A Return to Spheres of Influence?

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The NATO-Russia Founding Act (1997) sought the creation of 'a common space of security and stability, without dividing lines or spheres of influence limiting the sovereignty of any state'. This invocation of spheres of influence in Europe (and in the former Soviet space generally) inevitably recalled the Cold War. At the same time, the considerable dependence of many states during that era arguably made its spheres atypical. In any case the term itself is imprecise.

Since its adoption, the Founding Act has been described as a missed opportunity between NATO and Russia. It may simply have been unrealistic. The spectre of spheres of influence did not go away after the Cold War. Instead, what I argue here is that the spheres (or domains) of larger powers' influence are more or less established, and it is only the issue areas (or scope) of influence that is being contested. In doing so I submit that NATO's 2004 enlargement most likely represented the final significant stage consolidating a period of post-Cold War change. In thinking about power relationships in the post-Soviet space, I proceed by assuming that a sphere of influence is a region characterised by the primacy or hegemony of one external state or power.

The Spectre of Spheres of Influence

It is hardly surprising that all states deny they seek a sphere of influence, since the term evokes memories of injustice. It is the weak suffering what they must. However, all powerful states strive for influence over others, and surely all states would like some preponderance over other external actors within that influence. At the very least, both Russia and European Union (EU) member states have claimed interests in eastern Europe.

Since 1991 Russian official rhetoric has resorted to a range of language that comes close to 'sphere of influence'. In 1993 Boris Yeltsin spoke of Russia's 'special powers... in former regions of the USSR'. In the wake of the Georgia war, Dmitry Medvedev referred to Russia's 'zone of privileged interests'. For sure, interests are not the same as influence, but it is implausible that any state would declare privileged interests somewhere and at the same time renounce claims of influence.

Likewise, it would be disingenuous to pretend that EU states do not want influence over their neighbours. A common factor among the different arguments about the origins of the Ukraine war is an EU Association Agreement after all, and this sought influence through its conditionality. The Eastern Partnership has sought to foster a particular pattern of development in participating states. The EU claims that the policy is not a sphere of influence because it operates through consent or, in the words of its founding summit declaration, 'shared ownership and responsibility', but consent was not necessarily absent from Cold War spheres of influence, even if in some cases it was reluctant consent (in which cases the pejorative term 'Finlandisation' is often used).

During the Cold War neither the Soviet Union nor the United States formally consented to the division into such spheres. Instead, as the scholar Paul Keal (1984) argued, Cold War spheres were established by a process of precedent and expectation. Such a precedent could have emerged very soon after 1991. In 1994, at the UN Security Council, Russia endorsed US military intervention in Haiti, and in reply the US appeared to consent to Russian intervention in Abkhazia. Subsequently American officials repeatedly rejected the possibility of recognising a Russian sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space.

The United States' Inactions

Actions and not words matter. Its actions and, importantly, inactions suggest that the United States (I will come back to the EU) has already acknowledged a Russian sphere of influence in terms of its domain; that is, which states fall within the Russian sphere. In order to show this, we need to think about what remains constant across spheres of influence in different eras. Spheres of influence have been characterised primarily by an exclusive right to intervene militarily. The Monroe Doctrine was thus used to justify interventions in Latin America, and spheres of influence ostensibly legitimised both American and Soviet interventions during the Cold War.

At the 2009 Munich Security Conference, US Vice President Joe Biden asserted in his remarks: 'We will not recognise any state having a sphere of influence'. He was referring specifically to the question of agreeing to Abkhazian and South Ossetian sovereignty. Yet the United States could have taken any of several actions, up to military intervention in support of the Georgian government, but it opted for restraint. Despite its protests in various fora, its rejection of military options de facto recognised that Georgia was outside its sphere of influence.

Moreover, the United States has held back from sending lethal aid to Ukraine. Through a policy of sanctions it has challenged the scope of Russia's influence but not its domain, not unlike the way that in 1956 the United States challenged the Soviet Union over Hungary – it sought multilateral condemnation through UN resolutions – but would not directly intervene in support of Imre Nagy's government. In this respect, if President Trump chooses to recognise a Russian sphere of influence, either implicitly or explicitly, there are few actions to take.

But – as I have indicated – agreement between Russia and the United States cannot be the whole story. Analysis of 'Western' actors depends on how we conflate or disaggregate NATO and the EU. However difficult it is to conceptualise the EU as an autonomous or unitary actor, it has been an influencing power, and the United States has acquiesced in its influence.

The Exclusivity Question

If the EU has not obtained a sphere of influence, then it is not because of influenced states' consent. Rather, the EU cannot maintain a sphere of influence because EU members lack either the capabilities or the political will to intervene militarily and successfully in support of their interests. The Eastern Partnership has tested the scope of influence, and the amount of overlapping influence that may be agreed to, but it has not displaced Russian hegemony in the partner states.

Even during the bipolar Cold War era, spheres were not fully exclusive. There were grey areas. Iceland could fall inside the American sphere as a NATO member, and yet sign a trade deal with the Soviet Union. The scope of influence – that is, which issues are the legitimate areas of the external power's intervention – has varied in different eras. Prevailing economic doctrine has been a relevant factor, whether we have in mind the pre-colonial European spheres of influence in Africa, or the contest between capitalism and socialism.

Undoubtedly spheres of influence limit the sovereignty of the influenced states. States may consent to this influence because, despite the rhetoric of sovereign equality, they recognise that the global order is hierarchical. However, the more exclusive a sphere of influence is, the more unjust it is for the influenced state, moving as it does from hegemony towards domination. And yet a sphere of influence cannot mean domination by the external power, or else this would rob the term 'sphere of influence' of any distinctive content. Instead we would have protectorates or colonies deprived of any meaningful autonomy.

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