



U.S. Views of China's Regional Strategy: Sphere of Influence or of Interests?

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Today's relationship between the United States and China is more varied, complex, and cooperative than the accumulation of headlines would lead one to believe. The news media and commentators spotlight points of friction; more books are sold about conflicts and potential conflicts than about peaceful relations; and the bread and butter of politicians and government officials is in identifying and solving problems rather than simply shepherding the normal course of events. That said, U.S.-Chinese relations remain under a cloud of mutual suspicion and misunderstanding. No relationship between large nations is totally untroubled, but that between the United States, the continually dominant global power, and the rising China is particularly unsettled. That situation is reflected in the way Americans have been debating China's security intentions.

There is no consensus within American opinion regarding whether China seeks to join the existing international system or to transform it. There is also an important doubt, on which this paper will focus, whether China's priority is to stabilize its neighborhood or to dominate it – or whether China sees that as the same thing. U.S. interpretations of Chinese intentions rely in part on reading what Chinese commentators write on the subject and in part on the assumptions the U.S. commentators bring to their analysis.

Chinese commentators place paramount value on social and political stability, and express concern that unstable or “unfriendly” regimes on China's periphery could threaten China's own stability. Chen Xiangyang wrote in 2010: “(The periphery) is the main theater where China preserves national security, defends its sovereign unity and territorial integrity, and unfolds the struggle against separatism; it is...the buffer zone and strategic screen in keeping the enemy outside the gate. Second, it is the vital area for China's rise that world powers cannot cross...and the main stage for China to display its strength to the outside world.”¹ Many commentators point to outside forces at work to create intolerable situations, from China's point of view, in neighboring countries. This, from 2008, “The security environment on China's periphery is becoming more complex, with the strengthening of traditional military alliances, the expansion of foreign military bases, and the deployment of new weapons systems such as ballistic missile defenses. In addition, some people (are) plotting ‘color revolutions’...to revamp the regimes among China's neighbors, and some people are pushing ‘values diplomacy’ in a bid to build a democratic encirclement around China.”² Although the outside instigators of these ills are unnamed, the United States, judging by their context, is clearly atop the list of suspects. Suspicion of U.S. motives has a long pedigree. One of Mao Zedong's quotations was: “As for the imperialist countries, we should...strive to coexist peacefully with those countries, do business with them and prevent any possible war, but under no circumstances should we harbor any unrealistic notions about them.”³ The statements above may reflect unusually stark positions on the spectrum of Chinese opinion, but they are not uncharacteristic in holding that China has a strong, perhaps existential, interest in ensuring that the fourteen countries that border China remain “friendly.”

The United States, from its perspective, asserts a national interest in discouraging the emergence of regional spheres of influence anywhere in the world. Vice President Biden said during a May 27, 2015 speech at the Brookings Institution, “We will not recognize any nation having a sphere of influence. It will remain our view that sovereign states have the right to make their own decisions and choose their own alliances.” Deputy National Security Adviser Tony Blinken had earlier said, “We continue to reject the notion of a sphere of influence. We continue to stand by the right of sovereign democracies to choose their own

alliances.”⁷⁴ Robert Kagan described his view of the challenge facing the United States in regard to potential Chinese and Russian spheres of influence, “The question for the United States, and its allies in Asia and Europe, is whether we should tolerate a return to sphere of influence behavior among regional powers that are not seeking security but are in search of status, powers that are acting less out of fear than out of ambition.”⁷⁵

Much of the tension underlying U.S.-Chinese relations is based on apparently irreconcilable, but poorly defined, understandings of the concept “spheres of influence.” In a simple dichotomy, the absence of spheres of influence would suppose an ideal world in which every nation was totally sovereign and equal, with no country having more influence than any other. In contrast, a world in which spheres of influence were the rule posits rigid boundaries, behind which great powers would have absolute control of the nations within their spheres. Neither of these extremes is recognizable in the reality of international relations. China's assertions of vital regional interest along its periphery and the U.S. rejection of all spheres of influence require a nuanced examination to see if their irreconcilability poses risks. Our challenge is also to reflect on different views inside the United States on what to make of China's assertions and of the discrepancy between them and what the American commentators regard as more cooperative thinking on security.

This chapter does not take up territorial or maritime boundary disputes although they are often raised in discussions of spheres of influence. Those topics fall into the different category of interstate disputes rather than general relations among nations. A sphere of influence might make it easier to successfully assert a boundary claim against a neighbor, but we are interested here instead in the presence, absence, or importance of the spheres of influence themselves. It is enough to note that China's approach to maritime boundaries seems to U.S. officials to imply sphere of influence behavior. Under Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller said at a speech at the University of Sydney on March 6, 2015, “We believe an effective security order for Asia must be based on alliances founded on recognized mutual security, international law, and international standards, along with the peaceful resolution of disputes *and not on spheres of influence* (italics mine), or coercion, or intimidation where big nations bully the small. The United States shares the concerns of ASEAN and others over rising tensions and provocative unilateral action to change the status quo in the South China Sea...”⁷⁶

SPHERES OF INFLUENCE IN THEORY

Two basic dictionary definitions of “sphere of influence” show at the outset that there is no consensus on the full meaning of the term. One holds that a sphere of influence is an area within which the political influence or the interests of one state are held to be more or less paramount.⁷⁷ Another states that a sphere of influence is a political claim to exclusive control, which other nations may or may not recognize as a matter of fact, or it may refer to a legal agreement by which another state or states pledge themselves to refrain from interference within the sphere of influence.⁷⁸ The difference is whether the definition is positive or negative. Is a sphere of influence one in which the dominant power exercises control within the borders of the subordinate power, or one in which the subordinate power makes decisions which it believes will be well received by the dominant power? The former would appear unjust, the latter merely prudent.

There is a connection between the concepts of balances of power and spheres of influence. In order to balance power, smaller states may consider it wise policy to align themselves with the weaker of two great powers in order to prevent the greater one from achieving a position of dominance, but the opposite may also happen. In “bandwagoning,” smaller states align themselves with a stronger rather than a weaker great power in the hope that if the great power became hegemonic, the smaller state will have earned its favor, deflected its attention elsewhere, or even shared in some of the spoils of the dominance of their patron state. It is important for the small state to choose correctly because mistakes would have consequences.

There is disagreement within the international relations literature regarding whether spheres of influence are stabilizing or destabilizing, beneficial or unjust. The main argument in their favor is that joint management by great powers best maintains international peace. Having smaller powers under a measure of control by great powers means that disputes among smaller powers can be brokered by the great powers, dangerous or rogue behavior by smaller powers can be dealt with by the great powers acting in concert, and competition between great powers can be kept in check by agreement on the scope of their respective spheres of influence. It is also possible that management of a sphere of influence might be taxing enough on a great power to curb any wider ambitions that it otherwise might develop. Another potential benefit of spheres of influence is that great powers may feel a responsibility to promote the welfare of their client states, giving the latter access to resources they might not otherwise have.

The counterargument is that spheres of influence are destabilizing because smaller states might be emboldened by their connection to their great power patrons to act irresponsibly in local conflicts, with the attendant risk of widening local conflicts into great power conflicts (à la the slide into World War I). Competition to lure or coerce smaller countries into spheres of influence can also create destabilizing tensions between great powers. Finally, the unjust situation of smaller states having to accommodate to the desires of their great power patrons could create resentments and grievances, potentially leading to conflict and instability.

Finally, there are different views regarding the natural state of international relations. The Charter of the United Nations appears unambiguous in its description of the equality of nations. Chapter I, Article 1.2: “To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples.” Article 2.1: “The Organization is based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its Members.” Article 2.4: “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat of use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.”⁹ And yet, the UN Charter also permits the existence of regional arrangements and calls for members to solve local disputes through them. Non-members of regional arrangements *de jure* cannot have equal standing vis-à-vis the members in local deliberations. Moreover, the UN Charter in Chapter V, Article 23, names five members as permanent members of the Security Council, a tacit recognition that not all member states are truly equal.

Nations invariably voice support for the principle of the equality and sovereignty of nations – unsurprisingly, given that they have subscribed to the UN Charter. However, they at the same time can be seen defending the “naturalness” of acting to create conditions in neighboring countries that accommodate their interests. Alexander Lukin, wrote in a 2008 article titled “From a Post-Soviet to a Russian Foreign Policy,” “Every country has a natural desire to

see friendly regimes in neighboring countries.”¹⁰ Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in 2007 endorsed the sovereignty of nations, but immediately followed with: “Yet this does not give anyone the right to deny, let alone undermine, the natural mutual gravitation of nations towards each other generated by historical and other objective factors and based on mutual interests. Speaking of our closest neighbors, Russia wants them to be friendly, stable, and dynamically developing states. This approach is consistent with the plans of these states and cannot contradict anyone’s interests.”¹¹ Note the repetition of the word “natural” in the two statements, an appeal to the argument that this is simply how things are.

Despite this *realpolitik* – and against the long history of interventions by great powers in the affairs of smaller neighbors up to the present day – there is in the modern world a presumption of the sovereignty, independence, and self-determination of nations. When countries bypass these principles, they at least feel compelled to explain why they have done so.

SPHERES OF INFLUENCE IN HISTORY

The first use of the term “spheres of influence” may have been in an 1885 agreement between Britain and Germany that separated and defined their respective regions of interest on the Gulf of Guinea. They agreed not to acquire territory or to challenge the increase of each other’s influence on either side of a specific geographic line. A 1904 agreement acknowledged British recognition that Morocco was within France’s “sphere of influence.” In 1907, Britain and Russia divided Persia into three zones: one within Russia’s sphere of influence in the north, one within Britain’s in the south, and a neutral area in between.¹²

The term “sphere of influence” today has a negative, even pejorative sense; so much so that no modern nation would apply the term to its foreign policy. It has become an accusation as much as a description. One of the reasons for this is that during the twentieth century, spheres of influence became perceived as iniquitous. A primary example is the explicit reference to spheres of influence in the “Secret Additional Protocol” of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact): “Article 1. In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement in the areas belonging to the Baltic States (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the northern boundary of Lithuania shall represent the boundary of the spheres of influence of Germany and the USSR.” “Article 2. In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement of the areas belonging to the Polish state, the spheres of influence of Germany and the USSR shall be bounded approximately by the line of the rivers Narev, Vistula and San.” “Article 3. With regard to Southeastern Europe attention is called by the Soviet side to its interest in Bessarabia. The German side declares its complete disinterestedness in the areas.”¹³

SPHERES OF INFLUENCE: THE AMERICAN VIEW

Commentators who detect hypocrisy in the U.S. rejection of the concept of spheres of influence often cite the Monroe Doctrine as an example of a sphere of influence par excellence. In 1823, President James Monroe declared that any further steps by European nationals to colonize land in North or South America, or to interfere with the states of the Western hemisphere would be taken by the United States as acts of aggression. Defenders of the Monroe Doctrine argue that it was intended to prevent, rather than create, spheres

of influence. By this reading, the doctrine did not assert U.S. control of the region, but rather guaranteed that the United States would defend the region against further European interventions.

Nevertheless, later U.S. presidents cited the Monroe Doctrine to justify their interventions in Latin American states unconnected to European actions. In any case, Secretary of State John Kerry made the U.S. current attitude towards the Monroe Doctrine clear to an audience of the Organization of American States in Washington on November 18, 2013, to their applause: “The doctrine that bears (Monroe’s) name asserted our authority to step in and oppose the influence of European powers in Latin America.” “Today, however, we have made a different choice. The era of the Monroe Doctrine is over.” “(Our relationships are now) about viewing one another as equals, sharing responsibilities, cooperation on security issues and adhering not to doctrine but to the decisions that we make as partners to advance the values and interest that we share.”¹⁴

The strength of U.S. feeling regarding potential spheres of influence can be seen in the difference between its attitudes towards the Eurasian Economic Union and that of the EU. Whereas the European Union generally welcomed the establishment of the Russian-led EEU (Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan) that was initiated in 1994 and established on January 1, 2015, the United States expressed opposition to it on the grounds that it was a thinly-veiled attempt by Russia to create a sphere of influence among the former constituents of the USSR, if not virtually to recreate the USSR. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in December 2012: “It’s not going to be called that (Soviet Union). It’s going to be called customs union, it will be called the Eurasian Union and all of that, but let’s make no mistake about it. We know what the goal is and we are trying to figure out effective ways to slow down or prevent it.”¹⁵ As Biden recently said, “We will not recognize any nation having a sphere of influence.”¹⁶

State Department spokesman Jeff Rathke described the current U.S. relationships with other countries as explicitly not based on a sphere of influence concept: “What we see when we look around the world are places where we desire to improve our contacts with countries. What is important is that those relationships develop on the basis of mutual interest, mutual respect, without coercion, and to the benefit of the peoples of the countries involved.”¹⁷ The U.S. understanding of spheres of influence can be seen by looking at the mirror image of Rathke’s description of U.S. policy. In that case, a sphere of influence could be described as existing solely or mainly for the benefit of the great power, with one-way deference from the smaller power to the greater one, maintained by coercion, and solely or mainly benefiting the people of the great power.

SPHERES OF INFLUENCE: THE CASE OF RUSSIA

U.S. views of China’s efforts to augment its regional influence are informed by its experience of dealing with the Soviet Union in the past, and now with the Russian Federation. The emergence of NATO and the Warsaw Pact in the postwar environment created a balance of power with smaller states closely aligned to great powers. The United States, of course, recognized no moral equivalency between voluntary NATO membership and involuntary Warsaw Pact membership. The Soviet Union, for its part, contended in accordance with its

state ideology that far from creating a Russian sphere of influence, the Eastern bloc was a natural expression of the international workers' solidarity. States that had chosen a socialist path would, of course, band together to further the revolution and to await other states joining the movement. They also needed to mutually defend themselves against Western counter-revolutionary forces.

In 1968, General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev expounded the Brezhnev Doctrine to explain the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia to put down a reformist movement. "When forces that are hostile to socialism try to turn the development of some socialist country towards capitalism, it becomes not only a problem for the country concerned, but a common problem and concern of all socialist countries."¹⁸ The Brezhnev Doctrine laid the groundwork for interventions to oppose the creation of reformist regimes in countries within the Soviet sphere, and was even stretched to explain the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

The demise of the Soviet Union meant an end to the USSR's ideologically-based sphere of influence. Explaining Russia's new willingness to stand aside while former Warsaw Pact members applied to join Western institutions including NATO and the EU, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Gennadi Gerasimov said on October 25, 1989: "We now have the Frank Sinatra doctrine. He had a song, *I Did It My Way*. So, every country decides on its own which road to take." "Political structures must be decided by the people who live there."¹⁹

Putting aside the rocky history of U.S.-Russian relations over the past twenty-five years, I jump to the current U.S. attitude toward Russia's relationship with the former countries of the USSR and of the Warsaw Pact. Lukin's belief in the natural desire of countries to see friendly regimes in neighboring countries is more thoroughly explained by Dmitri Furman in his 2006 article, "A Silent Cold War." He argues that influencing the regimes of neighboring countries is a matter of survival for Russia: "As is the case with the U.S., the Soviet Union or any other country, post-Soviet Russia seeks to create a safe environment around itself." "[For Russia], its authoritarian and 'managed' content makes this difficult. A safe environment for our system is an environment of managed democracies of the same type, which we actively support in the CIS and elsewhere, such as in Serbia, the Middle East, and even Venezuela."²⁰

Dmitri Trenin argues that Russia's policy towards its peripheral states is qualitatively different from that of the Soviet Union: "The current policy of Russia's spheres of interest dates back from the mindset of the mid-2000s. Compared to the Soviet Union's, the Russian Federation's sphere is not only much smaller, but also much 'lighter' – 'interests' after all are not as compelling as influence. Unlike 'influence' which tends to be both all-inclusive and exclusive, 'interests' are much more specific and identifiable. Rather than whole countries, they include various politico-military, economic and financial, and cultural areas within them."²¹

Russia today makes two assertions. One, as seen above, is that spheres of influence are natural and cannot reasonably be opposed, although Russian officials disavow the term "sphere of influence." The 1997 "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security" between NATO and Russia explicitly states "the aim of creating in Europe a common space of security and stability, without dividing lines or spheres of influence limiting the sovereignty of any state."²² However, Lavrov has also insisted, "Ukraine cannot be part of any bloc."²³ The second Russian assertion is that the West is hypocritical in arguing that Russian moves are designed to create a sphere of influence. Lavrov said in 2009: "We are accused of having spheres of influence. But what is the (EU's) Eastern Partnership, if not an attempt to extend

the EU's sphere of influence into Belarus?" "Is this promoting democracy or is it blackmail? It's about pulling countries from the positions they want to take as sovereign states."²⁴

The EU differentiates its policies from Russia's. In their 2007 publication, "A Power Audit of EU-Russia Relations," Mark Leonard and Nicu Popescu wrote, "Whereas the EU stands for an idea of order based on consensus, interdependence, and the rule of law, Russian foreign policy is motivated by a quest for power, independence and control. The EU's main concern is to ensure that its neighborhood is peaceful and well governed. Russia wants to expand its sphere of influence and achieve control of economic interests and energy assets in neighboring countries and the EU."²⁵

U.S. and EU anxieties regarding the Russian sphere of influence will continue, and will spill over into U.S. attitudes towards China's relations with its neighbors. Many Americans would expect Chinese attitudes to parallel those of one Russian who explained his country's thinking in this way, "The real irritant of Russian-U.S. relations is America's unwillingness to acknowledge Russia's right to a zone of its own security interests. This (Georgian crisis of 2008) occurred amidst the constant expansion of the U.S. zone of not so much security interest as of influence – if not domination – in the military-political field, the most sensitive to Russia."²⁶

SPHERES OF INFLUENCE: CHINA'S HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE & THE U.S. ROLE

China's attitudes towards spheres of influence are shaped by its experience of having had European powers establish spheres within China itself. This began towards the end of the 19th century, when Russia secured from China the right to construct a railway line across Manchuria, and then a twenty-five year lease on Port Arthur on the Yellow Sea. In an Anglo-Russian agreement of 1899, Britain agreed not to seek railway concessions north of the Great Wall, and Russia agreed not to seek railway concessions in the Yangtze Valley. Germany landed troops in Shantung to establish a German sphere of influence, entailing a monopoly on capital investment in Shantung province. France established a sphere of influence in southern China in 1885, giving France a mining monopoly in three southern provinces and a ninety-nine year lease on a naval base at Guangzhou.

U.S. policy beginning in 1899 was not to object to the established spheres of European influence in China, but to work towards equal opportunities for trade within the zones, and to try to restrain foreign countries from expanding the scope of their control within their spheres in China. The U.S.' "Open Door Policy" called for "respect for China's administrative and territorial integrity."²⁷ The United States took a more direct approach to counter the foreign spheres of influence in China at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1908, during Theodore Roosevelt's administration, it opposed Russia's attempt to take over the direct administration of Harbin. During the next U.S. administration, that of William Howard Taft, Secretary of State Philander Knox proposed that the major powers join to lend money to the government of China to enable it to purchase and take control of the Russian and Japanese railway lines operating within China.²⁸

At the outbreak of World War I, Woodrow Wilson's administration had the goal of diplomatically persuading Japan to refrain from widening its sphere of influence in Asia. For this purpose, the United States offered to recognize the existing Japanese sphere of influence

in China in return for future restraint. Warren Harding's subsequent administration obtained international agreement at the 1922 Washington Conference that signatories would not seek new concessions from China. These efforts foundered when Japan seized Manchuria in 1932-33, and then claimed in 1938 that all of East Asia was within Japan's sphere of influence.

In China's experience, foreign powers, given the opportunity created by a weak Chinese government, imposed spheres of influence to further their economic and strategic interests at China's direct expense and even within China's natural borders. Experience also taught that threats to China can emerge along China's borders. China was forced to contend with Russian and Japanese aggressive control of Manchuria during the 19th and 20th centuries. In 1962, Chinese and Indian forces fought on the Himalayan border. Military clashes between China and Vietnam flared from 1979 until 1990. Given China's history, it is unsurprising that China considers events and regimes on its borders to be a matter of continuing vital national interest.

CHINA'S CURRENT POLICY TOWARDS ITS PERIPHERY

Zhao Kejin described four aspects of China's current view of policy towards its periphery in a 2013 article titled, "Common destiny needs stability." 1) Beijing must maintain peace and stability with neighboring countries, finding peaceful solutions to territorial disputes through dialog and consultation. However, Beijing "will oppose any party's provocative acts that stir up trouble in the region." 2) Beijing must develop mutually beneficial cooperation by creating a web of "crossed economic corridors from south to north, and east to west." 3) China must create "a common security circle in neighboring regions," based on mutual trust, equality, and coordination. 4) Beijing should work to establish "a community of common destiny, cultivate more friends and partners, and share weal and woe with them."²⁹

Yan Xuetong also described what China's neighboring countries can expect from China in a January 2014 article titled, "China's New Foreign Policy: Not Conflict But Convergence of Interests." He suggests that whereas China in the past strove to cultivate beneficial relations with all countries for the sake of economic growth, the future strategy would be one of more selectivity. "In the future, China will decisively favor those who side with it with economic benefits and even security protections. On the contrary, those who are hostile to China will face much more sustained policies of sanctions and isolation."³⁰

U.S. CONCERN OVER A CHINESE SPHERE OF INFLUENCE

U.S. observers generally approve of improved relations between Beijing and China's neighbors, but express unease that Beijing shows signs of judging the quality of its relationship with other countries in part on their commensurate distance from Washington. Zachary Abuza explained to *Deutsche Welle* in November 2015, "The Vietnamese seek good ties with the U.S., Japan, ASEAN, India, Australia, and Russia, as well as China. The problem is that the Chinese have a very zero-sum view of the world, and they see Hanoi's improved relations with Washington, New Delhi, Tokyo and Canberra, as part of an effort to 'contain' China, which expects deference from Vietnam." "China is unhappy at the closeness of Vietnam's relationship with the United States, including the unprecedented visit of the CPV (Communist Party of Vietnam) General Secretary to Washington last July."³²

Other U.S. commentators ring louder alarm bells. Denny Roy wrote that while Beijing is cultivating “disproportionate” influence in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, the Central Asian States, Burma, and North Korea, the most serious development is China’s assertiveness in the maritime Asia-Pacific region. “A Chinese sphere of influence here would require the eviction of American strategic leadership, including U.S. military bases and alliances in Japan and South Korea, U.S. ‘regional policeman’ duties, and most of the security cooperation between American and friends in the region that now occurs.” He added, “Washington is not ready to give up this role, seeing a strong presence in the western Pacific Rim and the ability to shape regional affairs as crucial to American security.”³³ Taking the broader U.S. view of China’s ambitions for its region, Michael Swaine and Ashley Tellis wrote in 2000 “an assertive China could reasonably be expected to... develop a sphere of influence by acquiring new allies and underwriting the protection of others; (and) prepare to redress past wrongs it believes it may have suffered...”³⁴

It is clear that the general U.S. attitude towards China’s policy regarding its peripheral region is one of suspicion that China’s goal of creating a “common security circle,” and a “community of common destiny” is more reminiscent of current Russia’s *realpolitik*, or even of the earlier Soviet-dominated Eastern Bloc, than of the benign and consensual nature of the EU. Chinese statements regarding “Asia for the Asians,” or of “favoring those who side with China,” fuel the suspicion that its aim is to dominate and exclude.

There is a range of U.S. opinion regarding how to deal with China’s moves to increase its regional influence. Michael Swaine urges understanding for China’s desire to reduce its vulnerability to potential future threats from the United States and other nations, “Chinese leaders today are not trying to carve out an exclusionary sphere of influence, especially in hard-power terms; they are trying to reduce their considerable vulnerability and increase their political, diplomatic and economic leverage in their own backyard. This is a much less ambitious and in many ways more understandable goal for a continental great power.”³⁵

Others take a less sanguine view. Whereas, according to Robert Kagan, the legitimate *raison d’être* for traditional spheres of influence is defense against threatening neighbors, today’s China enjoys far greater security than it has at any time in the last three centuries. Absent the threat of invasion, China’s motivation for creating a regional sphere of influence may be “necessary for a sense of pride,” or “to fulfill their ambition to become a more formidable power on the international stage.” Kagan says that China has every legitimate interest in competing with the United States economically, ideologically, and politically. However, military competition is different and could threaten the underlying security and stability of East Asia.³⁶

Andrew Krepinevich, goes as far as to argue that the United States should act now to deter China from building up a naval force that Chinese governmental and military leaders might believe capable of excluding U.S. forces from the Western Pacific. His prescription is an “Archipelagic Defense” that could contain Chinese naval forces within the China seas.³⁷ Krepinevich, Robert Kagan, and others are concerned that China’s regional strategy includes a strategic element, to shift the military balance of power in the Pacific against the United States.

A CHINESE SPHERE OF ECONOMIC INFLUENCE?

In regard to economic and commercial interaction between China and its neighboring countries, there is occasional suspicion among American experts that China may seek to use economic levers to apply political pressure. One frequently cited example of this was the 2010 “embargo” of rare earth metals exports from China to Japan, following a China-Japan maritime dispute.³⁸ However, two researchers from Australian National University investigated the episode and found that there was no unusual drop in actual Chinese exports of rare earth metals to Japan at the time. Before the maritime incident, there had been discussions in China of restraining exports of rare earth metals to try to drive up prices of this key manufacturing component, over which China has a near monopoly. A politically motivated embargo would have proven ineffective because rare earth metals are routinely stockpiled overseas and manufacturers have developed work-arounds that would decrease their vulnerability to a loss of supply.³⁹

China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) initiative provoked some concern among U.S. commentators but more on economic than political grounds. The main concern was that the bank would fund commercially unfeasible or environmentally damaging projects, bypassing the controls under which established international lending organizations operate. The now wide and experienced membership of the AIIB has assuaged most of these concerns. It will operate under strong international scrutiny. The AIIB's hiring of experienced former World Bank officials is also a good sign that it will operate in a conventional, cooperative manner. Another, less often expressed concern among Americans was that China would manipulate AIIB lending to favor countries which complied with China's political wishes. David Dollar notes, however, that with nearly 60 countries now participating in the AIIB, it would be difficult for China to discriminate in this way.⁴⁰

Similarly, it is difficult to find expressions of concern among U.S. economists or political scientists regarding negotiations for a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. If successfully negotiated, RCEP would not include the United States, but with India and Japan belonging, it would not be an organization that China would find easy to dominate.⁴¹ The rules under which trading blocs operate are well established by the WTO. There is no reason why the broad RCEP and the next-generation TPP could not overlap or even potentially merge if the RCEP members were eventually willing and able to meet the TPP's more demanding standards.

CONCLUSION

Looking beyond the military balance, if China's self-perceived requirement to ensure that the countries on its periphery will not counter Chinese interests is an irresistible force, and the U.S. insistence that it will not accept the emergence of regional spheres of influence is an unmovable object, how can we expect their relationship to develop?

Susanna Hast argues in her 2014 book *Spheres of Influence in International Relations: History, Theory and Politics* that the concept of spheres of influence is inadequately defined even though it is widely used.⁴² It holds within in it both a fundamental injustice, that is to say the unequal status of states, along with elements that can promote international peace. Spheres of

influence can never be a perfect basis for relations among states, but they can be more or less coercive, more or less stabilizing, and more or less beneficial to the citizens of the countries involved. Hast quotes Robert Jackson, “War is the biggest threat to human rights. War between the great powers is the biggest humanitarian threat of all. Nothing else comes close.”⁴³

Removing some of the historical and conceptual baggage from the term spheres of influence makes it easier to imagine ways in which the management of relations between China and her neighbors could satisfy both Chinese and American requirements. The key may be in Trenin’s distinction between a sphere of *influence* and a sphere of *interest*. The United States ought to be able to appreciate China’s interest in promoting stable, predictable, and economically successful countries within its periphery. At the same time, in the interest of long-term global stability and harmonious relations among the Pacific Rim countries, China would need to recognize that sovereignty and self-determination among its neighbors might enable them to act in ways other than China would ideally prefer. Chinese tolerance for some unwelcome behavior among its neighbors might be called a “sphere of restraint.” Putin’s Russia might only be comfortable dealing with “managed (read authoritarian) democracies” on its borders, but China would seem to have a long-term interest in being able to manage relations with neighboring countries that feature the unpredictable elements of genuine democracies.

The other aspect of a potentially acceptable Chinese sphere of interest and restraint would be non-exclusivity. China should not judge its relations with its neighbors based upon their relations with the United States. Chinese insistence on exclusivity would validate U.S. opposition to what it would perceive as an attempt by China to create a sphere of *influence*. A sphere of *interest and restraint* would focus both countries on specific, and generally negotiable, economic and security concerns.

Susanna Hast goes a step beyond spheres of influence or of interest to suggest that “spheres of responsibility” might provide another conceptual model. This would shift the focus away from what is demanded of smaller countries and toward what is owed them by the great powers. Applying this to Chinese-U.S. relations in Northeast Asia, the two countries could – in consultation with the countries of the region – agree to work together on projects that could promote the wellbeing of all peoples living in the region. These could be in the realms of the environment, food security, disaster relief, energy, or any of the countless challenges being faced by the region’s population. Joint, explicitly regional, projects could serve China’s interest by making its neighborhood more prosperous, integrated, and politically and socially stable. They could serve the U.S. interest by tying the United States more directly and closely to the Asian region and by assuaging U.S. concerns about China attempting to use its influence to reduce the U.S. presence in Asia.

U.S. and Chinese policies have different and sometimes conflicting interests. Economic and soft power competition are to be expected, and are perhaps even salutary. Non-military competition probably serves, on balance, to benefit the Asian countries that are the objects of their competition. Military competition, however, does tend towards being zero sum. That makes it all the more important that U.S. and Chinese regional policy should emphasize general areas of non-exclusionary competition and restraint. A proper appreciation of why China requires sufficient regional influence and why the United States will oppose excessive levels of regional influence will help keep competition between the two nations within bounds. Applying the term “sphere of influence” without thinking through what it means and implies can be a distorting lens that makes compromises more difficult to envision.

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