eastern European countries and their American diasporas by reemphasizing NATO as a defense against possible threats from a revived Russia. The United States undertook to expand NATO not just to the

³⁵ No external great power has ever attempted to interfere with coercive policies by India in its region. None challenges Indian suzerainty in Bhutan. None actively opposed the Indian annexation of Goa or Sikkim, separation of Bangladesh from West Pakistan, prolonged occupation of Sri Lanka, blockade of Nepal or counter-coup intervention in the Maldives. On the other hand, no other naval power has accepted India's intermittent claims that it is entitled to primacy in the Indian Ocean.

³⁶ Bungled American policies in the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula set the stage for a major expansion of Iranian politico-military influence in the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia now feel strategically encircled by an Iranian sphere of influence.

³⁷ See <https://www.australianforeignaffairs.com/essay/2019/07/our-sphere-of-influence>

³⁸ South Africa is now at the politico-economic center of the sphere of influence defined by the Southern African Development Community (SADC), originally established to coordinate efforts by its neighbors to end its *apartheid* and colonial control of Namibia. SADC now consists of Angola, Botswana, Comoros, the D. R. of the Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe in addition to South Africa.

³⁹ A negative case in point is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The governments of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand established ASEAN in 1967. Its purpose was to promote peace and security in Southeast Asia and to accelerate economic development despite the ongoing wars between the United States and Chinese and Soviet-aided forces in Indochina. After the 1975 communist victories there, ASEAN helped its members adjust to the changed balance of power and expanded to include Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia. Today, ASEAN is a means by which its members can avoid incorporation into the spheres of influence of any of the great powers contending for strategic primacy in Asia. It enables them to speak collectively to external great powers about their shared security, economic, and political concerns. Such powers recognize "ASEAN centrality," accept that ASEAN is non-aligned between them, and seek to cooperate with it rather than antagonize it. Like Switzerland, ASEAN balances its relationships with those most likely to limit its independence and leaves ideology to ideologues.

⁴⁰ Proposed by the United States in October 1993 and formally launched by NATO in January 1994.

frontiers of the former USSR but beyond them.⁴¹ This was an impulse born of America's so-called "unipolar moment," in which it sought universal deference to its values and interests and began to launch massive interventions to change regimes that refused to comply. In doing so, it set aside the UN Charter and other foundational elements of international law.

Belying its original purely defensive *raison d'être*, NATO then vivisected Serbia (ripping Kosovo from it), joined the post-9/11 American effort to pacify and transform Afghanistan, and helped overthrow the government of Libya. Russia and other great powers came to see NATO as a threateningly offensive tool of American foreign policy. Meanwhile, the alliance, which was coterminous with an American sphere of politico-military influence in Europe and the Mediterranean, resumed justifying its continued existence by reference to the threats from Russia it had helped to resurrect.⁴² Eventually, Russia resorted to shows of force followed by military intervention in Ukraine to block any further expansion of the American military sphere of influence in Europe.⁴³

In its long history, Europe has been at peace only when its major powers have all been included in a cooperative security system. The Concert of Europe kept the European peace for a century. The exclusion of Germany and the USSR from the councils of Europe in the 1920s and 1930s catalyzed World War II and the Cold War. The attempted exclusion of Russia from a role in the maintenance of peace and security in Europe in the 21st century has deprived it of diplomatic alternatives to a relapse into belligerent behavior.

The Middle East

In the Middle East, the collapse of the USSR orphaned Iraq and Syria, both of which had remained part of the shrunken Soviet sphere of influence that followed Egypt's defection to

⁴¹ As early as the U.S. midterm elections of 1994, both the Republican Party and the Clinton administration were courting ethnic Slavic and Baltic voters by suggesting early membership in NATO for their ancestral homelands. By December 1994, Russia, which professed to have been seeking partnership with the United States, angrily declared that it felt threatened and betrayed. (See "NATO Expansion: What Yeltsin Heard" and referenced National Security Archive documents at <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-03-16/nato-expansion-what-yeltsin-heard>. The Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland were admitted to NATO in 1999, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania (all formerly part of the USSR), Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia in 2004, Albania and Croatia in 2009, Montenegro in 2017, and North Macedonia in 2020. In 2008, when NATO declared it would be prepared to admit Georgia and Ukraine to membership, Russia warned that it would regard this as "a direct threat" to its security.

Meanwhile, the United States briefly attempted to establish its influence in Central Asia before ceasing to contest the dominant politico-military influence of Russia and the economic influence of China there.

⁴² In 2020, when the United States and other NATO countries, citing election fraud, refused to recognize the Lukashenko government, Belarus placed itself under Russian protection, thus confirming its position as part of a residual Russian sphere of influence in eastern Europe.

⁴³ By 2021 – 2022, Russia had built enough military strength to mount a diplomatic challenge to the continued expansion of NATO. Moscow demonstrated its ability to overwhelm Ukraine and to signal that admitting it to NATO membership might trigger a nuclear confrontation with the United States. It demanded that the United States and NATO end the menace such expansion posed to its peace of mind. Russia initially denied that it had any intention of invading Ukraine. But when it received no U.S. or NATO answer to its demands, it attacked, changing its apparent objective from strategic denial of Ukraine to the U.S. sphere of influence to the incorporation of Ukraine into a reestablished sphere of influence of its own.

America. No longer constrained by Moscow, Iraq gambled that it could alleviate the financial exhaustion of its eight-year war with Iran⁴⁴ by seizing Kuwait and its oil riches. In response, a UN-authorized coalition of forces led by the United States and Saudi Arabia liberated Kuwait.⁴⁵ Syria joined this coalition, signaling a willingness to explore relations with the United States as a partial substitute for the support of the vanished USSR, but was rebuffed due to its hostility to Israel.

In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq, ousted its government, and attempted to incorporate it into the American politico-military sphere of influence. The U.S. achieved military dominance in Iraq only to see Iran gain a paramount position in its politics. The concurrent U.S. effort to engineer regime change in Syria failed, entrenching Iranian influence there and providing an unexpected opportunity for a resurgence of Russian influence in the Asad government.⁴⁶ The destabilization of Iraq and Syria provoked a backlash by Islamist extremists, who briefly erased the border between the two and established an “Islamic state.” Turkey incorporated parts of northern Iraq and Syria into its military and economic spheres. The United States established a blatantly illegal military presence in Syria. After the withdrawal of all but a residual U.S. military training mission,⁴⁷ China became the preeminent foreign participant in the Iraqi economy.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, “fracking” enabled the United States to resume its historic status as a major energy exporter and made it the swing producer in global energy markets. This reduced the centrality of the Persian Gulf in U.S. global policy. The American commitment to Persian Gulf security diminished concomitantly.

As the 21st century proceeded, U.S dominance of the affairs of the “Middle East” eroded. Despite the resurgence in Russian influence and intermittent French attempts to reassert a leading role in Lebanon, regional rather than external powers began to drive politico-military rivalries and dynamics there. China is displacing other great powers as the region’s largest economic partner, but the Middle East is no longer in the sphere of influence of any great power or divided between several, as in the past.

The U.S. “Pivot” to East Asia

In Asia, the disappearance of the USSR as a shared Sino-American adversary eliminated the major rationale for strategic cooperation between Beijing and Washington. The US-China diplomatic finesse that had set the Taiwan issue aside to cooperate in the containment of Soviet ambitions began to break down. Ideological differences reemerged to estrange the United States from China.⁴⁹ The return of China to wealth and power after its two-century-long eclipse by the

⁴⁴ 1980 – 1988.

⁴⁵ Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 4, 1990. It agreed to a ceasefire with U.S. and Saudi-led forces at Safwan on March 3, 1991.

⁴⁶ <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/02/what-russias-endgame-syria>

⁴⁷ <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/12/09/us-just-ended-combat-iraq-thousands-of-troops-will-stay-put-now.html>

⁴⁸ <https://plus.iru-miru.com/en/article/42718>

⁴⁹ The brutal military suppression of the 1989 student and worker uprisings in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square and elsewhere in China put human rights issues at the center of the relationship at a time when the end of the Cold War

West and Japan began to erode the primacy the United States had exercised in the Asia-Pacific since the defeat of Japan in 1945. Alarmed American strategists and military planners began to view China as a potential “near peer competitor”⁵⁰ of the United States. America reaffirmed its post-Cold War determination to prevent the rise of any power anywhere that might rival it.⁵¹ The U.S. military progressively diverted reconnaissance and other resources previously devoted to Russia to targets in China, stepped up aggressive military activities along China’s borders, and attempted to enlist NATO members in support of efforts to balance rising Chinese power. But the United States proved unable to develop or implement a strategy to retain its previous economic leadership in the region, which became steadily more centered on China.

Sino-Russian Entente

NATO’s expansion and what the United States called its “pivot to Asia” produced a growing, openly hostile presence, headed by senior U.S. combatant commanders, on the peripheries of both Russia and China that aimed at militarily containing both. Not surprisingly, both pushed back. Moscow escalated its objections to further expansion of the American sphere of influence represented by NATO and warned that it would have to react militarily if this were not halted. Beijing renewed its drive to end the division of China produced by U.S. military intervention in the Taiwan Strait to separate the combatants in the Chinese civil war. Sino-American hostility grew apace.

As the 21st century began, Russia had no acknowledged sphere of influence in Europe, though its European neighbors (other than the newly established state of Ukraine) remained careful not to provoke it.⁵² But, as the newly globalized American sphere of influence (represented in Europe by NATO) neared its borders, Moscow became obsessed with strategic denial of neighboring countries to dominant America influence. Meanwhile, longstanding objections by China to continuing U.S. support of Taiwan (the Chinese island province to which the US-supported losing side in the Chinese civil war had retreated) intensified. China sought to remove Taiwan from the U.S. sphere of influence in Asia and to deny it status as an independent polity. Despite having no claims of its own, the United States challenged China’s territorial claims in the East and South China Seas.

Washington’s labeling of both Russia and China as ideological and geopolitical adversaries and its treatment of them as such gave their partnership a common focus and helped to consolidate it. Escalating U.S. pressure pushed these two formerly estranged great powers into an increasingly

had made America feel omnipotent. Meanwhile, Taiwan, which had been a dictatorship, democratized, endearing it to American proponents of democracy promotion abroad.

⁵⁰ The U.S. Department of Defense’s Office of Net Assessment invented the “peer competitor” concept as a means of modeling force structure and guiding the development of military capabilities in the absence of a real-world high-tech enemy like the USSR. The enemy it posited would be able to match and counter any capability the U.S. armed forces might field. Such a “peer competitor” was a maximally challenging enemy in war games and the perfect driver of weapons procurement. In time, defense planners settled on China as the real-world “peer competitor.”

⁵¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/08/world/us-strategy-plan-calls-for-insuring-no-rivals-develop.html>

⁵² For example, Norway, the only founding member of NATO to border Russia, has long barred the peacetime stationing of troops and offensive weapons from other NATO countries on its territory. See also the discussion of the armed neutrality of Finland, above.

open and comprehensive anti-American entente, committed to coordination of policies and actions directed at reducing the menacing military presence and hostile political influence of the United States on their respective peripheries.

NATO, the EU, Turkey, and Russia

By 2020, five post-Cold War enlargement rounds had extended NATO to all of Europe other than its officially neutral states⁵³ and expanded the alliance to thirty members. For most of these, especially the new members, NATO was still a purely defensive alliance. They had no significant ability to contribute to expeditionary military operations and sought dependence on the United States, NATO, and its larger member states for their defense.

But the post-Cold War era saw NATO cease to emphasize its defensive character and to become a platform for offensive military operations in the Balkans and “out of area” interventions by “à la carte” coalitions led or backed by the United States.⁵⁴ Efforts to include Russia in consultations with the United States and NATO about European security issues foundered. Meanwhile, Turkey both distanced itself from the United States and, like Russia, set aside its centuries-old aspiration to be recognized as part of the European community of nations centered on Berlin, London, Paris, and Rome. And, as Sino-American relations turned adversarial, U.S. efforts to enlist NATO and its members in operations directed at countering Chinese naval power in the South China Sea helped convince China that it should share Russian opposition to further NATO enlargement.

Post-Soviet Central Asia

The United States and the European Union (EU) briefly challenged China and Russia for influence in post-Soviet Central Asia, but it soon became obvious to them that they were at best marginal players in the region. Russia and China did not have to do much to deny them significant roles in its governance, economic development, and foreign relations. An effort by Turkey to assert a pan-Turkic sphere of influence has yet to succeed.

In Central Asia, the newly reconstituted Russian Federation has worked out a *de facto* division of influence domains with China. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization,⁵⁵ provides a forum and mechanism in which the two countries can cooperate with the countries of the region to deny the region to Islamist extremism, terrorism, separatist movements, and regime change through “color

⁵³ Austria and Switzerland are officially neutral and internationally recognized as such. Finland, Ireland, and Sweden have remained outside alliance structures, though all three are part of the American politico-economic sphere of influence in Europe. Bosnia & Herzegovina and Ukraine aspire to join NATO. Moldova is constitutionally neutral. Serbia seeks to join the EU but not NATO.

⁵⁴ Fourteen of NATO’s then-nineteen members participated in the US-led 1999 air war with Serbia. NATO commanded the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan in which a total of fifty nations took part, many of them not NATO members, but most NATO members declined to join the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. 9 NATO member states spearheaded the 2011 intervention in Libya, which was joined by two non-NATO members. The majority of member states did not take part in the conflict.

⁵⁵ Established in 1996, the SCO has become the world's largest regional security organization in geographic scope and population, covering three-fifths of the Eurasian continent, two-fifths of the world population, and about one-fourth of global GDP. Its current members are China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

revolutions.” Meanwhile, given Beijing’s insistence on Westphalian norms of non-intervention, China seems content to leave military intervention in Central Asia to Russia and its partners in the Russian-sponsored Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).⁵⁶ The CSTO, which took its current form in 1999,⁵⁷ has defined a military sphere of influence for Russia in Central Asia,⁵⁸ where it is the universally acknowledged “first responder.”

On a visit to Kazakhstan in 2013, Chinese president Xi Jinping announced what has become known as the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI). This began as a framework by which to build infrastructure, facilitate trade and transit, and connect all points in the Eurasian landmass, maritime Southeast Asia, and East Africa to China but has since expanded to encompass the globe. Moscow has linked its Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) to the BRI. Russia is ruled by realists who recognize that they do not have the capacity to compete with Beijing in trade and investment in the lands between them, which are unlikely to be able to resist the attractions of China’s huge and expanding market.

Central Asia illustrates a likely global future in which worldwide and regional orders are both multipolar and multidimensional in terms of the domains they cover. There are already four overlaid spheres of influence there:

- A post-colonial Russian sphere of linguistic and cultural influence with its center of gravity in Moscow.
- Dominant Russian politico-military influence through the CSTO, which protects the region’s regimes from “color revolutions.”
- A shared Sino-Russian antiterrorist sphere of influence embodied in the SCO, which is directed at neutralizing extremist and separatist movements and preventing them from penetrating China’s or Russia’s borders.
- The absence of effective military, economic, technological, or political competition from the United States or the EU.
- An emerging Chinese sphere of economic influence.

The “Indo-Pacific”

In the Indo-Pacific⁵⁹ too, multipolarity and multidimensionality are becoming the norm, with different great powers now engaged in competition for dominant roles in an expanding variety of military, economic, technological, and political domains. In this region, as in others, the United States is perceived to be progressively less engaged than it was in the last century. Meanwhile,

⁵⁶ China registered no objection to the CSTO intervention in Kazakhstan. The “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,” which have been central tenets of Chinese foreign relations since 1954, are a succinct restatement of Westphalianism and hence the principles of the United Nations Charter. They are “mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and cooperation for mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence.”

⁵⁷ Current CSTO members are Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. In January 2022, the CSTO sent troops to restore order and protect the government from an insurrection in Kazakhstan. This was its first such intervention.

⁵⁸ The CSTO bars its members from joining any other military alliance.

⁵⁹ As a strategic concept, the “Indo-Pacific” combines East and South Asia. It originated as a Japanese formula to justify including India in efforts to balance Chinese influence in Southeast Asia.

geographic propinquity gives China military advantages that the United States lacks. China's economic size gives it influence, but the rules for trade and investment are being made plurilaterally, not by China, and without participation from external powers like the United States.⁶⁰ Politically, China currently inspires more anxiety in its neighbors than emulation. Japan remains the most trusted power in East Asia and the Pacific. Despite India's inclusion in the concept of the 'Indo-Pacific' geopolitical zone, it remains largely sidelined.

The Indo-Pacific region, which coincides with the area of responsibility of the former U.S. Pacific Command,⁶¹ now encompasses:

- An intensifying Sino-American contest for strategic control of Taiwan,⁶² which China seeks to wrest from the U.S. sphere of influence and bring under its renewed control.
- An increasingly Sinocentric Asian regional economy, in which Asians make the rules for trade and investment without the participation of the formerly dominant United States (or the EU).
- Vehemently asserted but slowly eroding American regionwide politico-military leadership.
- ASEAN determination to avoid having to choose between China and the United States even as some ASEAN member states begin to make such choices in favor of China,
- Troubled relations between a neutral Myanmar and its neighbors, fellow ASEAN member states, Bangladesh, China, India, and the West.
- Australian confirmation of military dependence on the United States and cooperation with a rearming Japan in the context of deteriorating Sino-Australian relations.
- An US-aligned Australian sphere of influence in the South Pacific that appears to be eroding as China establishes a competitive presence.⁶³
- Strategic hedging, self-strengthening activity, and increasing regional outreach by formerly submissive U.S. allies in northeast Asia.⁶⁴
- Indian politico-military hegemony in South Asia (countered only by Pakistan).

⁶⁰ Key institutions include the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which Japan rescued from U.S. withdrawal and which China as well as the United Kingdom aspire to join, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a free trade agreement between 15 Asia-Pacific countries, including Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

⁶¹ Renamed the Indo-Pacific Command in 2018.

⁶² See <https://chasfreeman.net/war-with-china-over-taiwan/>, <https://chasfreeman.net/will-the-chinese-civil-war-end-with-a-bang-or-with-a-whimper/>, and <https://china.usc.edu/daniel-kritenbrink-and-ely-ratner-testimony-us-partnership-taiwan-dec-8-2021>.

⁶³ France and New Zealand also hold sway in parts of the Pacific.

⁶⁴ U.S. forces occupied Japan after World War II and never left. The U.S. troop presence there and in South Korea has long been unpopular. Japanese and Koreans tolerated it because of the Soviet threat to their independence and the perceived military superiority of North Korea to South Korea. With the end of the Cold War and the remarkable ascendancy of the Republic of Korea (ROK) over its northern rival, this tolerance is increasingly fragile. Meanwhile, Washington's stridently anti-Chinese posture has fed concern that Japan and the ROK could be dragged willy-nilly into a Sino-American war and erratic American foreign policy behavior has raised doubts about the reliability of U.S. security guarantees.

- Independent buffer states between China and India (Nepal) and China, South Korea, and Japan (North Korea).
- A strengthening Chinese military presence in the South China Sea.
- A restive, nonaligned, potential great power in Indonesia.

China's "Belt and Road Initiative"

The BRI began as an effort to extend China's domestic industrial policies⁶⁵ to countries beyond its borders. It was framed as a means of exporting surplus Chinese industrial capacity to build infrastructure⁶⁶ that could connect all the countries of the Eurasian "world island" and East Africa to China. But as other countries have sought to tap Chinese capital and construction expertise, the BRI has expanded to include partner states on every continent, including Africa and the Americas. In Africa, BRI-related investment has become the largest source of funding for economic uplift, dwarfing financial support from institutions like the World Bank. China's domestic savings are being channeled into foreign investment in development, not just through the BRI, but through new institutions⁶⁷ that are compatible with and complement the Bretton Woods framework.

The BRI finances investment in infrastructure to raise economic efficiency and bring into being a worldwide logistics network that is connected to China but available to others. It emphasizes market opening and includes the negotiation of free trade agreements and standardized arrangements to speed customs clearance, bonded storage, and the transit of goods. It imposes no requirement for Chinese partners to exclude relationships with other countries. So, it has little in common with mercantilism.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, linking other countries' economies to China undercuts their previous dependence on the United States and its allies. Even if the BRI continues to avoid efforts to exclude others from trade and investment in the countries that participate in it, it gives them an incremental stake in good relations with Beijing to balance their interest in cooperating with other great powers. This makes it likely to create a politico-economic circle of deference for China, if not dependence on it and an exclusionary sphere of influence.

Although the BRI is geoeconomic, rather than geopolitical, in nature, and has no unified planning apparatus or oversight of the projects it fosters, it is viewed with alarm by the United States, which sees it as a threat to its previous global primacy and as a potential Chinese sphere of influence. So far, U.S. opposition to the BRI has taken the form of coercive diplomacy and hostile information campaigns. This approach has registered few if any successes because it

⁶⁵ In China, the state sets strategic development objectives, which it supports with project finance from its banks. Projects are conceived by entrepreneurs (both state-owned and private) to respond to market conditions and designed to be profitable. Officials are rated on how well they support the creation of enterprises and jobs consistent with these objectives. The combination encourages strong public-private partnership that is supportive of national objectives.

⁶⁶ Roads, railroads, pipelines, fiber optic cables, ports, airports, industrial and free trade zones.

⁶⁷ For example, the Silk Road Fund (established 2014), the 105-member Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (established 2015), and the New Development Bank (formerly the BRICS Bank, established 1917).

⁶⁸ See note #18.

misconstrues the geoeconomic nature of the BRI as geopolitical. Fiscal and other constraints make it difficult, if not impossible for the U.S. to offer attractive alternatives to cooperation by BRI member countries with China. Neither the United States nor its European allies now have the financial or engineering capacity to compete effectively with Chinese policy banks or construction companies.⁶⁹ The old adage, ‘you can’t beat something with nothing’ applies.

Neo-Mercantilism and Technological Spheres of Influence

Under the Trump administration, the United States responded to the challenge of China’s growing economic strength and technological competence by adopting neo-mercantilist⁷⁰ policies. These policies have been continued by the Biden administration. While they pay lip service to the need for the reinvigoration of the American political economy, they aim at hamstringing the Chinese economy and retarding its technological advance. They have so far galvanized rather than curbed efforts by China to reduce its longstanding dependence on the United States for imports of food and high-tech components for manufacturing.⁷¹ Meanwhile, Washington’s and Beijing’s efforts to decouple high-tech supply chains is leading to the emergence of new technological spheres of influence with incompatible industrial and consumer standards.⁷²

The Global American Sphere of Influence

Washington no longer frames its arguments for and against policies in terms of the provisions of the UN Charter or major international legal conventions. Instead, it promotes the idea of a monolithic “rules-based order” in which liberal internationalism serves as a thin cover for U.S. primacy.⁷³ The “rules-based order” amounts to the assertion of a global sphere of influence in which the United States, assisted by the Anglosphere and a few former colonial powers,⁷⁴ sets and enforces the rules. American primacy and overlordship are symbolized by the unique,⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Lacking the capacity to carry out a politico-economic strategy to counter rising Chinese influence, the United States has sought to answer it with increased military spending and deployments, accompanied by coercive diplomacy through financial sanctions. But this approach does not provide alternative financing or a substitute for Chinese investment and construction projects, and therefore does nothing to reduce the BRI’s appeal.

⁷⁰ Neo-mercantilism is a revived theory of mercantilism emphasizing trade restrictions policies justified by “national security” concerns. It seeks to increase domestic employment through protectionist measures, while using export controls and restrictive immigration policies to limit foreign access to scientific knowledge and technology with military applications.

⁷¹ China is no longer the fastest growing market for U.S. exports, as it once was. The imposition of tariffs has exacerbated supply chain problems resulting from the COVID-19 epidemic and fed inflation in the U.S. economy. There has been no significant “reshoring” of industrial jobs from China to the United States.

⁷² The U.S. campaign against Chinese telecommunications companies like Huawei and ZTE and its efforts to choke off Chinese access to extreme ultraviolet lithography (EUV) technology and equipment exemplify this effort to divide the global technology market. The irony is that, in many instances, the United States cannot itself produce alternatives to Chinese products.

⁷³ The new “rules-based order” omits references to the United Nations Charter and international law. Due to domestic political gridlock, the United States is no longer able to ratify international treaties and conventions, but it insists on its right to interpret them without regard to the views of others. The “rules-based order” presumes that the United States and its key allies (in the G-7) have the authority to make the rules, determine when and how to apply them, and exempt themselves from them while imposing and enforcing them on others.

⁷⁴ The “G-7,” whose members are Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the United States.

⁷⁵ No other country defines defense in global terms rather than by reference to its homeland.

comprehensive set of U.S. regional military commands. These span the globe and are headed by quasi-viceregal four-star flag officers. The US-directed “rules-based order” is institutionalized and reinforced:

- Militarily, by a network of some eight hundred bases beyond U.S. borders,⁷⁶ the world’s widest ranging (if no longer the world’s largest) navy, counterterrorism operations in much of the world,⁷⁷ and the world’s greatest volume of arms sales.
- Economically, through use of dollar sovereignty and dominance of key multilateral institutions⁷⁸ to impose a bewilderingly complex set of financial and other sanctions on other countries.⁷⁹
- Technologically, through the extraterritorial application of U.S. export and retransfer controls.⁸⁰
- Informationally, by the dominant role of U.S. media and digital communication platforms.
- Politically, by regime-change operations, selective democracy promotion,⁸¹ adjustments in levels of foreign assistance,⁸² the enforcement of the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine,⁸³ and the denial of technology and arms sales to countries that cooperate with designated U.S. adversaries.⁸⁴

In effect, Washington now claims and seeks to exercise a right to help determine the policies and international alignments of all the world’s countries other than China, Iran, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, and the Russian Federation, all of which it regards and has

⁷⁶ 170 of which reportedly have golf courses!

⁷⁷ According to the Cost of War project sponsored by the Watson Institute at Brown University, in 2021, the U.S. military was engaged in such operations in eighty-five countries.

<https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/US%20Counterterrorism%20Operations%202018-2020%2C%20Costs%20of%20War.pdf>

⁷⁸ For example, the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT).

⁷⁹ Countries or regions subject to direct U.S. sanctions (either unilaterally or in part unilaterally) include (but are not limited to) the Balkans, Belarus, Burma, Burundi, Central African Republic, China, Cuba, Democratic Republic of Congo, Hong Kong, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Nicaragua, North Korea, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria, Ukraine/Russia, Venezuela, Yemen, and Zimbabwe. U.S. secondary sanctions target normal arms-length commercial activity that does not involve a U.S. nexus and may be legal in the jurisdictions of the transacting parties. While U.S. individuals and entities must adhere to primary sanctions as a matter of U.S. law or face potential criminal/civil penalties, secondary sanctions present non-U.S. targets with a choice: do business with the United States or with the sanctioned target, but not both. Targeted sanctions prohibit US persons from transacting with an individual or entity designated by the State or Treasury Departments under a specific sanctions regime.

⁸⁰ The United States now gives export controls and economic boycotts extraterritorial application. As a result, persons and companies in other states are prevented from exporting to or investing in the states targeted by the U.S. The U.S. previously argued (e.g., in the case of the Arab boycott of Israel) that this was illegal under international law.

⁸¹ It is instructive to contrast the U.S. reaction to the 2013 military coup in Egypt and the 2021 coup in Myanmar. Egypt is in the U.S. sphere of influence while Myanmar is outside it.

⁸² For example, adjustments in aid policy toward El Salvador after its August 2018 switch in diplomatic relations from Taipei to Beijing and similar moves after anti-Chinese riots in the Solomon Islands in 2021.

⁸³ See note #21.

⁸⁴ For example, the termination of previously agreed cooperation in developing and building the F-35 “Lightning II” with Turkey after it bought the Russian S-400 air defense system and threatened sanctions on India for the same transgression.

designated for military planning purposes as implacable adversaries. In what some have called “a contest for the allegiance of humanity,” countries in the spheres of influence of other great powers or not yet incorporated into the U.S. sphere are either courted⁸⁵ or subjected to coercive diplomacy through sanctions⁸⁶ or thrown into anarchy by regime-change operations.⁸⁷

But in a period of major global power shifts, as formerly eclipsed civilization-states like China, India, and (in their own views) Russia and Turkey resurge to wealth and power, the static partitions established by spheres of influence deter less than they invite challenge. This defeats their purpose, which is to protect the security, political culture, and domestic tranquility of the states that establish them. The once-monolithic U.S. global sphere of influence is under attack as other nations seek to deny territories and activities to American dominance and to compete in domains other than the politico-military. What seems to be replacing the once-unified world order is a congeries of regional, overlapping, multidimensional, political, economic, informational, technological,⁸⁸ and military spheres of influence

Conclusion

In the beginning, there were military empires forged through conquest. Then there were trading empires that evolved into political control of areas like India and Indonesia. Some spheres of influence were devoted to denying other powers influence in areas of strategic interest to those proclaiming them. Now the norm is spheres of influence that seek a measure of exclusivity through demands for deference and the power to veto the decisions of the countries they incorporate about military, economic, technological, informational, or political matters. The global U.S. sphere of influence is comprehensive but of this kind. It is now being challenged in various regions of the world and globally, through the rise of other innovative economies and information systems. Rivalry between the world’s greatest powers directed at defending or expanding the arenas in which they exercise primacy may still drive their strategic decisions. But regional powers have their own ideas about this, and their views are gaining ground.

As the world traverses the third decade of the 21st century, the worldwide ascendancy and global sphere of influence of the United States is under challenge from its designated adversaries, particularly Russia and China:

- Latin America is building new relationships with China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey in defiance of the Monroe Doctrine.
- In the Asia-Pacific, China proposes the negotiation of a “new type of great power relations” that would give it a significant role in the management of the region. In the

⁸⁵ For example, Ukraine.

⁸⁶ For example, Cuba, Myanmar, Nicaragua, Venezuela.

⁸⁷ For example, Libya and Syria.

⁸⁸ The exchange of technology may be regulated by governments, but it takes place without much reference to them through companies, universities, and research institutes. Non-state actors play a significant role, as illustrated by the cyber attacks on Russia by ‘Anonymous’ following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

absence of such an agreement, it is exploring the possible use of force to remove Taiwan from the U.S. sphere of influence and integrate it with the Chinese mainland.⁸⁹

- In Europe, Russia insists, at a minimum, on strategic denial of Ukraine to the U.S. sphere of influence represented by NATO, demands the rollback of the U.S. sphere to limit potential threats to it from its immediate neighbors, and may, at a maximum, be seeking to incorporate Ukraine into a reestablished, broad Russian sphere of influence.
- In the Middle East, previous great power spheres of influence, including the six-decade-long primacy of the United States, are challenged by Islamism and nationalism, and are giving way to regional dynamics driven by local religious and geopolitical rivalries.
- In Africa, new regional alignments are emerging, as the French retreat from Islamist attacks in *Françafrique*, Nigeria establishes a regional order through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), South Africa exercises dominant influence in its neighbors, and other local spheres of influence emerge.
- The global dominance of U.S. media has been greatly eroded by the emergence of foreign competitors,⁹⁰ unattractive parochialism, corporate censorship, and increasing domestic focus. U.S. information dominance is challenged by locally sponsored social media and the emergence of sequestered national media zones in places like China and Iran.

These are strategic developments with enormous implications for global peace and development. Denying the validity and role of spheres of influence neither erases them nor helps deal with them or the process of their demise. Understanding what is at stake is essential to dealing effectively with conflicts between great powers. Spheres of influence have been an integral part of great power competition. They differ in their purposes and consequences in the varying domains they affect. They are now generating more instability and conflict than they confine. Spheres of influence have been an abiding phenomenon of statecraft and diplomacy that deserves a great deal more study than it has so far received. It is time to consider the alternatives to them.

⁸⁹ The Taiwan issue – the question of what political relationship Taiwan should have with the rest of China – is not just an issue of Chinese nationalism. For China (and, less convincingly for the United States) it is a geostrategic issue. On the eve of Japan's surrender, the State Department published a note on Taiwan (cited in Akira Iriye, *Across the Pacific: An Inner History of American–East Asian Relations* (New York: Imprint, 1967), p. 221), which remarked:

“Strategic factors greatly influence the problem of Formosa [Taiwan]. With the exception of Singapore, no location in the Far East occupies such a controlling position.

“Formosa is separated from the continent of Asia by one hundred miles, from the main island of the Philippines by two hundred miles, and from Kyushu, the nearest home island of Japan, by seven hundred miles. Flying distance from military airports in Formosa is 559 miles to Canton, 438 miles to Shanghai, 1,290 miles to Tokyo.

“Formosa, larger than the State of Maryland, stands in a strategic relation to the China coast comparable for the United States to an imaginary island of such size one hundred miles off the coast of North Carolina, four hundred miles from New York City. Every point off the entire coast of China falls within a radius of 1,100 miles. A radius of 2,000 miles includes Burma, Singapore, Borneo, Guam, and Japan, including Hokkaido.”

⁹⁰ U.S. media are now grossly ill-equipped and staffed to cover events abroad. The vacuum is being filled by state-owned foreign news services like the BBC, Al Jazeera, Sputnik, Xinhua, and the like. The U.S., which once commanded the global information domain, is no longer able to dominate it. Domestic media designed to appeal to partisan audiences at home alienates, rather than engages audiences abroad. Great powers are being driven to recognize the need for information strategies. The United States, having euthanized the U.S. Information Agency after the end of the Cold War, is, however, a holdout.