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Russia's Influence in America's Backyard

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Summary

Last month US National Security Advisor John Bolton blustered about Venezuela: 'This is our hemisphere – it's not where the Russians ought to be interfering.' With this and similar statements the spectre of spheres of influence haunts both Latin America and Europe. Policymakers and pundits should be cautious what they wish for.

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The call to arms

Certain Beltway commentators, taking the bait from Bolton, have called for an agreement between the major powers about spheres of influence. What is needed, argued Ted Galen Carpenter in *the National Interest*, is 'a sensible agreement embodying ... restraint on both sides.' Such views misunderstand how spheres of influence emerge and how they are maintained. Historically, such spheres reflect an interplay of power and practice – they are seldom openly agreed around a negotiating table – and, moreover, too little attention is being given to the negative implications of such an arrangement for both big and small powers.

> The widespread belief that the great powers 'agreed' spheres of influence after World War II is misleading.

In Moscow in 1944 British prime minister Winston Churchill had proposed an informal 'percentages agreement' to Josef Stalin which determined the balance of British and Soviet influence in east European states. But the agreement never materialised. Similarly, Franklin D. Roosevelt may be remembered for advocating the idea of the great

power allies as 'Four Policemen' each responsible for order within its own sphere. But to the extent that this was reflected in the permanent members of the UN Security Council, the idea was considerably watered down.

The declaration made at Yalta also called for the liberated European states to 'create democratic institutions of their own choice' and the signatories pledged to 'jointly assist' the liberated states, which was a far cry from the exclusive influence advocates of spheres of influence usually envisage.

> Irrespective of what may have been understood tacitly by Stalin and others, the 1945 Yalta Conference did not formally recognise a Soviet (nor American) sphere of influence.

Rather, it was American and Soviet military might in the ensuing decades that consolidated the *de facto* patterns of influence that existed at the end of the war and forged the Cold War spheres. It is material reality, not agreement, that ostensibly brought 'restraint.'

Spheres and stability

Equally misleading is the assumption that explicit spheres of influence will bring stability to the world. While Cold War spheres of influence may have avoided a major out-and-out war in Europe, there were still plenty of flashpoints in the superpowers' backyards.

> American and Soviet interventions in their spheres of influence were not just about maintaining order: they were about perceptions of the rival superpower's growing role – whether real or imaginary.

American fears of communism led to its involvement in Guatemala in 1954, and to the events in Cuba of April 1961 and November 1962, among many other interventions. On the Soviet side, the Brezhnev doctrine affirmed the willingness to use force to forestall liberal influences. This was not merely about stability; it was about stemming the countervailing power's influence – and to assume that the two are the same thing is lazy. At the very least, it should not be taken for granted since influence can be either stabilising or destabilising in its effects.

Further afield American and Soviet agents fought overtly and covertly to bring states into their respective sphere of influence. The roll call of Cold War proxy conflicts is well known and, irrespective of the origins of those conflicts, who can deny that American or

Soviet support prolonged many of them? Such conflicts should remind those calling for spheres of influence that in the past they have prompted constant probing about where one side's influence stops and another's begins. The vagueness of 'influence' encourages such testing of the limits: does a sphere encompass merely preponderant rights in respect of military interventions or do privileges extend to trade and cultural policy?

Spheres: past and present

I would submit that the assumption spheres of influence disappeared after the Cold War also misleads. I have argued previously that Russia and the US already recognise each other's sphere of influence implicitly. If the US did not do so, there are good reasons to think that Georgia and Ukraine would already be NATO members since their foreign policy goals have been clearly and repeatedly expressed. US officials may not see it this way, but in fact all that NATO's policy in respect of the two former Soviet republics has served to do in recent years is probe Russia's sphere of influence and see what level of cooperation can be sustained before Russia reacts.

After the Cold War, with Russia's power and attentions circumscribed, the previous spheres of influence may have softened. This softening had a stabilising effect; it brought a resolution to many of the conflicts in Central America and elsewhere. Yet if the US did not at some level continue to respect a Russian sphere of influence, then it is unclear why Georgia has not been admitted to NATO. Instead it is being strung along with tenuous and imprecise pledges that membership will be forthcoming.

As Carpenter notes, Americans should not be surprised that Russia acts in a similar manner by testing America's influence in Latin America, which it has been doing in Venezuela.

> To normalise talk of spheres of influence is to lower the threshold of legitimate military intervention by the large powers. This will only serve to dilute the threshold for the resort to force all round.

This is not to say that there is no place for military force. It is widely agreed among analysts that Russia responds above all else to displays of force. It acts coercively with others too and has shown its willingness to use force to uphold its implicit sphere of influence. America should indeed stand up to Russia in defence of its own interests, provided those interests are clearly defined, and there may well be good arguments to be made against Russia's role in Venezuela (that is beyond the scope of this commentary). At the same time US officials should drop the belligerent and unhelpful language of spheres of influence.

Hypocrisy in America

In April Bolton directly invoked the Monroe Doctrine, the nineteenth century proclamation of an American sphere of influence in Latin America. He asserted that the doctrine was 'alive and well.' Many Russian listeners will have recalled that only a few years ago John Kerry lambasted Russia for behaving 'in a 19th century fashion' in Ukraine! Nonetheless, the Monroe Doctrine is instructive when it comes to the relations between the powers. It came at a point when European powers were already well on their way to having been squeezed out of Latin America. European powers did not fully accept America's claimed right of preponderant influence (why would they?); they simply weren't strong enough to resist it.

Openly proclaiming that America considers the Monroe Doctrine a legitimate basis for action only invites accusations of double standards from China and Russia when it comes to the South China Sea or the former Soviet Union. It also encourages officials in Washington and Moscow to think in terms of exclusive influence: yet one state's influence over another is seldom absolute.

> The limited sovereignty implied in ever-more-exclusive spheres of influence would cause deep dissatisfaction in small and middle powers, many of whom shook off colonial shackles in the twentieth century.

Some realists may shrug but with power comes responsibility and a world organised by explicit spheres of influence could prove irresponsible. Above all, the world will likely become more conflictual because the frictions that will result in Europe or Latin America will matter far more to external powers.

It is doubtful that any Latin American states accept America's claimed right of preponderant influence (why would they?). Policymakers should instead focus on clearly defining their interests and recognise that other major powers have interests too, including Russia.

> Brazenly proclaiming a sphere of influence is unhelpful: it will heighten rather than lower the likelihood of conflicts in the periphery as happened during the Cold War.

It will do so by encouraging assertions rather than arguments and the use of force to test the limits of influence. Regardless of how one identifies – realist or liberal, cold war warrior or peacemaker – let's focus on careful and cogent arguments and say balls to spheres of influence.

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